

David Tudor's Corporeal Imagination

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ABSTRACT

As a pianist of contemporary music, David Tudor adopted early on in his career a Stravinskian aesthetics of performance, understanding himself not as an interpreter, but rather as an objective executor of the sounds notated in the musical score. Inspired by Toshi Ichianagi and Gordon Mumma, and by John Cage's experiments in indeterminacy and electronic sound production, Tudor gradually abandoned this objectivist stance in the late 50s in favor of a more actively physical engagement in his own musical productions. This aesthetic shift coincided with his increased desire to compose with electronic components, producing sounds that were less implicated in historical or semantic contexts than the traditional tones of the piano. As a performer, his physical relationship to electronic sounds was not mechanical or causal as it had been with the piano, in that his predetermined actions did not produce expected, logical aural results. Rather, his physical contact with the electronic components resulted in a spectrum of sound possibilities, all a step removed from the physical impulse that had caused them. Deprived of its functional role in producing sound, the working body became forefronted in the aesthetic experience of Tudor's electronic compositions, its strenuous exertions appearing to the spectators as a necessary visual counterpart to the resulting sound itself. In her collaborative paintings, Sophia Ogielski visually clarified this symbolic function of the body's actions in Tudor's works, as he also did in some of the drawings he completed of the electronic circuitry necessary to his compositional process. Tudor strongly identified his compositions with this dominant image of the working body, even stressing its importance within the realm of artistic production by defining everything outside of it, namely the sphere of his private life, almost exclusively with the opposing image of the gustatory body, involved primarily in cooking and the collection of spices.¹

By positioning his own physically active body in the center of his compositional production, Tudor demonstrated his affinity for the aesthetics of abstract expressionism, best exemplified in the action paintings of Jackson Pollack and gestural collages of Tudor's collaborator Robert Rauschenberg. These artists' bodily gestures left their expressive imprint on their resulting abstract works in the same manner as did Tudor's exhaustive physical choreography in compositions like *Toneburst*, implying in both cases what T.J. Clark has labeled the "metaphorics of masculinity," or involvement of physical power, command of space, energy, virile creativity and organic intensity that can be seen as part of being a man.² Tudor departed from this aspect of abstract expressionism, however, by reinterpreting the means of artistic production, in this case his electronic components, as equal partners in the artistic process, or human beings in the linguistic and ethical sense. In Kant's spirit he refused to use these tools as a means to an end, engaging them instead in an intense dialogue and giving them an authority and autonomy distinguished from that of the colors in Pollack's drip paintings. By so doing he redefined his role as a strategic player in the production of the spontaneity so cherished by abstract expressionists, thereby communicating what most of his collaborators and listeners have understood to be his profound spiritual generosity.

In this presentation, I will further analyze the philosophy of the body outlined here in relation to musical performance and sound production as a means of understanding the meanings of two key works David Tudor created in collaboration with avant-garde dancer Merce Cunningham: *Rainforest IV* and *Toneburst*. Although Tudor was affiliated with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company since its inception in summer 1953, and although many of his compositions were written for dancers, very little has been written about his relationship to dance.³ Merce

¹ For a discussion of these bodily images, as they emerged in the 1960s, see Sally Banes, "The Body is Power," *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 189-234.

² T.J. Clark, "Jackson Pollock's Abstraction," in Serge Gilbaut, ed. *Reconstructing Modernism* (Boston, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 229. See also Ramsey Burt's discussion of Clark's ideas in relationship to Merce Cunningham in *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1995), 140-43.

³ Gordon Mumma offered an interesting basis for research in this area in his 1975 article "From where the circus went" (in James Klosty's *Merce Cunningham* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1975), 64-73. David Tudor's compositions for the Merce

Cunningham's involvement in these works complicate them by negating traditional bodily and gender distinctions, thereby contradicting Tudor's previously described bodily strategies. By unlocking the key to Tudor's corporeal imagination, I hope to reveal the hidden expressive relevance of these works, which goes far beyond the puppet like automatism with which critics most often associate them.

FULL PAPER

(Slide: Image of Child playing the piano with family watching.)

