STEVE RODEN
ON LOWERCASE AFFINITIES AND FORMS OF PAPER
forms of paper was created for the exhibition 'six degrees - art in the libraries'—a group exhibition of site specific works for public libraries around los angeles. the soundwork was created using electronically manipulated sounds of book pages being rubbed, scraped, turned, etc. 8 speakers were placed on a small pedestal in an atrium in a hollywood branch of the library, along with a series of paper 'drawings' made from discarded library books. the work was playing very softly within the library space continuously for one month.

— steve roden, 2001
10 years after the initial installation and subsequent CD release of *Forms of Paper*, the short text I wrote in 2001 seems cryptic at best; for the piece involved not only a number of shifts in my own work (it was the first piece I’d ever recorded and composed using a computer), but was the beginning of the dissemination of the term ‘lowercase’ to describe a kind of music.

During the late 1980’s computers were not exactly alien to me, but in terms of music and computers, my experiences were limited to a midi-based program called Performer—which I used for 4 or 5 years. At the time, I was trying to compose with synthesizers, and adding live sounds over them. Performer seemed ideal because it not only allowed the computer and synths to talk to each other, but was also able to (once in awhile when it actually worked!) sync everything up to an 8 track tape machine. At the time, the computer/tape deck relationship was fraught with problems, and after much frustration I went back to working with tape, leaving the computer and everything midi based behind—which was a blessing in disguise most certainly.

I met Bernhard Günter in 1997 when he came to Los Angeles for a performance at Beyond Baroque. He visited an exhibition of my visual work, and so we began corresponding regularly. In 2000, he released a CD of my work on his label Trente Oiseaux, and in 2001, while teaching in France, I was able to spend a few days at his home in Koblenz, where we spoke extensively about composing and sound. At the time, he was using Pro-Tools not only as a recording studio, but also a composing tool; and while I was extremely reluctant to approach the computer again for my own work, he patiently walked me through the program and encouraged me in no small way to use Pro Tools, and to start to work again with the computer. Thus, upon my arrival home, I got my hands on a copy of Pro Tools and started to learn how to use the program.

At the time, the computer and myself were hardly friends (and in truth, our relationship is still quite strained), but because I had already been using various Mac based graphic design programs: Quark Express, Photoshop, etc. for freelance work, I was somewhat familiar with Pro Tools’ interface. The final push came with the annual breakdown of my Fostex 8-track, leaving me to decide whether I wanted to be without a recorder for a few months while it was out for repairs (again!), or dive into Pro Tools wholeheartedly. Had I truly understood at the time that I could simply have used Pro Tools to replace my dead multi-track tape recorder, it might’ve been a much easier transition. But regardless, I decided to enter the realm of the computer...

I should mention that even now, many years later, my knowledge of how to use the Pro Tools and its plug-ins is still quite rudimentary; and as a user of mainly guitar pedals for processing, I know next to nothing of how most of the plug-ins are supposed to be used. In the beginning, I was frustrated by the lack of tactility (i.e. no knobs to turn) and so I ended up processing sounds mainly in two ways, via pitch shift, and equalization. As with the rest of my work, I was looking for limited choices rather than limitless once, and so I decided to use only the plug-ins that came free with the program. (Certainly inspired by Brian Eno, who often spoke at the time of his interest, early on, in using only the pre-sets that came with his DX7).
After figuring out ways to enable the plug-ins to get a little confused, the standard Pro Tools EQ became one of my favorite tools, because it tended to offer surprising results, mainly when running a fragment of sound through the same EQ setting over and over again like a feedback loop, until it sounded nothing like the original. While the results might have been logical to the computer (or an operator who knew more than I did), my limited technical knowledge of sound equalization allowed the transformation to evoke a sense of wonder—the process seemed like a kind of alchemy.

At this time, my general composition and recording technique was to record various short performances into an Akai mono sampler, using a mic or a contact mic to generate 15-20 seconds of sound. I would then edit the recording into a nice short loop, and trigger the sample via a midi keyboard so that I could shift the pitch and speed of the loop by moving my hands along the fake piano keyboard. These loops were then recorded into Pro Tools as if I were simply recording on a multi-track tape deck.

