

Lawrence Kumpf

(classical music plays softly in the background)

The American, who is sprawling more than ever, lights
A cigar; the excited couple, beyond
Still whispers things which can't be heard
Raymond Roussel
"The Source"

I originally wanted to call this reissue "The Middle Years," as it seems easy to situate the methodologies of these four records in between those of Graham Lambkin's Shadow Ring period (1993–2003) and his more recent improvisational duos, mostly in live performance, with artists like Áine O'Dwyer, Joe McPhee, Keith Rowe, and Taku Unami. The four albums anthologized here as *Solos* mark a distinct period of creative production in Lambkin's career. Of course, there are no hard-and-fast dates delineating his phases: these "middle years," from 2001 to 2011, witnessed a fair amount of non-solo work, in the forms of collaborative projects and performances, collaborations with Jason Lescalleet (2008–11), the release of the DVD *Motion Painting* (2006) with Timothy Shortell, and a live performance and subsequent release with Moniek Darge (2011, 2014). Still, the specific albums collected here profess an insular approach from which Lambkin has since made a palpable shift, and thus they're best understood as *Solos*, with Lambkin's personal, authorial vision presented in its clearest articulation.

I had been following The Shadow Ring for years when, in 2008, a friend brought Lambkin's solo work to my attention. He described the recently issued *Salmon Run* (2007) as an album made by the guy from The Shadow Ring playing classical music in his bathroom and crying while the sink ran, and that I had to hear it. Although this description is somewhat apocryphal, it does capture the sentiment of the album. Later that year I met Lambkin at a performance at ISSUE Project Room, where I was working. Lambkin had rarely performed in concert, and this was his first post-Shadow Ring outing (excluding a handful of guest appearances with the band Tart). I can't completely remember the conditions of how Lambkin and I started working together, but looking back through my email, it appears I had tried to arrange a collaboration between Lambkin and Vito Acconci in 2009. Acconci turned down the offer, citing his previous attempted collaborations with Vladislav Delay and Alva Noto that never got off the ground. Lambkin and I then discussed Conrad Schnitzler as a possible collaborator; Schnitzler, who was no longer traveling at the time, proposed to send some pre-recorded music for the concert. But Lambkin turned that down, saying that he didn't "fancy a duo with a CD-R." In the ensuing years I began organizing an annual performance with him, including his first meeting and collaboration with Moniek Darge, in 2011, as part of *Everyday Experimental*, a program also featuring Annea Lockwood and Alison Knowles, among others. Darge's composition *Rain* (1980) served as an inspiration for Lambkin's *Poem (For Voice & Tape)* (2001), and her work in general figures strongly in his project. In 2009 he started releasing Darge's music on his own Kye label, which had been relatively dormant between the initial release of *Poem* and of *Salmon Run* in 2007. Darge's *Soundies (Selected Works 1980–2000)* (2009) was the first non-Lambkin-related



At home with Moniek, Poughkeepsie, NY, 2002 (Adris Hoyos)

release on Kye, and marked the label's shift to championing a moodboard of artists like Darge, Henning Christiansen, and Anton Heyboer, as well as a number of younger artists whose work Lambkin engaged with artistically. His subsequent collaboration with Darge would later be issued on Kye as "Indian Weather Trap," on *Indian Soundies* (2014).¹

During this period, Lambkin remained fairly reclusive, living in Poughkeepsie, New York, where he moved in 2000 from Miami with his then-wife Adris Hoyos, formerly one-third of the band Harry Pussy. For the most part he was a stay-at-home father, performing two or three shows a year, always in a collaborative setting. In addition to running Kye, which would release fifty records in total before shutting down in 2017, Lambkin maintained an active practice as a visual artist, producing a body of drawings as well as series of photographic self-portraits with a cheap camera and a home printer. Some of these images were included in his artist's book *Millows* (2012), and we've reproduced a selection in this publication, but the vast majority have yet to be seen. For his rare concerts, Lambkin would develop a singular and meticulously thought-out plan, to be slightly altered for any of the handful of venues at which he appeared. The performances often employed strategies found in his recordings: slowed-down and manipulated recordings of everyday sounds played back on cheap consumer electronic devices, toy instruments, and occasionally the use of his voice or breath overloading the microphone, always articulated at the limit of legibility. In 2014, I organized Lambkin's first solo performance, which took place at Brooklyn's ISSUE Project Room. It was staged in conjunction with an exhibition of his works on paper, *Came to Call Mine*, at Audio Visual Arts in Manhattan; there was another performance later that year, in June, at Yale Union in Portland, Oregon, on the occasion

¹ Darge was also the namesake for Lambkin's late cat Moniek, though I'm not sure if she ever learned that.

