

Cecilia Lopez in conversation with Joe Moffett

This interview with Cecilia Lopez by Joe Moffett is a transcript of a conversation that took place on May 7, 2021 and is edited lightly for clarity.

Cecilia and Joe will release their first duo album on [Tripticks Tapes](#) in fall 2021.

Joe Moffett: You started practicing music as a vocalist, is that right, or was it keyboards?

Cecilia Lopez: I think it was voice. I was singing as far back as I can remember and used to make songs as a kid. Although the first “formal” lessons I took were piano lessons. I did those two things for a while, and I also studied clarinet.

JM: Oh, clarinet?

CL: Yes.

JM: I don't think I knew you played clarinet! So from there, was there a certain point at which you decided that you wanted to make your own instruments? Or was this a more gradual decision.

CL: I think there was. When I was in my early-mid teens I was going to the conservatory for classical voice. It was totally frustrating and I was having an existential crisis [*laughs*]. I was given all these techniques and couldn't put them into practice to do what I wanted to do. At that time I met Carmen Baliero who is a friend now but was my composition teacher then. She was making and teaching experimental music and also thinking about the methodologies of the pieces as part of the pieces themselves. I wrote a piece for wine glasses, and I made up the way it was written, or I would write but make up the graphic notation. It was still written for pre-existing instruments. At some point I ended up studying with Gustavo Ribicic who, among other things, was teaching me serial music, and we were doing Cagean composition strategies, all these mathematical methodologies. At some point I felt completely stuck and I remember thinking that I wanted to work with acoustics as if it were a structural element itself, compositionally. At that point I was experimenting, working with pieces of sheet metal, and I was thinking about how I could compose the space, in a way.

JM: When you're talking about acoustics, is it always with the space in which it's taking place in mind, or are there situations where it's more variable and you have a structural-acoustic idea in mind that can take place in different environments?

CL: I think it's the latter. The space is a variable. So I consider how the sound is distributed in the space. It could be anywhere and it can be adapted. But it is always located somewhere.

JM: People talk about “site-specific” work and when I hear that it usually means, to me, that something is constructed for one space in particular, so it is cool to hear about work that is adaptable to its location. Theoretically you are talking about making a piece that could work in, say, a square, concrete space but it could also thrive in a circular, wooden space.

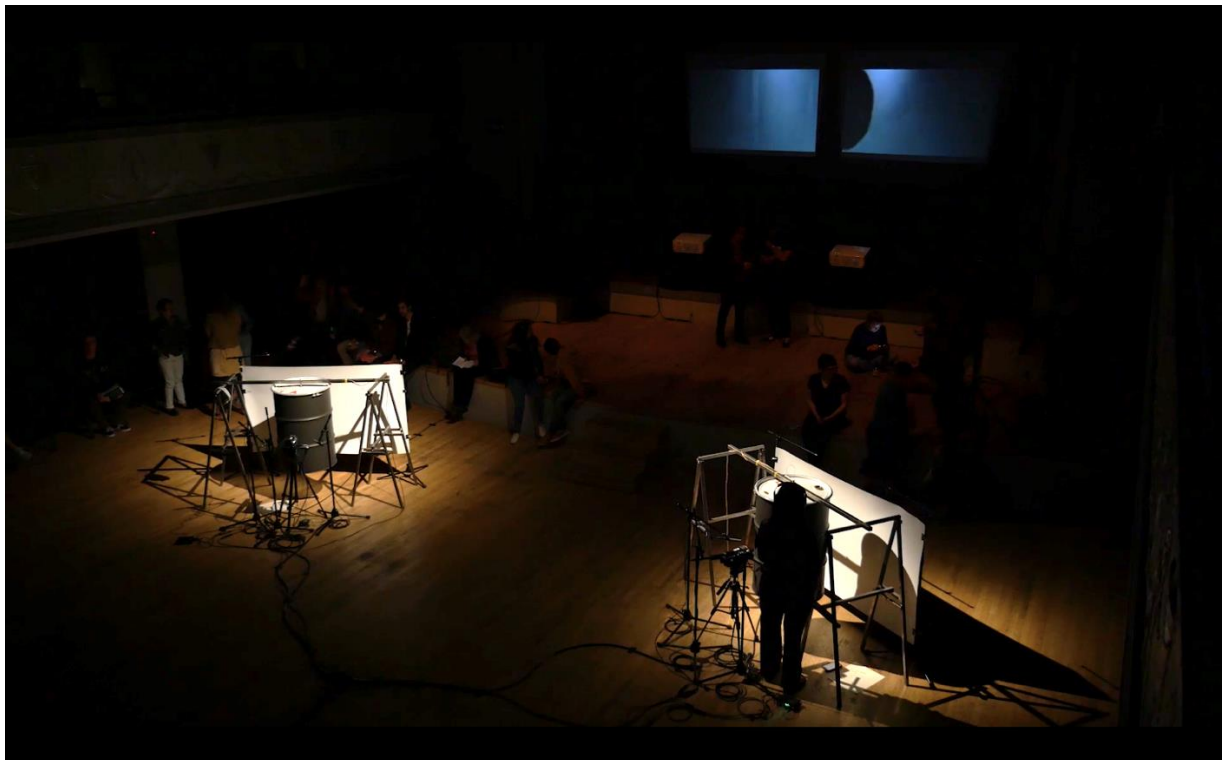
CL: Yes, probably the piece would change in each location, but I feel that “site-specific” is more often a marketing phrase that venues love to hear, like, “It's done specially for us” but it's not always true.