When I recorded Forms of Paper, I used both regular and contact mics to sample a variety of “performances” using my hands and the pages of a book. The way that I built the piece in Pro Tools was pretty much the same as if I was still using a tape deck, but at the same time I wanted to exploit certain aspects of the computer that I could not approach with a tape deck, such as: cut and paste, a certain kind of repetition, and much of the approach to mixing. Even so, I would say that, at best, my embrace of this new tool carried was tempered by a heap of reluctance.

I’m not sure whose idea it was to include a sound artist in a series of exhibitions in Los Angeles libraries, but nonetheless, I was given an atrium space to work with at a large Hollywood Branch Library. I ended up using a low flat pedestal, the size of a big coffee table, which I covered in modified pages from a discarded science book. The pages were modified by folding them up into small squares and punching holes in them to create dot patterns that, when unfolded, resembled archaic rorschach ink blots (i.e. they contained a lot of mirror imaging). The speakers rested upon the layer of modified papers, playing a quiet composition that was soft enough that the sound never reached the upstairs area, which was the main portion of the reading spaces. While no one ever complained about the sound being distracting, one person did offer an anonymous response in the form of collaboration by inserting a small Chinese electronic toy which made cricket sounds in a bookcase close enough to the installation that both could be heard at the same time.
Originally coined by minimal artist Steve Roden, ‘lowercase’ is an extreme form of ambient minimalism in which very quiet sounds bookend long stretches of silence. Roden started the movement with an album entitled Forms of Paper, in which he made recordings of himself handling paper in various ways. These recordings were actually commissioned by the Hollywood branch of the Los Angeles Public Library. — Wikipedia

**VS.**

The term [lowercase] is associated with Steve Roden who suggests that the genre “bears a certain sense of quiet and humility; it doesn’t demand attention, it must be discovered... It’s the opposite of capital letters—loud things which draw attention to themselves.” — Electro Acoustic Research site

Around 2001, the term “lowercase” truly entered the fray. While I had been tagged as being the originator of the term, I never intended the phrase to describe (or worse, to define) a kind of music. When Rob Young interviewed me for the first time in 1997 for The Wire, I mentioned that my artistic tendencies were “lowercase”. I had been using this phrase since the mid-1980’s to set my work apart from the bombastic nature of painting at the time via artists like Julian Schnabel. While the artworld and popular culture seemed to favor spectacle, I was interested in silence, humility, intimacy, and thus began to describe my work as having a lowercase aesthetic—and I viewed the term as a quiet form of protest.

When I discovered Agnes Martin’s writings around 1990, they seemed to offer a potential outside of the way artists and culture were speaking at the time, and by the mid-1990’s I had gone back to one of the biggest influences on me—a section from Rilke’s letters to a young poet, in which he discusses so-called “inconsiderable things”. For Rilke, inconsiderable things were object or sounds or forces that were so subtle they could only noticed or experienced by a perceptive and sensitive soul—and like Martin’s writings, Rilke’s inconsiderable things favored intuition over academic thinking—sugestting the potential power of a subtle whispering voice. In so many ways, the word lowercase simply felt like an antidote to the prevailing uppercase aesthetic.

After The Wire article, the term was no longer my own. Somehow, within the then relatively small experimental music scene, a group of artists found sympathy with the term and adopted it in relation to their own work, and eventually it began to infiltrate a number of different music scenes. I certainly never expected the term would be used by anyone else, nor was it ever my intention for it to define a kind of music. In fact, I never saw it as a rigid term, nor one that would be anything other than open. the funny thing is that my own work has never been interested in the kind of extremes suggested by Wikipedia, and long silences have never been part of my work (although low volume and quiet sounds have), and I have always favored quiet activity and drone rather than true pauses or silence.

Unlike the Wikipedia entry, the definition from the Electro Acoustic Research Site printed above, is an actual quote by me, although those words were most certainly spoken in relation to my own work, rather than attempting to define a genre or a kind of music.
In 1999, I was contacted by James Coleman (who is a fantastic improvisor on the theremin) asking me if it would be ok to start an online discussion list using the name “lowercase-sound”. James mentioned that a number of folks in the younger Chicago free jazz scene were exploring silence and the ideas that had been hovering around the term lowercase music. At this point things became quite interesting to me, as it seemed the term was opening up, as there were acoustic musicians, laptop musicians, analog gear musicians, all experimenting with silence and quiet in ways that formed a virtual community. The discussion list, for awhile, became quite lively, and by 2000, Josh Russell gave the term an enormous push into the world by compiling two beautifully packaged lowercase music compilations, as well as organizing a series of performance events in the Southern California area.