The historical study of great performers, when it has taken place at all, has tended to focus on the aesthetics, style, practice and quality of their playing, as defined by writings and recordings that take on the documentary status of musical scores. For David Tudor, however, making music was never about a simple aural result, but rather always intimately intertwined with the very physical, theatrical act of performance itself, captured here in an anonymous picture kept among his papers. In contrast to many other pianists, Tudor was keenly aware of the stage, and of the charismatic power of his own physical presence.

(Slide: Tudor as a beat, with cigarette in his mouth, free style, no tie.)

Drawn by the seductive masculine imagery of the Beat movement, Tudor presented himself in his early years as a sensual, tumultuous source of expressive energy, with “a cigarette hanging between his lips with a long ash, as he played.” His early admirers, including his wife M.C. Richards, and John Cage, remembered the life-radiating, warm physical presence of his hands: so “HOT,” Richards recalled, “So alive so strenuously exercised, and yet so soft.” “I see the shape of your hands,” John Cage wrote, “How marvelous of you to have given me fire.”

Tudor did not base his career on this early sensual vision, but rather spent most of his life negating and denying it, in an over forty-year odyssey to develop a new aesthetic of musical-theatrical performance. In my talk today, I would like to outline that aesthetic, focusing on its culminating expression in Tudor’s 1968 ballet accompaniment and 1973 sound installation, *Rainforest* and *Rainforest IV*. My focus will therefore not be on David Tudor’s sounds, but rather on his body and its function in the development of a new direction in music theater.

David Tudor’s most groundbreaking experience as a performer occurred in December 1950, when he gave the American premiere of Boulez’s Second Sonata in a concert of the League of Composers in New York. Tudor hoped to overcome his confusion about how to play such a complex, discontinuous score, by exploring Boulez’s source of inspiration, Antonin Artaud’s *Le théâtre et son double*, which became one of the guiding influences in his young life. Quickly adapted as a secretive source of wisdom by the American avant-garde around John Cage, Artaud’s writings were translated into English for the first time by Tudor’s wife M.C. Richards and discussed at length by all of them over a period of many years. Tudor was at first most attracted to Artaud’s essay on affective athleticism (“un athlétisme affectif”), and the consequences it could have for his development of a new performing style. According to Artaud, “affects” existed as the “double” of muscle movement and breathing, and found their material form therein. In order to express these affects, the actor had to study to study human musculature, and the acupuncture points of Chinese medicine, as well as practice varied breathing, with the aim of learning to express a vast range of emotions through the direct movement of the body. Reading Artaud taught Tudor that his body could directly and efficiently express affects and ideas, without the gestural language of nineteenth-century piano playing.

(Slide: Tudor in serious pose at piano.)

Tudor’s newly acquired bodily stance revealed that he no longer intended to express his own emotions at the piano, but rather hoped to act as a vehicle for the sounds themselves, the spiritual and affective essence of which he was determined to communicate efficiently. An ardent disciple of the teachings of Ferruccio Busoni, Tudor adopted the Busonian notion that sounds were platonic ideas that existed permanently in nature, yet had to be selected or accentuated by the composer and performer so that people could become conscious of them. Determined to “in concrete (direct) ways...make the performer the channel,” for such ideas, Tudor transformed himself from a sensual

Cunningham Company include *Rainforest I* (1968); *Toneburst* (1974); *Weatherings* (1978); *Phonemes* (1981); *Sextet for Seven* (1982); *Fragments* (1984); *Webwork* (1987); *Five Stone Wind* (1988); *Virtual*.

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Beat poet into an exacting human automate, whose bodily actions at the piano resulted in utterly precise, complex, aural textures. He diligently practiced this economy of movement, sharing his love of machine-like efficiency with his later dance partner, Merce Cunningham. Perhaps for this reason, he considered Edward Steuermann's remark that he played Schoenberg with "dispatch" as "the loveliest comment that I have ever heard about my playing." "Just as in his piano playing there were no nonessential gestures, but every movement was somehow functional," a friend recalled, "so too in his daily life...There seemed little that was spontaneous, none of those little windows that open momentarily and unexpectedly to reveal a person's soul. Everything seemed methodical, part of a plan." Perhaps for this reason, composers often spoke of Tudor as an "instrument," as John Holzaepfel and Cage have commented.