JM: It's refreshing to hear that because that term can seem like a buzzword.

CL: But it's always site-specific and you adapt it to the place - you could be playing a waltz and it's in a space and it sounds specific! In my mind it's placed somewhere, so the movement of the sound from one place to another is a thing, for example, and always changes depending on where it's taking place.

JM: I was thinking a bit about [Machinic Fantasies](#), and I'm reminded of the rotating oil drums with the holes in them. I can't remember now how the sound was being projected - was it that the sound was going into the drums, while the rotation was causing that oscillating effect and the sound was sent out through the speakers? I should be able to remember this...

CL: Yeah you were part of it! [*Laughs*] There's a speaker inside, and the rotating oil drums have holes, with a microphone placed right where the holes are. So you have the acoustic filter of the holes turning, but then also the microphone is specialized through amplification.



JM: Ah ok.

CL: It's so twisted, but that's what it was.

JM: There were multiple outputs of sound, in other words.

CL: Yes.

JM: It was coming out of the drums but it was also coming out of those speakers on the outside as well. That was a fun piece!

CL: I think there were two mics per oil drum in this case. I've done it with four. For example, with that, you have one object, but because you're placing those four mics you create another space, but it's fake.

JM: What do you mean by "fake"?

CL: I mean you're delimiting another perimeter around the objects.

JM: It's not as though there are actual boundaries, but there are spaces where some sounds are more apparent than others, is that right?

CL: Years go by and you read the liner notes and you're like, "Oh my God" - I think it referred to an augmented, kinetic object for this piece. But it makes sense in a way because there's this acoustic artifice that creates a space out of something that is like a resonant body [the oil drum] but it's not a space. It would be if you were an ant, you'd be in a silo.

JM: It's projecting that space that's inside the drums outward.

CL: And it's making it bigger, in a sense. It's playing with that. It could be one mic or sixteen. It could be whatever.

JM: I remember in that piece you had the stage with the quadraphonic setup on the stage and people could go sit there and have a different experience.

CL: That was the amplification of the drums, plus some tones I had too.

JM: And then there was the brass...

CL: The brass were coming from the drums themselves, so that's what was being filtered.

JM: Ah yes, ok. How long ago was that, like three years ago?

CL: May, 2018.

JM: That's wild.

CL: Well, for the last year and a half we were just hanging out in a room doing whatever, so...

JM: Yeah that's true! This is a stereotypical thing for me to say, but time does go by quickly here, and I feel like we met each other recently but it's been like three or four years now that we've been working together.

CL: I was actually thinking about that with the duo. It's not like we met and we recorded, it took a while.

JM: We did a handful of shows.

CL: But we had three times more rehearsals than we did gigs, which was cool.

JM: Yeah, it's nice when that happens. It's easy for things to just be gigs.

CL: I like the other direction.

JM: The other thing I was thinking about with regards to *Machinic Fantasies* was that you started with a piece of music and you did a cross-fade.

