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With time, in time, our time - Afterall

– *Jacob Korczynski*

10-12 minutes



Justin Hicks and Steffani Jemison, 'Mikrokosmos'. Documentation of workshop, performance, and record release event, De Appel, Amsterdam, 27 June, 2019. Photograph: Liza Nijhuis. Courtesy De Appel

Records are inherently recursive. A single object with two separate sides, reaching the centre of one takes you over, before the encounter on the second face brings you back.

Working together as Mikrokosmos, composer Justin Hicks and artist Steffani Jemison consider their LP *Another time, this time, one time* (2019) a continuation of the exhibition of the same name presented at Western Front in Vancouver in the autumn of 2017.¹ As the exhibition's curator Pablo de Ocampo outlines in the liner notes to the LP published by the institution's label Western Front Records, Mikrokosmos has thus far taken on multiple formats including workshops, study sessions, and concerts. All three of these forms of gathering are predicated upon a tacit agreement by the participants to share time and each of these collective experiences are summoned when one listens to 'Tutorial' and the self-titled track that make up the two sides of the record. Initiated in 2016 and taking their name from Bela Bartók's eponymous six-volume piano pieces composed between 1926 and 1939, Hicks & Jemison's first collaborative recording as Mikrokosmos is not a document of a performance. A record of its own making, Hicks & Jemison have found the apposite form for Mikrokosmos in this LP, while the outcome of their project is not restricted to the history of the medium itself.





Steffani Jemison and Justin Hicks, 'Another time, this time, one time'. Installation view, Western Front, Vancouver, 2017. Courtesy Western Front. Photograph: Dennis Ha

One of the earliest curatorial efforts to focus upon artist's records was *The Record As Artwork: From Futurism to Conceptual Art. The Collection of Germano Celant (1977–78)*, a touring exhibition of LPs taken from the collection of the Italian curator. In his essay featured in the accompanying catalogue Celant states:

As a form of aurally-written page to be perceived through the phonograph, the record is able to amplify writing or reading. As the mechanical extension of the written or spoken word, it can release written research from the immobility and passivity of the printed page and restore to communication those qualities of spoken language which printing removes.²

Just over a decade later, Michael Glasmeier reiterated Celant's proposition in his contribution to *Broken Music: Artists' Recordworks* (1989) a survey of the medium he co-edited with Ursula Block, stating that: 'Essentially, the record was seen as an instrument for expanding a writing oriented culture into the phonetic field [...]'.³

Celant and Glasmeier both point to the prime role of language-centred practice in informing the development of artists' books and the parallel emergence of artists' records. Not only does *Another time, this time, one time* resist this equation but it also points to modes of production and forms of reception beyond the authorship of the lone artist encountered via the multiple art object by an

individual. As an ongoing collaboration by Hicks & Jemison, Mikrokosmos subverts such a frame by beginning as a duo which is expanded to a number of other collaborators on *Another time, this time, one time*, all of whom bear listing here: Jonathan Hoard, Allison Loggins-Hull, Alexis Marcelo, Anaïs Maviel and Kenita Miller-Hicks on the instruments, and Tim Darden, Quincy Flowers, Ayesha Jordan, Kara Lynch, Alexis Marcelo, Okwui Opokwasili, and David Hamilton Thomson as the chorus.

With *Another time, this time, one time*, Hicks & Jemison's collaboration is mirrored in that of Brian Jackson and Gil Scott-Heron whose work is taken as material for both sides of the LP, specifically their 1977 song 'We Almost Lost Detroit'. Their choice of revisiting the work of Scott-Heron for *Another time, this time, one time* continues an exploration of Black American music that has informed all of the previous Mikrokosmos projects and is two-fold. First, there is his role as a griot, speaking from and to a Black experience in America across four decades of releases. Second, they hone in on the specific technique of melisma as demonstrated by Scott-Heron, where a series of notes are sung to a single syllable and emulated by the ensemble convened by Hicks & Jemison.