In 2002, a year after Forms of Paper was released, Leander Kahney wrote a piece for Wired magazine about “lowercase music” called “whisper the sound of silence”, which was posted on the Wired magazine website (I don’t believe it ended up in the print version of the magazine). It was the first of many articles claiming that Forms of Paper was the first piece of “lowercase music”—something that Wikipedia continues to incorrectly state to this day.

What was interesting about the lowercase scene at the beginning was that on one hand it was quite positive, with a group of artists coming together locally and internationally simply because they were interested in quiet music and for many of us, it simply opened the conversation to a place of potential and experimentation. On the other hand, there was an element of conformity that drove me crazy, through endless debates about what was or wasn’t lowercase, including other media such as films or books. The conversations around such things felt meaningless, and worse it suggested that such a thing could be defined, and thus conformed to. While it was a nice sharing of influences and inspirations, it was clear that some folks began to try to make “lowercase music” rather than following their own path. Nonetheless, as much as I continually grumbled at anyone using the term “lowercase music”, there were certainly many good things that came out of that scene.

When the Wired article was published, it was the first time I began to see how powerful the web had become, as I got a lot of random emails from folks who were curious and wanted to hear more... I also heard from folks whose feathers were rather ruffled:

I have a couple of things to say to you:
Are you serious? This is not music, in fact it’s not even sound FX. If you guys were actually doing something then I might be impressed. I worked in LA in the music industry & I heard a lot of crap but this is not even that. What’s the point of buying a CD that has nothing on it except a few random barely audible noises that I can make on my home DAW setup. I am thoroughly disappointed with this lame idea especially when music & audio in general needs a serious artistic movement to revive it. You & your cohorts are pretending to be serious artists that have a alternative to all the groovebox beat music that is out there. What you are doing though is truly nothing & the only statement you are making is that you really have no talent or ideas to present. If you really want to change the way people listen to sound then you must actually make something for them to listen to first. Not really a very novel idea but I think it works
Forms of Paper was released in 2001 and was my first release for LINE. I sent the final mix to Taylor Deupree a few weeks before 9/11, but because I was traveling at the time I wasn’t able to hear the mastered track until the CDs had been manufactured. Truth be told, the first time I heard it, I was not happy. Because I tended to mix my own work at a relatively quiet level, the mastering process necessitated upping the gain, which brought out a number of sounds that I had never even heard. The disc sounded relatively okay at a very very low volume, but if anyone listened to it at a normal listening volume or on headphones, it wasn’t the piece I’d intended at all. This was one of many situations revealing to me the obvious—that the technical side of things will never be my strong suit. Nonetheless, I ended up blaming the computer, because I had never experienced such problems with tape.

It didn’t help that people seemed to really like the disc, many suggesting it was my best, which culminated in a review in The Wire stating that “Forms of Paper unfolds from a nominally two dimensional plane into a space shot through with hidden depths and cavities, each one a wormhole leading to a realm as full of possibility as silence itself.” Somehow, the CD that I considered to be somewhat of a failure, was embraced by a lot of people as being my best...

A few months later I went on tour with Bernhard Günter. We performed in LA, and New Mexico—as well as visiting the Grand Canyon together. I told him about my unhappiness with the CD and the extraneous noises, as well as a lack of warmth; and he immediately offered to remaster it for me so at least I would have a copy in my archives that was closer to how I wanted the piece to sound. While I had no interest in the piece ever being re-released, I gave him a copy of my final mix and a few months later he sent back his take, which sounded a thousand times better.

Last year, Richard Chartier began to ask about re-releasing Forms of Paper as a high quality download, but I continually turned him down; and until a few months ago, I had not listened to the piece since the year it was released... and truthfully, up until last year I had zero interest in sending it back out into the world—even in its proper form. Then, while planning my current LINE release, Richard asked again.

When I realized that October 2011 would the 10 year anniversary of Forms of Paper’s initial release, it seemed time a good time to reconsider—particularly because I have gotten more requests for a copy of Forms of Paper than any of my other releases, I decided to finally re-listen to Bernhard’s remastered... and remarkably—with all of the distance between us—this piece of mine and me, seemed to feel as if we might finally be able to get along.