Tudor progressively distanced himself from his own expressive body not only in response to the demands of Boulez's and later Cage's aesthetics, but also as a means of realizing what he understood to be the spiritual goals of Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophic teachings. A lifelong student of Anthroposophy, Tudor early on came to understand art as a "direct religious experience," distinct, to a large extent, from the sensual body and physical world. In Steiner's words, "the ear (wa)s really there for the purpose of overcoming the resounding of the tone in the air and reflecting back into our inner being the pure etheric experience of tone." Or, in the words of G. Wachsmuth, whose work Tudor typed out in minute detail: "Music fundamentally lives only within the human being, in the Ether-body, by which the Physical body is naturally carried along in connection with the lower Tones of the scales." M.C. Richards poetically captured the meaning of Tudor's musical spirituality in a poem describing the intimate communion between ear and tone in the etheric realm:

The ear, he said, is a threshold:
 sipped through bone, the nectar of tone.
Ah, that's the rapture of listening:
 intimacy closer than senses!
Tone, we become one another.
 Essential angle, you make love the meaning.

In order to achieve this intense spiritual communion with sound, Tudor began to disassociate himself ever more drastically from his own flesh. "As one proceeds along the road to the Spirit," he wrote in the 1950s, "the faculty of listening grows more inward and all-encompassing...before it is possible to have a selfless interest, which is no longer determined by likes & dislikes, there must be a certain distance between the processes of soul & Body. This can be reached by unfolding a thought-activity emancipated from sensory life, & a moral will." "Before the eyes can see," he wrote later more poetically, "they must be incapable of tears. Before the ear can hear, it must have lost its sensitiveness." Around this time, Tudor wrote his wife that he felt he, "had erected a screen in front of (him)self, preventing sense experience being quite vivid," and that he "now s(aw) & listen(ed) with dispassionate sense organs." A perceptive reviewer recognized this in Tudor's playing as early as 1954 as a "melancholy of impotence."

(Slide: Henry Cowell.)

Envisioning the performing body as a spoke in the wheel of a machinery of sounds that could communicate directly with the inner spirit, Tudor began to sacrifice his intentions and expressive will ever more to the inanimate objects on stage with him, whether they be the piano, or later any number of gadgets or found objects in the arsenal he created with John Cage. The aesthetic goal was to have listeners hear new sounds in combination with the visual experience of seeing known and traditional objects manipulated, thus creating what Artaud called "poésie dans l'espace," or the visual inversion of forms and conventions that would cause spectators to question traditional functions and meanings. Exposed to such a situation, listeners had to rethink their very understanding of sound production. Like Artaud, Tudor encouraged aural unpredictability, and the "metaphysical" fear inspired by the creation of unfamiliar, new objects and sounds. One of Tudor's greatest mentors, Henry Cowell, whom you see here with him, had professed the very same aim of combining new sounds with the visual experience of known objects by developing extended playing techniques for the piano. This corresponded with Tudor's belief that the greatest spiritual and musical discoveries took place within a given context, and in dialogue with existing things. "if you begin with an improvisation," Tudor commented, for example, "its like you don't know what you are doing, but if you have a whole concept, than the composition becomes a question of revealing all the parameters and possibilities"

(Slide: Tudor attacking piano.)

Tudor's performative actions after 1950 did not communicate a state of serene bliss, as one might expect given his spiritual proclivities. Rather his body expressed ferocious rage against the piano, as if it was taking revenge for all the pain caused by its cruel effacement. Tudor's interest in the connections between sound, pain, and violence was sparked as early as 1941, when Renata Grave sent Cage her first English translation of Luigi Russolo's *The Art of Noise* (L'arte dei rumori?) and Tudor himself completed extensive typescripts of F Marinetti's descriptions of the musicality of war (?). In the late 40s, Tudor learned again about violence in preparing Stefan Wolpe's tragically enraged Battle Piece, -- a work that had its source in Wolpe's memories of the second world war, as did Boulez's and Stockhausen's early works. But Tudor ideas were most influenced, it seems, by reading again Antonine Artaud, who spoke of violence in his theater of cruelty as the anarchic origin of art. Like Tudor, Artaud's expressive rage came from the personal experience of having had his body denied, in Artaud's case, however, not by himself, but rather by a psychiatric system that submitted him to repeated physical torture in the form of electroshock and insulin therapies.