Kye ad for *Everyday Experimental* concert series, Darge/Lambkin/Vanhecke, 2011

KYE PRESENTS
 ISSUE PROJECT ROOM
 11 / 18 / 11 8PM

MONIEK DARGE
 FRANÇOISE VANHECKE
 GRAHAM LAMBKIN

PERFORMING:
 ABBEY-SOUNDS
 EAST CRETE
 GALLOP
 WEATHER TRAP
 TAMIL NADU

\$15 / \$10 (MEMBERS)

of a Yuji Agematsu exhibition. These two shows consisted of Lambkin digging through his red traveling suitcase, filled with wires and small instruments, plugging various things into a small tabletop mixer while a track of his unharmonious humming emanated through the PA, which would later be mirrored by his “live” humming. As Lambkin fiddled with his equipment, either triggering sounds or simply letting a prerecorded material play through, Führs & Fröhling’s album *Ammerland* began to play through the PA; Lambkin mumbled into the microphone and mimed the gestures of a solitary drunk getting into the tune.² Related in style and content to Lambkin’s *Amateur Doubles* (2011), the final record in this set, these two performances marked the end of this period of production. They felt like the first and last of Lambkin’s *Solos* performances.

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While much of The Shadow Ring’s musical output can be categorized loosely as “songs,” in that the pieces have lyrics and are mostly performed with conventional instruments, there is a clear progression over the group’s career, with later albums like *Lindus* (2001) and *I’m Some Songs* (2005, recorded 2001–2) upending this more traditional rock model (the title of *I’m Some Songs* calls attention to the fact that while these were still considered “songs” by the band, they were stretched to the outer limit of the form). Lambkin’s *Poem*, made around the same time, makes a clear break, completely dismantling the song structure as well as the collaborative elements that made up The Shadow Ring. As Mark Harwood notes in his essay for this collection, Darren Harris and Tim Goss start to become Lambkin’s subject matter, rather than creative contributors. On *Poem*, and on subsequent efforts like *Salmon Run*, the ambiguity of roles like author, producer, and listener becomes more complex. The act of listening is emphasized, recorded, documented, and represented as a central part of the song, further breaking down structures of containment. Incorporating his subjectivity as a listener—recording it as part of the music—Lambkin emphasizes that he is also an *unreliable listener*. The veracity of what is being heard is always in question: he edits, leaves in, or adds mistakes, and manipulates the material.

Of course, Lambkin had already employed strategies of deskilling aimed at disrupting language throughout his tenure with The Shadow Ring. He would use handwritten lyrics, often making sections illegible through smudging the text, and instruct Harris or Goss to read them in a single take while performing a physical gesture like smiling. But it was not until the release of *Poem* that Lambkin shifted his approach to focus more on language, pushing it to the point of total illegibility. The result is that the language used becomes rhythmic and tonal, and ceases to relate content either sensual or nonsensical. Robert Ashley’s *In Sara, Mencken, Christ and Beethoven There Were Men and Women*—based on John Barton Wolgamot’s book of the same name—is a clear point of reference for *Poem*. Both Ashley and Wolgamot work with discernible language, in this case the repetition of a single sentence, which remains almost the same as it’s repeated.³

The effect is to overload the denotative aspects of the spoken words, causing the reader (in the case of Wolgamot) or listener (for Ashley) to focus on the timbral and rhythmic qualities of the voice. In Ashley’s performance of Wolgamot’s text, the editing of the tape contributes to the overall uncanny tone of the work as it’s transfigured into spoken word. Here, each sentence is read in a single breath and then edited together in such a way as to remove the breaths between sentences, creating an inhuman consistency across the duration of the record. While Lambkin’s *Poem* uses similarly simple technical strategies to denature the human voice, there are also dramatic elements at play manifested by the different resonances of the voice that invoke the different rooms in which the recordings were made. The spatial relationship between the recording device and the water from the sink and the shower—sometimes one is “soloing,” sometimes the sink and shower come together in a “duo”—shifts across the two sides of the album. At the end of the record, Lambkin tunes into a classical music radio station and hums along to a piece for violin and piano that he happened to find.