CL: Ah, that's true. *That* was site-specific, for example, because Roulette is such an awkward place for a piece like that, because it's a venue, and it has to have an ending and a beginning. I didn't want to start from zero. And because they have a bar, I was like well, if the bar is open and the door is open, and there's music at the bar but that music is also playing inside the oil drums in the concert hall, there is going to be a blending situation in which all of a sudden, the music starts getting mixed with the tones of the piece, and it starts to get weird and eventually people will shut up when they realize the piece is going on.

JM: I like that. I knew it was intentional but wondered if the idea was switching from “casual listening” into “serious listening,” though perhaps that boundary isn’t so clear.

CL: In a way... there were seats but the idea was for people to be a little freer. If you have a clear start, nobody’s going to move but if it’s more gradual people are going to be like, “What is this?” They’ll start to come closer. There’s a looseness that is maybe more inviting. I didn’t feel like that piece wanted to have a formal beginning with applause and performers entering onstage.

JM: It was nice to have people scattered about and sitting on the floor.

CL: I forget now but the recording of the people talking is nice. The bar music was funny, I don’t remember what it was, Burt Bacharach or something like that. And lounge music. It was ridiculous mixed with the rest.

JM: I liked the start of the piece too because it reflected your sense of humor. I don’t know if you thought of it consciously that way.

CL: I don’t know if it made the situation less awkward or more awkward [*both laugh*]. It was less uptight, at least, maybe by way of awkwardness.

JM: I guess there was the possibility for people to be like, “Should I start being quiet?” It is a moment of awkwardness but it can be productive. I don’t know if it would be as perceptible live as in the recording, but if the “background music” is part of the piece, then the audience talking could also be seen as part of the piece.

CL: I cut it off in the recording, though. It was already an 80-minute piece without the people talking at the beginning.

JM: Oh right!

CL: With the audience sound at the beginning it would need to be a box set [*laughter*]! But that was site-specific. You can leave the doors to the concert hall open and if you’re paying attention - if you’re listening to the music at the bar and you go into the hall, you might say, “Is this the same music?”

JM: I think the most recent thing I saw you perform was probably *Red*, which was a while ago, and that piece you did with Aki Onda [[Bifurcations](#)]. That was an improvisation, right?

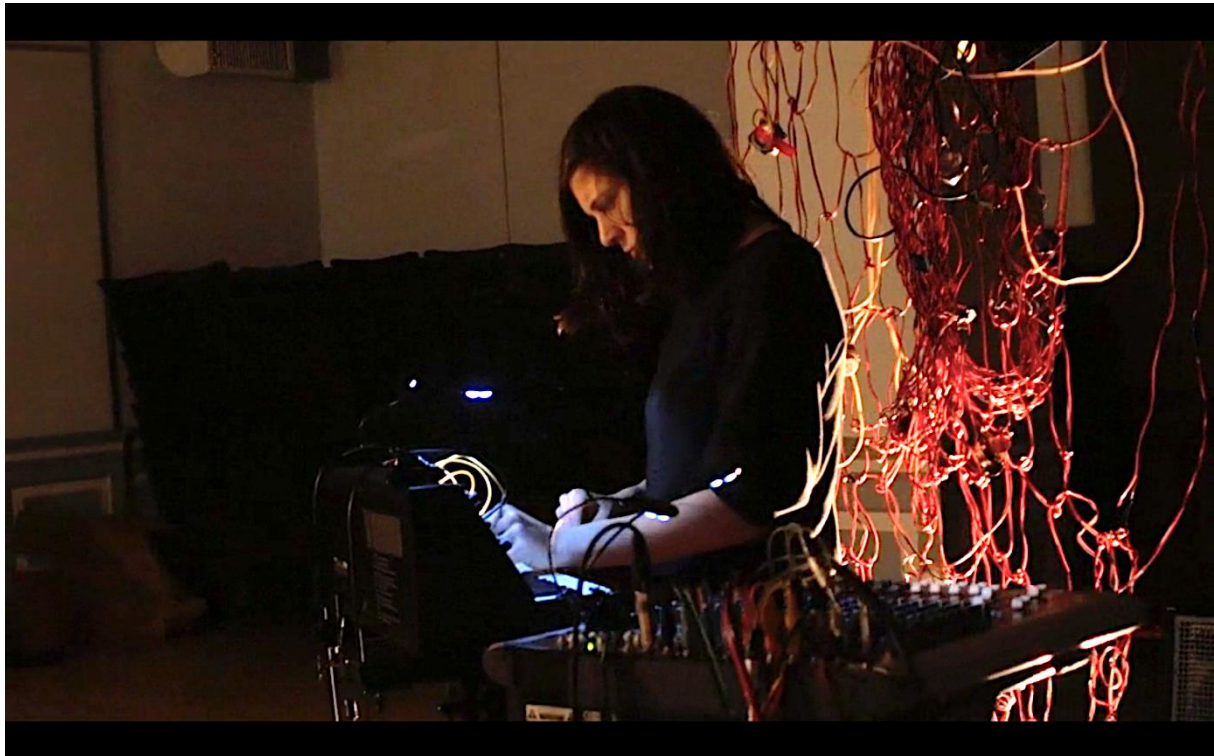
CL: There was a structure. It was a graphic score, so it was loose. And that show we did with you, Forbes Graham, and Chris McIntyre.