(Slide: Tudor and piano violence.)

In the wide range of reviews kept in the Tudor archive, critics comment again and again on the violence with which Tudor treated the piano, and their confusion over what that visual spectacle had to do with the resulting cruelty of sound. After a concert in Carl Fischer Hall in May 1956, for example, Jay S. Harrison remarked that Cage and Tudor "(we)re being naughty in the manner of horrid children. To them, music (wa)s clearly a plaything to be cracked up, stamped upon, pulverized and ground into a useless pulp." They offered "a vicious aural version of Chinese water torture." And in 1960, Edward Wallace commented that "The crowd had paid to see a fight, and to the eternal credit of David Tudor, they saw one...Mr. Tudor clobbered the keys, slugged the tuning pins with a blunt piece of metal -- then stuck his head inside the piano, daring the lid to fall and decapitate him...The point is, a big bully got what was coming. It was high time a piano got slapped around."

(Slide: Tudor completely tied with stuffed mouth, performing with bandoneon.)

It was only a matter of time before Tudor began denying his bodily will entirely, transferring its energies to the technological objects Cage and *musique concrète* had taught him to so admire. In performing *Bandoneon!* in 1966, as you see here, Tudor finally bound his body, in order to be able to "project (his) thoughts into the about-to-become available technology." In the spirit of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, he tied his body like Odysseus to the mast, in order to gain aesthetic experience. Instead of distributing work to servants behind the scenes, as Odysseus had done, however, Tudor aestheticized the very notion of work itself by staging the spectacle of his own working body, something also brought forefront on the Getty flyer for this symposium.

Tudor's decision to abandon his expressive performing body reflected his growing disillusionment with the life of a traveling virtuoso. As early as 1956, he had written M.C. Richards from Darmstadt that "there is really no decent opportunity here for a pianist, and I have to play the same old s---- and so hate myself worse than at home." As time had passed, he come to feel ever more like a pianistic servant, especially to Karlheinz Stockhausen: "I couldn't stomach it," he later remembered, "Being tied to the piano and having to play that music all the time, on every concert I couldn't bear it." And so Tudor chose to abandon not only his performing but also, seemingly, his sexual body. In 1963, long after his estrangement from M.C. Richards, he wrote her that he had already become entirely cut off "because of lack of intimate human relations." I am "less and less engaged," he told her, "but there can't be any complaint -- my own doing." M.C. Richards remembered him in her diary, not without bitterness, as "unloving," "impotent," "a convenient Eunich," and "living in the shadows."

(Slide: Rauschenberg's bed.)

Tudor's body did not disappear when he decided to become an electronic cyborg-composer, but rather became present in its absence, visually evoked by the use of objects with corporeal associations and aurally expressed through the electronic imitation of bodily sounds. His friend and early collaborator Robert Rauschenberg probably taught him the most about the disconcerting ambiguity of aesthetic effect that could be produced by playing with the bodily associations of material components in art, especially in works like "Bed" of 1955, that you see here. As James Leggio has argued, "Bed" like many other works by Rauschenberg, "deals with the human body at one

remove, in the form of signs” or signals. The paint on the bed here expresses “displaced sexual violence, soiling, or erotic dirtying,” according to Leggio, “while the rounded fullness of the pillow provide a “memory of softness” which is “ostentatiously corporeal.” Leggio’s concludes that:

...through its imprint, its stains, and the geometry it engenders, the body proclaims itself to be both “in here” and “out there.” Bodily traces thus declare the paradoxical nature of the self’s doubled identity, articulating the way we live and have our being partly inside our fleshly envelope and partly outside it...the bed and its other, the body, while intractably different entities, are yet so closely intertwined that they become a curiously intimate pair of strangers.

(Slide: Tudor and Rauschenberg creating art, Paris 1961)

Rauschenberg more directly taught Tudor about how to create artistic evidence of the absent body’s presence in a concert in Tudor’s honor at the US Embassy in Paris in June 1961. Surrounded by the works of Jasper Johns, Niki de Saint-Phalle, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jean Tinguely, Tudor played Cage’s *Variations II*, while Rauschenberg painted for him on stage *First, Second and Third Time Painting*.