With his next record, Lambkin would push these dynamics even further. *Salmon Run* (2007) takes its name from an upstate brand of “rainbow” rosé that Lambkin was enjoying at the time. It’s perhaps the most theatrical work from his *Solos* period. Returning to Robert Ashley, there are clear parallels here to *Automatic Writing* (1979), especially in Lambkin’s compositions such as “Jungle Blending,” “Jumpskins,” and “Cementspaw.” *Automatic Writing* is composed primarily of Ashley’s recordings of his involuntary speech, a condition caused by a mild Tourette syndrome. For Ashley, this condition that produced spontaneous sounds or compositions offered a parallel to his own practice as a composer and his interest in unconscious composition. The recording of his involuntary speech is then elaborated through the use of electronics and modular synthesis to make a final composition with “three characters” in a semi-operatic form. As with *Salmon Run*, there is a real invocation of space that comes through the manipulation of the audio material: *Automatic Writing* has a sense of being heard through a wall, with elements coming through in ways that are somewhat imperceptible. Closely listening to Ashley’s piece again, I have at times taken the needle off the record player to hear if a musical melody is in fact coming from the recording and not through the walls of my apartment or from the street.⁴ The appropriated musical elements of *Salmon Run* are more at the forefront and function as framing devices (“Intro”) for the narrative elements (“Glinkamix” and the final section of “The Bridge to Aria / Salmon Run”) at play in the piece. The operatic or narrative elements in *Salmon Run* are likewise obtuse; Lambkin has claimed that the album is “loosely about Sasquatch, bears and other North American wildlife,” but perhaps it’s a rather Roussellian move—evoking the bucolic scene of a fish on a bottle of Salmon Run wine—that takes Lambkin down this flight of fancy. Raymond Roussel’s poem *La Source* (1903) is primarily a long, imaginative digression describing an alleged spa scene in impossible detail on the bottle of mineral water he’s having at a cafe. Toward the end of the poem, the waiter comes and removes the bottle from

² A video of the performance can be seen on the ISSUE Project Room’s website; unfortunately, it has been arbitrarily edited and the last section is missing.

³ In Wolgamot’s text the sentence starts off in its very truly great manners of Ludwig van Beethoven very heroically the very cruelly ancestral death of Sara Powell Haardt had very ironically come amongst his very really grand men and women to Rafael Sabatini, George Ade, Margaret Storm Jameson, Ford Madox Hueffer, Jean-Jacques Bernard, Louis Bromfield, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and Helen Brown Norden very titanically on the next page followed by in her very truly great manners of John Barton Wolgamot very heroically Helen Brown Norden had very originally come amongst his very really grand men and women to Lodovico Ariosto, Solon, Matteo Maria Bojardo, Philo Judaeus, Roger Bacon, Longus, Simeon Strunsky and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe very titanically and so on, with a slightly altered single sentence on each page.

⁴ One of the muffled sounds on the recording is Al Green’s “Let’s Stay Together.”

⁵ Keith Waldrop, “John Barton Wolgamot,” in *In Sara*, liner notes, Lovely Music, 2002.

his table and Roussel, in journalistic form, is brought out of speculation, and back to the “reality” or “real-time” of the cafe. He begins to describe the other guests, the American lighting, a cigar, etc. There is something in this particular verse that always reminded me of *Automatic Writing* and also serves as a nice mirror for *Salmon Run*, which invokes a semi-conscious space between waking and sleeping, sounds on the periphery of hearing. What really matters is the *sound* of whispering and not the words.

Lambkin often employs a similar strategy across his recordings, undermining the fidelity of the recording equipment to highlight the artifice of the equipment while also distorting his subject matter. (There is a similar strategy at play in his photographic self-portraits of the time, the sonic traces of which can be heard as the click of the camera in “The Currency of Dreams.”) *Softly Softly Copy Copy* (2009) utilizes a quasi-Oulipian technique in order to further expand his compositional approach: Lambkin deploys a series of fragments and scraps from his own previous work. Inspired by Trevor Wishart’s densely edited electronic composition for tape and voice, *Red Bird (A Political Prisoner’s Dream)* (1978), *Softly Softly Copy Copy* strives to break conventional tropes of organization through a grafting of sonic odds and ends over a skeletal structure created from the first minutes of pre-concert audience ambiance collected from Tangerine Dream bootlegs. The methodology is appropriately arcane; Lambkin’s own words might help to elucidate it:

I really loved the Tangerine Dream recordings [because there] was that kind of palpable sense of expectation in the audience before the group began. They’re obviously on stage, the lighting’s down, or whatever the situation is; the audience is kind of hushed, and you hear the sequencers start to bubble to life. I loved that moment where the band was beginning to take control of the situation. The music starts, then you’re away. So I had this tape collage, and it was just the beginnings of all these concerts. People rumbling mics, and chatting, but as soon as the band made their first stylistic sonic gestures, I’d stop the cassette and line up the next one.