JM: Oh right, that was all the same show. So from there, the last show I saw you curate was one of the three-night festival programs that you did at Roulette. Maybe you could talk about your process for curating a festival like that - was that your first multi-night event that you’ve organized?

CL: Yes.

JM: How was that for you?

CL: There was a lot of learning in the process. Outpost Artist Resources approached me to do a new media festival. Which, again, is a very preconceived term like “experimental” and “site-specific.” So it was like, how can we think of this in a different way? As multi-media or inter-media as my work is, I try not to think of technology in an arms race way. It’s not like the more the better or the more technical the better - many times it’s the opposite. So I was focusing on that question. There was Nao Nishihara, for example, who creates artifacts with wood and other materials.



JM: I think I was there for that night - he was walking around with a mobile set of instruments.

CL: So that's technology too. "A spoon is technology" was a joke for me while planning the festival, but it's a stand you can take. So in doing the festival I was thinking about that and about subjective experiences with technology too. People often try to approach making things more "diverse;" but if you think of who is doing the work that is more subjective, you end up there - by focusing on the work, which I think is more interesting. Then you actually get richer work in terms of difference. So that was a cool process too. For example, asking the question of who is utilizing technology but placing it into a body, who has access to technology, etc. It's not just because a work involves multi-channel VRPs that makes it cool. It ended up being a good group of artists in that way and the works were all very different.

JM: For sure. I really liked how the space was used the night I was there, and I appreciate the idea of technology not being relegated to synths or even objects that need an electrical outlet.

CL: A piano is technology - I would have a hard time understanding how it works if I wasn't already familiar with it. It's complex, like a telephone is complex. And the electronic aspects of media are usually valued more than the mechanics which are also technology.

JM: I think that in some of your work you use not only synths but also objects that are simpler, or maybe more accurately, objects in which the circuitry isn't hidden per se. I keep talking about *Red* because there's such a clear image in my mind of the big net of wires and speakers, so you're seeing everything, and even that is transparent and has other instruments inside of it that resonate and feedback. At least that's how I understand the mechanics of it, is that right?

CL: Yeah.

JM: It's funny because I'm thinking a lot in a visual way, and I'm thinking about things that you can see versus not see. You're hearing stuff, but the experience of being in a space and seeing things changes the listening experience. What I sometimes find forbidding about music or musicians or virtuosity is the hidden nature of the content, whether that involves not

knowing what a violinist is accomplishing through their movements across the fingerboard, or a trumpeter via their embouchure, or with synth, which I find especially mysterious, because it seems like there are a billion options.

CL: Yes, it's very awkward.

JM: So for you, do you feel like you're using a similar approach to a synth with something that you've constructed, but the elements are more apparent?

CL: At some point, when I started working with feedback, I realized I was working with motion. I remember scoring movement, how close or far a performer should be to a piece of metal. There is a correlation between motion and sound, and the composition is happening there too.

JM: This reminds me of when we were working on trumpet material [for [Dos\(tres\)](#)], you were choreographing the trumpet motions and dealing with how the actual sound waves were physically interacting with each other in a direct, proximal way.

CL: But that's what I mean about the space - it happens somewhere. Maybe it also has to do with the fact that for me the listening is placed somewhere too. That's why I think I didn't do records for so long - the pieces I created were not a stereo situation, but like a multi-dimensional situation.