(Slide: *Third Time Painting*)

The audience heard the sounds of Rauschenberg painting, but were not permitted to see the resulting work. Likewise, the sounds of Cage’s piece were overshadowed by Tudor’s display of physically realizing them on stage. I would like to think that *Third Time Painting*, which you see here, reveals the imprint of David Tudor’s absent body: the shirt he would have performed in, and the clock expressing his pianistic rhythm. As if to affirm the final disappearance of Tudor’s sensual corporeality, Rauschenberg fixed it chillingly in artful materials in a manner that would be imitated by Tudor himself again and again during his years as an electronic composer.

(Slide: Cunningham’s *Rainforest*, with helium balloons)

Tudor’s newly defined goal of staging the absent body as a material trace is not immediately evident in the music he created for Cunningham’s ballet *Rainforest* in 1968. While Cunningham and his dancers evoked the primal movements of fantastic primitive animals, Tudor used oscillators, a homemade eight-channel amplifier, found objects, and contact mikes in order to simulate electronically the sounds of birds and animals in the forest. The circular repeating pulse of Tudor’s manipulated nature sounds and the torn gym suits contributed to the sense of extreme alienation from the body evoked by Cunningham’s Nijinskian-like dancing fauns.

(Video excerpt of *Rainforest* with Cunningham and birds)

The staging for Cunningham’s dance was designed by Andy Warhol, who created a rainforest of spectacularly commercial, pop art pillows. The contradiction of trees and animals being replaced by something as glittery as shining helium pillows accentuated the feeling of absent human life. Pillows had been used long before by Rauschenberg, as we have seen, and even by Cunningham and Tudor in Cage’s *Theatre Piece*, where they had joined musical instruments, washtubs, swings, champagne bottles and other objects as symbols of the physical desires of absent human bodies. “The idea that a forest consists of pillows is...ingenious,” Anne Kisselgoff commented when the dance was revived in 1986, “There are hints of survival of the fittest (the music roars appropriately) or the peaceable kingdom (the score has birdlike sounds within its rich texture) as some of the dancers snuggle up to each other.

(Slide: Toilet bowl floats from *Rainforest IV*, Paris)

When *Rainforest* became a wandering installation, the absent body became even more central to it. During the infamous 1973 performance in New Hampshire, Tudor and his collaborators specifically selected objects with bodily associations, which they hooked up to transducers and transformed into loudspeakers, whose sound sources they controlled. The first critics were keenly aware of the corporeal connections of all the objects in view, and especially of “a pair of new and gleaming toilet bowl floats.” (seen here in a later performance in Paris 1976, and also on Getty flyer) “What we’re after,” John Driscoll said at the time, “is to tune...(the coupled floats) to give us special resonant frequencies.” “You should hear the mattress,” he added, “it makes the most beautiful tone.” The

toilet floats naturally attracted the most immediate attention, perhaps because the image of touching and listening to them provoked disgust as well as mysterious fascination. As Barthes commented: "The body begins to exist where it repugnates, repulses, yet wants to devour what disgusts it and exploit that taste for distaste..."

(Slide: Girl and dog behind picture frame)

In *Rainforest IV*, Tudor also invited the human body back into his music by using interactive sculptures of found objects to encourage audience participation. Rather than frighten listeners with a visual display of aggressive physicality as he had earlier done with Cage, Tudor now engaged *their* bodies directly in experiencing sound by offering them the possibility of "touching" and sensing objects acting as loudspeakers. Audience members could invent their experiences of the sound by moving around and exploring the shapes presented to them, interacting in this manner as the listeners at the first happening in Black Mountain College had, when they had projected their imagined displays onto the vacant surfaces of Robert Rauschenberg's white paintings. Tudor's installation brought to mind as well the contemporaneous work of Robert Morris, whose "sculptures for performing on," involved the use of "bodily reactions." In the spirit of Artaud's "poésie dans l'espace," the sounding objects of *Rainforest IV* inspired categorical shifts and displacements, for example in how its participants understood the role of their various sense in the aesthetic experience of listening. As Bill Viola exclaimed to David Tudor: "you did teach me (in *Rainforest*) to hear with my eyes."

