Alexander Wu

March 2025

automatic buddha

8-channel audio

duration: 13'30"
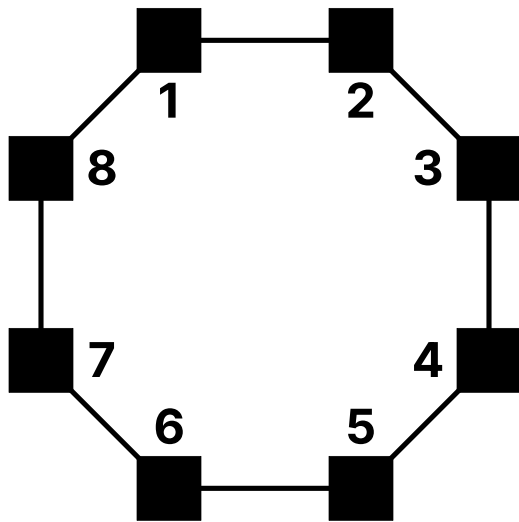
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Speaker Arrangement

1 2
8 3
7 4
6 5

Eight audio files are included in the multichannel stems folder. The numbers in the file names should match the numbers in the graph.

Program Note

Earlier this year, I went tomb-sweeping for my grandma and great-grandma. It had been a while since I last visited a cemetery back home, and I was surprised to find that the soundscape was different from what I remembered. Cemeteries in Southeastern China are usually in the mountains, so my memory of their sound was birdsong and rustling leaves. Instead, I was surrounded by Buddhist chants: some were slow and lyrical, others were fast and monotonous, but all of them sounded at the same time. These voices came from hundreds of lotus-shaped, solar-powered machines called "nianfoji" or sutra recitation machines, better known in English as Buddha machines.

Reciting sutras is a way to accumulate merit (for oneself, for others, for the dead) in Han Buddhism. Buddha machines provide a way to outsource the process of merit accumulation—and perhaps, the process of griefing—to electronic components. They continue to sound, rain or shine, as the families move on with their lives miles away in the city, until the next lunar new year, when they return, sweeping the tombs again and replacing the batteries. The low fidelity of the cheap speaker reminds passersby that a machine makes this sound, that it is decidedly not the "real thing" you would hear at a temple. But concurrently I felt the presence of something sublime, perhaps through a process Lacan describes as the synthesis of awe with what refuses awe: the juxtaposition of what is truly imposing and what is wholly gratuitous and somewhat absurd.

automatic buddha is an abstracted reflection of this experience. Mundane objects become magical not through a dramatic transformation but by merely existing alongside other mundane objects in transient, illusory spaces. A few of these sound objects are referential, vaguely reminiscent of the Buddha machine if the listener is familiar, but most do not clearly point to any extramusical source. Their mundanity is derived from (psycho)acoustic phenomena—aliasing, phasing, difference tones, channel masking, etc. Each of them strives to be the "real thing" that has a clean-cut definition —a perfect sine, an exact unison, a resolute bass drop, etc.—but most of them fail. Something new emerges when these failed approximations follow and join one another incessantly: imposing but gratuitous.