Justin Hicks and Steffani Jemison, 'Mikrokosmos'. Documentation of *Another time, this time, one time*, co-commissioned by Nottingham Contemporary and Western Front, 2018. Courtesy Nottingham Contemporary. Photography: Samuel Kirby

The way in which Mikrokosmos simultaneously grapple with the historical and formal conditions of repetition are met in the 1981 essay 'On Repetition in Black Culture' by James A. Snead.⁴ Writing just one year after the collaboration between Jackson & Scott-Heron dissolved and at the beginning of the decade that saw Scott-Heron's solo output fade away, Snead asserts the necessity of repetition in order for every culture to maintain a sense of continuity about itself.⁵

Those continuities so fundamental to developing communities can be both built over, and lost to, time. Perhaps this is why it is so powerful that 'Tutorial', which takes up the first side of the LP, begins with Scott-Heron's voice intoning that single word. But he is not alone. A lone vocalist echoes his inflection. Then a chorus emerges to collectively sound out the same word, leaving it suspended in the very force it names. In contrast to the first side, 'Another time, this time, one time' begins more as a solo exercise in melisma, untethered to the voice of Scott-Heron. Like 'Tutorial', 'Another time, this time, one time' is also led by a single utterance: 'over'. Pointing to the flip of the LP which brought the listener to the B side, it is then intoned again, joined by a second word that again points to the inherent temporality of the medium they occupy: 'over time'.

While both tracks on the record are united in the way space is formed around the words from 'We Almost Lost Detroit' by the voices of Hicks, Jemison and their collaborators, they do not stand alone, acapella. Sundrum, glockenspiel, flute, and piano also compose the sounds that form the two sides, with each instrument responding to and repeating the modulating sequence of the notes uttered by Scott-Heron. Snead asserts that: '[...] black music has always tended to imitate the human voice, and the tendency to "stretch" the limits of the instrument may have been there already since the wail of the first blues guitar, the whisper of the first muted jazz trumpet, or the growl of the first jazz trombonist'.⁶ In the context of the Mikrokosmos LP, the entanglement Snead proposes between the voice and the instrument in the Black American musical tradition could be seen as expanding the number of voices assembled or what one voice sings of on the second side as

'strategies for remembering' embodying or evoking absent individuals which is a shared subtext of both Snead's text and the Mikrokosmos project at large. This enmeshment of the instrumentation and the voice is felt perhaps most intensely in the second segment of the second side of *Another time, this time, one time*. After a solo vocalist moves through the melismata produced by a series of single words, a shift takes place when a second voice announces: 'more, different, something'. What follows is an exhilarating and wordless exchange between a soloist, whose rapid, breathy intonations match the undulating percussive volley of a sundrum, resounding at an accelerated rhythmic tempo which is then picked up in a series of hand claps and then a collection of clipped notes on a piano.



Steffani Jemison and Justin Hicks, *Another time, this time, one time* (in the vicinity of Fulton Avenue and Saratoga Avenue), HD video, colour, sound. Installation view, Western Front, Vancouver, 2017. Courtesy Western Front. Photograph: Dennis Ha

Snead most succinctly frames the formal deployment of repetition in his identification of the 'cut' where he states: 'Black culture, in the "cut," builds "accidents" into its coverage, almost as if to control their unpredictability. Itself a kind of cultural coverage, this magic of the "cut" attempts to confront accident and rupture not by covering them over, but by making room for them inside the system itself.'⁷

The cuts produced by Hicks & Jemison on the LP are made manifest in the elliptical structure of 'Tutorial' where 'We Almost Lost Detroit' is neither grasped as a whole, nor unpacked in order. Instead, Jackson & Scott-Heron's song is split into its sixty-one examples of melisma, honing in the words themselves. To quote Snead once more: 'The "cut" overtly insists on the repetitive nature of the music, by abruptly skipping it back to another beginning which we have already heard.'⁸ Hicks & Jemison simultaneously enumerate and incise non-chronologically and in doing so, associations accumulate the second time words are sung: 'survive', 'almost', 'Detroit', 'time', 'over', 'mine'.

The cuts made into 'We Almost Lost Detroit' produce a repetition without a pattern, just as the assembled players and chorus at times remove themselves from the collective of the ensemble in order to respond not only to Jackson & Scott-Heron's composition, but also one another. The cuts made into 'We Almost Lost Detroit' find their visual counterpart in the sleeve of *Another time, this time, one time* by graphic designer Preston Thompson. Here, their collective name carries across the top of the front cover and down the right hand side and is echoed on the verso as it is again spelled out, this time across the bottom of the rear cover, and up the left hand side. Thompson assigns one of five colours to each of the letters of Mikrokosmos, without the sequence recurring, thus

embodying the segmentation of sound, source, and authorship at work in an ongoing association. Again, further, beside. _____ time, _____ time, _____ time.