(Slide: Tudor sitting impassive behind his table of electronics)

Tudor himself did not participate in the explicit interactive environment of *Rainforest IV*, at least not in any of the existing videos or according to the reviews. Instead, he sat almost immobile, in the state of utter seriousness he had learned with Cage, behind a large table of electronic devices, using his hands to activate mechanisms and alter sounds as efficiently as possible, as he had always done. His gestures were still the source of sound, but human sensuality had now been replaced utterly by mechanical precision, and a complete transfer of Tudor's bodily expressivity to the rational mechanics of electronic circuits. He had succeeded here in doing what he had always wanted to do: transform his living body into a gigantic, spiritual ear, which transcended the physical in its attunement to sound. His stage role consisted of listening intently, shaping the sound created by his own electronics, and thus establishing the long wished for direct bond between his inner ear and the produced tones. David Miller was overwhelmed by the impression this living embodiment of the act of listening: "Without realizing it, I did not take my eyes from David Tudor's face...and in this way received a remarkable confirmation of the *sensuality* of an active, engaged intellect. Externally viewed, what was he doing? Sitting quietly, manipulating an elaborate array of controls, his body appeared mostly dormant, the only evident activity being that taking place between the hand and the brain...What might have been interpreted as a purely cerebral process manifested itself throughout as a virtually erotic experience. The old dichotomies between mind and body, intellectual and carnal being were both stated and eliminated in this performance."

The sounds of *Rainforest IV*, like its objects, tended to forefront the absent human body, which remained for Tudor a site of pain and violence, expressed aurally through intolerable, screeching or bodily noises. M.C. Richards recognized the violence of his electronically produced sounds after attending a performance in October 1966: "I fled after the volume of amplified sound became deafening," she wrote in her diary, "I suddenly realized the 'hard fact' of David's disregard for simple human qualities, and his lack of respect for his own 'ear' as well as mine and others." One visitor to the 1976 installation in Minneapolis commented, "It is a loud, cacophonous, continuously changing bombardment of sounds that surround and engulf the listener." In capturing such an explosive source of sound energy, Tudor realized Antonine Artaud's aim not only of expressing cruelty, but also of creating a work "in which we feel the whole nervous system burning like an incandescent lamp with vibrations, consonance which invite man to get out with his body in pursuit of this new, strange and radiant Epiphany in the sky." Linda Fischer described the physical effect as "a condition of inner resonance and rhythms I have known and been unable to articulate...It was something like a confrontation of the physical senses with their non-physical counterparts -- an intensity that is so physical it seems I might shatter -- these were emotions that I had never felt before, but powerful and elusive and completely real."

(*Rainforest*: Aural excerpt)

Tudor designed Rainforest in order to signal the violence of not just any absent body, but rather of his own. Rather than transfer his numbed, disassociated senses, bodily functions and desires to inanimate objects as he had earlier done, he now represented and materialized them in the outer concrete reality of electronic circuitry. Following Rauschenberg's path, he left the outer trace of his productive, spiritual act of inner listening on the stage by symbolizing it in the intricate web of complex electronic gadgetry laid out on the table in front of him, transferring it in this way from the ethereal realm of the imagination into the physical world. In that Tudor almost always decided himself on the source and process of the ultimate sound, the circuitry and electronic gadgetry can be seen to externalize and physically represent the workings of his own mind. As the commanding creating body in *Rainforest* and mental source of its electronic mappings, Tudor quickly became fetishized by his collaborators and fans, who tended without exception to reminisce later about his eating and hearing habits, as if they received no other impression of the man except his outer display of the senses of hearing and taste.

(Slide: Suitcase)

The intense physical exertion required to exhibit his inner ear as an electronic theatrical trace in *Rainforest IV* caused Tudor to negate further his outer body, which became ever more a mere encasing for inner workings now externalized in circuitry. Tudor symbolized this encasing too with the object of the suitcase, which he carried with him on all his extensive travels in late years, and which contained only electronics (the technological recreation of his inner spiritual ear) and spices (the intellectualized, categorized game plan of his abstracted sense of taste). Having given all his spirituality and wisdom to sound, Tudor was left with a silent body as trampled valise. Perhaps for this reason *Rainforest IV* has always had such an effect on its listeners. They were not hearing Cage's "sounds in themselves," but rather, the direct aural expression of the violent cry of David Tudor's body.