JM: So if you got into recording later on, how has that changed in itself and how has it changed your experience of performing live?

CL: Well I don't know because since I started records I haven't performed because of the pandemic.

JM: Oh wow. It's very recent then.



CL: The first record I put out was with a trio in Argentina, but that was kind of different because it was a band. The first record I put out on my own was in 2018, and those were old pieces I had processed. So that made sense. But the other album I put out that year was the recording of *Machinic Fantasies*.

JM: Oh, so that was only your second album - that is very recent!

CL: The recording sounded so good that it made sense, but in the liner notes Kurt Gottschalk wondered whether the visuals distract from the sound or whether the sounds distract from the visuals.

JM: Distract?

CL: Posing that question, whether the music is recordable - does it live in an in-between place, and can the aural and the visual be separated.

JM: That makes sense. For that particular piece, it was so *in a place*, with objects rotating and people moving around the space.

CL: It was a question that I had, does it make sense to put it out as an audio recording?

JM: Do you feel like it's more like a documentation of an event or a recording unto itself?

CL: It's funny, because in the recording itself you can hear the space. It's a piece but not done in a recording studio or meant to be a record. Since that happened, I feel like all the things I work on are based more on my improvisation practice, like the duo we recorded or the duo I recorded with Brandon Lopez, or some recordings I did on piano and synth, but those are strictly music. A recording of *Red* with Brandon, Gerald [Cleaver] and me is going to come out soon, and that is more in-between.

JM: It's a recording of a live performance, right?

CL: Yes, because there's no way I could set that up - where would I set that up for a studio recording and have the budget to do it? It's sort of impossible. So at some point I was like, "This is it, this is the record." Otherwise it wouldn't exist.

JM: And that piece has changed a bit as well, right? You have done it solo as well.

CL: They are all called the same thing, but they aren't the same. It's the same material, but it's been done as a solo, it's been done as an installation... that recorded version is called *Red (db)*, because there's an actual composition for the three of us. And Julia Cavagna was moving the netted objects in that version. All of that is choreographed. If I'm performing alone it's just unwritten improvisation.

JM: So with an ensemble, you're creating a more pre-determined or structural piece so that certain events take place at certain points, more or less.

CL: Many times I describe it as several layers of composition. One is the hardware - like, I have this signal, where is the sound going to come out? Or the double bass is going to sound in the snare or is going to go to the amp; or the trumpets will be specialized - these are all hardware questions. And then there's what happens in time, which is the score, and then there's what actually happens, which is feedback and you don't really know what it is. At some point I was thinking that I wasn't sure how to make this piece work in time, but for me it's easy to do graphic scores, so I decided to make a score. There were so many variables that I wouldn't have known how to manage it otherwise. When I'm alone, it's manageable without a score, but if I have to tell another performer what to do while I myself am doing something else, I'll write a score.

JM: I like that the composition is comprised of many layers, including the making of the instruments.

CL: That's technology too - it's like thought models.

JM: It's a nice contrast to the Western classical tradition, where the instruments are often treated as a given, or it feels that way to me anyway.

CL: The musicians are treated as givens too!

JM: That's totally true. When there's so much more that goes into it that doesn't get considered the "composition." Perhaps people are thinking about that more critically now. Then again, it's not like Bach *wasn't* building and working on his own organs.

CL: There aren't so many like that - that is an example of someone who was putting together both things, the instrument with the thought, or the theory, and thinking of how to push that through.

JM: I think this comes up in jazz as well. I vaguely remember something that Michael Foster said years ago to me, where he was talking about extended techniques and saying how certain things he was doing have their grounding in the way certain jazz saxophonists were manipulating or altering their instruments. Creating the instrument, even if it's on a micro-level, doesn't come out of a vacuum and it isn't entirely new, in other words. It comes from a performance practice that these musicians were doing decades ago. I feel like Taylor Ho Bynum could talk about that sort of thing as well with regards to trumpet.

CL: In the piece that you and Forbes [Graham] did, I didn't just sit down and write the piece - I got together with the performers. We would see what was possible, and I would record it and listen to it. With Brandon and Gerald it was the same thing. Then there are these ridiculous things, like in the score of [Red](#) there is a part that says "Hitchcock" because Brandon was doing something and I was like, "Oh that's cool, that's like Hitchcock." So he knew what that meant, but if someone else were looking at the score they wouldn't know. It would sound completely different if it was for different people. It was developed specifically for them.