He then used a roughly twenty-minute section from this larger tape collage and applied elements from his archive, along with new material and a musical interlude by Samara Lubelski (her written recollection of working with Lambkin is published in this collection). He repeated this process twice to make the final two compositions for *Softly Softly Copy Copy*.

It recalls, again, Wolgamot’s *In Sara, Mencken, Christ and Beethoven There Were Men and Women*, a work that was conceived and composed after hearing an outdoor concert of Beethoven’s *Eroica*. Keith Waldrop describes the Wolgamot book’s ur-moment as the author’s experience at the concert, “hearing within the rhythms themselves, names—names that meant nothing to him, foreign names. It was these names, he realized, that created the rhythm, bearing the melody into existence.”⁵ To compose his work, Waldrop explains that Wolgamot:

made long lists of names and held the list next to the pages of his projected book. When certain names



Original cover/label designs for unreleased *Salmon Run* LP (HP Cycle), 2007





Untitled (photo print with collage elements), 2009. Collaboration with Dr. Timothy Shortell (Überkatze Studio, Brooklyn, NY)

came near each other, there was, he said, “a spark,” and that was how he knew they went together. In this way, three names gathered on each page, and then around those three clustered multitudes of names. And still something was lacking. Each page rhythmically complete, there was no impulse to go from one page to the next. There had to be a matrix, a sentence, to envelop the names. So far, he had spent a year or two composing his book. The sentence, a sentence to be repeated, more or less identically, on each page—this sentence took him ten years to write. “It’s harder than you think,” he said, “to write a sentence that doesn’t say anything.”

There is a latent spirituality to Ashley’s engagement with Wolgamot’s desire to write “a sentence that doesn’t say anything” that later became manifest in Ashley’s overt interest in Buddhism. Lambkin’s work, by contrast, remains completely embodied, and his narrative strategies take on a more speculative nature, creating multiple points of entry for the listener to enter the work on their own terms; perhaps this is why visual artist Ed Atkins appreciates Lambkin’s work (see his essay on *Salmon Run* in this publication).

I’m reminded, too, of Maryanne Amacher’s musings in her treatment for the opera *Intelligent Life* about hearing with other people’s ears or even hearing through the ears of animals: “BECOME REINDEER, ELEPHANT through

Music and Sound; try on each other’s ‘ears’ by exchanging RESONANCE PRINTS.” These artists similarly underscore that our subjectivity is just one subjectivity and then another, a million grounded perspectives with no bird’s-eye view. As in Ashley’s *Automatic Writing*, there is a dusk or twilight that hangs over Lambkin’s work—it’s not so much a valorization of the unconscious or the desire to empty one’s mind, but a speculative engagement with sounds in liminal spaces, something misheard when you’re drifting off, drunk or not really paying attention. Humming along, but not really carrying the tune.

In *Amateur Doubles* (2011), sly manipulations of CDs by early French prog musicians Besombes/Rizet and Philippe Grancher are presented as “readymade” recordings. But this is an illusion: not only are the recordings suffused with the texture and ambience of a car ride (where Lambkin was recording), but the French CDs were pre-edited to begin with. The editing subtly defamiliarizes the source material—for instance, the church bells in Lambkin’s version ring three times at the end of the song, while in the original version they only ring once. Lambkin claims that he is devaluing the intended role of the original records by putting them on the same ground acoustically as anything else that might be picked up in the recording, and in turn, making the music just as important as the incidental sounds around it. This is true on one level, but the choice of these particular records

seems pointed, not haphazard. The originals themselves play with motifs of car travel in their songs and album art, after all, connecting to the recording and artwork for *Amateur Doubles*, the latter of which features an image of Lambkin alongside his wife and two children in their car. (For more on the car as a site of music production, see Adrian Rew’s essay here.) If it seems there is a certain seamless positivity to all of this, it is rather the product of a meticulously orchestrated ambivalence. The movement and sounds of the car produce a portrait of a tired domestic space and time, with Lambkin seemingly relegated to just another figure in the scene, a mumbling, irritated father whose voice is heard from time to time expressing frustration. While he can claim to have authored the situation, he was only a passenger on the trip (he doesn’t have his driver’s license). His role as companion is to be a double for you, the listener. Because, while you are welcome to listen, you can’t enter completely—the car was already full.



Test shot for *Face Panel #6*, 2006