JM: Right, rather than being played by just any chamber ensemble.

CL: Not only is improvisation part of it, but also the improvisers I was working with are part of the character of the piece itself, because it was made with them. It could be performed by

other people, but it is going to sound completely different, which is cool. But it's like everyone is a little hands-on in the process, which I like.

JM: I like the fact that you borrowed a trumpet of mine and were working on the piece in part by playing the instrument yourself.

CL: Well, I needed to listen to it as well. It was the same with the other pieces as well, I needed to listen. I appreciate that people were open to that method of work. Some people are like, "Just tell me what to do" and I would be like, "I have no idea."

JM: I guess that's an approach - which is fine too, but it's different.

CL: It's a very different approach. And in my case, I'm also performing, so it's more blurry.

JM: I like that way of working. I don't compose so much, per se, but I like that mode of working with certain ensembles and getting a certain kind of dynamic, but also going for a fairly specific kind of sound so that it isn't super open-ended.

CL: I don't think that it's so open ended, but the process includes the people. Gerald would do something, and I would like it and we would work with it, but it was something that he proposed. I can't take credit for that.

JM: Here's an unrelated question: is there music that you really like that you don't consider an influence on your own practice at all?

CL: That's a hard question. Music that I really like and hasn't influenced me?

JM: I mean everything is going to influence us in some way but something fairly disconnected from everyday practice.

CL: I'm leaving! [*Laughter*]. It's hard to say. I was talking with someone about this regarding Phill Niblock the other day because he listens to jazz but his music sounds nothing like jazz. It's something he likes the most and they were like, how is that possible? I think I make a point in connecting those two things - for example, that first record that I mentioned is me filtering a chamamé duo, Rudi y Nini Flores, who play traditional folk music from northern Argentina, as well as some Bach. Then I filtered a song I did myself that was absolutely cheesy. I also filtered a Chet Baker song. Everything sounds kind of fucked up and you can't tell what it is, but it's there. Maybe that's a way to make things more permeable.

JM: So those are things that you would maybe listen to or already listened to but filtered them or put them into your own piece...

CL: I worked with the oil drums for ten years before they became a piece. It went through so many phases. At some point, I realized my practice with the object involved listening to music through the object, like listening to a radio being filtered, a kind of deviated listening practice. That's why the cocktail music made sense to use in *Machinic Fantasies*. Some pieces are very specific in the material but there's a listening practice situation that provides room for other things to be part of it.

JM: I find for myself that I have different modes of listening to or consuming music. Maybe I over-compartmentalize it, actually. Which is maybe why this question is so awkward, because I'm trying to label what is or is not influential, or part of what I do versus not part of what I do - it all really is...

CL: It's the same.

JM: What has practice been like for you recently, or in what ways has practice changed?

CL: It's been complicated. I don't even know. I usually had access to more space so I had things set up so that I could play with stuff. Since the pandemic, I haven't had access to spaces, and I don't want to set up an oil drum in my house. I mean, I've done it, but I'm trying to avoid it - I don't want to hang my clothes on the instrument, you know? So I haven't been with stuff so much. It's been kind of a disaster. But I have been doing a lot of mixing. It ended up being a digestive time - working with material that happened before this situation. It is getting to the point where I need to get into hands-on mode again, though.

JM: It's good that you had recordings that you could work on in that way.

CL: Yes, but it was also figuring out that it was going to be a survival strategy, mentality-wise. When we recorded in the fall it gave me something to mix in the winter.

JM: Yes, I remember you were saying that! It was a brilliant idea.

CL: I knew I was going to need something to do and I didn't know what it was going to be.

JM: It has definitely helped me as well.

CL: It's because you have something to look forward to. It's been so dire. It's kind of childish but I need to be able to make a mess when I work - to put up the oil drum and the speaker, consider the setup and let a few days go by to work out ideas. But in a studio apartment it's much more challenging.

JM: Lack of space, or expansive space, can be limiting.

CL: It has been interesting to see people adapt to circumstances. For me, I had to reconcile with the purpose of everything, in a way. It wasn't so much, like, OK now it's all going to happen online. What? Are we doing this? Why are we doing this?

JM: I've been in a similar mindset.

CL: It was a parenthesis.

JM: That's a good way of putting it, I hadn't thought of it that way before. In terms of actually practicing the trumpet, I would have periods where I would be enthusiastic and then a week where I would be like, I don't even fucking see the point in doing this. Who am I doing this for? Trumpet can be so annoying too because you have to warm up, and I hate warming up [*laugher*]. I'm so lazy!

CL: At the beginning of the pandemic I was doing this piano piece, so I was practicing, which is something I don't do. Then after that I found it hard to connect to the playfulness. I work from there - like kids will start playing and there's no purpose, no reason. It's just playing for playing, and it has been hard to reconnect with that desire or impetus.

JM: I don't know if you had a similar experience, but improvising on my own got really old after a while.

CL: Doing synth, I'm like who wants to hear another solo synth set? I don't. So why would I do it if I don't want to hear it? If I'm playing with the net, I feel I'm at least interacting with something, and I don't know exactly what it's going to do.

JM: Though do you feel like maybe a month will go by and you'll be into doing solo synth again?

CL: I never did solo synth.

JM: But did you, for lack of a better word, resort to practicing it during the pandemic?

CL: No, it just never happened. I tried but I got bored with it. There are other things I find more interesting. There's something about setting up processes, like the net going through a synth or music being filtered by some process. But synth on its own doesn't really do it for me. I keep thinking I should figure it out.

JM: Well it might not be necessary or desirable to figure out that particular thing.

CL: It would be practical, but that's not usually what I do, being practical [*laughter*]. I miss playing with the material stuff.

JM: I do think of you as someone who synthesizes multiple objects or materials. You do the thing of improvising in an ensemble "just" on synth, but you are also really good at bringing multiple elements together into one whole. What you do is hands-on.

CL: The synth is a way of processing, but the oil drum is a way of processing as well. Sheet metal worked as a filter too. So I don't think it's so much about the synth itself. It's developed into its own thing, but in the beginning I would play with these other objects as if they were processing instruments.

JM: So do you consider all these things - a synthesizer, sheet metal, oil drums, and other objects - on the same plane? Not necessarily in terms of complexity - a piece of sheet metal is a more simple thing than a Nord...

CL: Well that's the question, like when we were talking about the new media thing. It's simpler...

JM: But it doesn't mean it's less interesting?

CL: ...But it's also very complex in its own way - it depends on how deep you go with it. It's the same with the Nord - you can press one key and get a techno band. You can push the hold button and lift your hands and drink. It's so *manufactured*.

JM: It's interesting to think about how you as a body, as a person - what kind of work you're putting into the instrument, whatever it might be. I think about this kind of thing with the trumpet and the other objects I use. Trumpet is this complex series of tubes that has had its own evolution to get to the point it's at today and has all these ways you're "supposed" to play it. But then there's the deconstructing thing where you're playing it "wrong" intentionally to get these other sounds out of it that may be, on a superficial level, less complex - or less resonant. But it has its own place and relevance.

CL: It's not necessarily about the proficiency of the instrument or the technique - I think that the extended techniques develop their own problems as well, or that whole approach develops its own form of a virtuosity/proficiency dead end. That's what I mean when I say that in Western classical music the instrument doesn't matter and the player doesn't matter - it's all about the proficiency. How well it's played, not even who or what.

JM: That's something I've been grappling with recently, the idea of virtuosity. There's this little guy inside me who's like, "You gotta seem like you know what you're doing at all times" - as a trumpet player, even if I'm making ridiculous noises. There's a weird dead end to it that's not about music, at a certain level.

CL: It's like a music school sequel.

JM: Yeah exactly.

CL: It happened to me with the voice. I stopped singing because of that.

JM: Oh yeah?

CL: My relationship with singing was very intuitive. I would sing with my sister - we would put the tape recorder on and sing insane things. I remember the songs. They were lost in a fire, but there were tapes and tapes and tapes of great songs. They were cool, really out there. I remember doing classical singing in the conservatory and was like, this sucks. It wasn't what I wanted to do. I remember crying and the teacher was like, "Oh yes, you have to suffer!" and I was like, "*Fuck this.*" I was 14 and knew it wasn't going to work. I was singing for money at weddings and people would tell me I was good, but I knew it was going to be a disaster. I wanted to live my life - I wasn't going to give up my teenage years for that.