

Brainwashed - Ellen Fullman and Okkyung Lee, "The Air Around Her"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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As Ellen Fullman can likely attest, one of the downsides to inventing your own instrument with 100-foot-long strings is that it definitely limits the number of possible venues for your performances. Another is that Fullman's Long String Instrument takes roughly five days to install and tune, adding yet another level of amusing inconvenience to the endeavor. Fortunately, an optimal situation surfaced in 2016, as John Chantler's First Edition Festival was given access to Stockholm's Performing Arts Museum while it was being renovated. Given the limited "pure drone" nature of her instrument, the success of Fullman's work can be heavily dependent on finding an appropriately sympathetic foil who can add vivid splashes of color and new layers of emotional depth to that rich harmonic backdrop. In that regard, Fullman could not possibly have hoped for a more talented and amenable collaborator than avant garde cello virtuoso Okkyung Lee.

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Unsurprisingly, the idea for Fullman's Long String Instrument initially came from her exposure to Alvin Lucier's *Music on a Long Thin Wire* in the early '80s. At the time, she was a young sculptor, and she set about creating her own version, initially using a bowl of water as a resonator. Like Lucier's instrument, the Long String Instrument was initially only one string, but departed from his work by making it a more tactile and acoustic phenomenon (Lucier's wire was "played" by an oscillator). Over the ensuing three decades, however, Fullman greatly improved upon her original prototype, using wooden resonators that behave like guitar bodies and expanding the number of strings to as many as fifty-six (a maximum dictated by the span of her arms). Fullman plays the instrument by slowly walking between the two sets of strings, dragging her rosin-covered fingers along them to produce sustained and buzzing metallic drones. In essence, it is like a massive tambura and naturally lends itself to creating dense, harmonically vibrant reveries in the vein of Indian Raga. A tambura usually only has four strings, however, so Fullman's invention opens up significantly deeper and more layered vistas of heavy drones and slowly blossoming clouds of accumulating overtones. In short, it is the ideal instrument for drone music, allowing Fullman to achieve both a palpable physicality and a degree of nuance that was previously not possible.

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The album is divided into two separate halves of roughly twenty minutes each, but the two sections are essentially variations on the same theme, so their differences are largely academic. It is possible that the original performance was a single long piece that has been edited to fit the vinyl format, but the second half seems to start anew rather than picking up where the first half left off. The foundation of each, of course, is the languorously undulating and buzzing swells of Fullman's vibrating strings. That backdrop can be quite compelling in its own right, as the shifting metallic thrum can be quite sharp at times and produces quite an unpredictable array of harmonics and harmonies as the sustained tones interact and collide. During her more subdued moments, Okkyung Lee produces her own undulating drones that intertwine with Fullman's to achieve a heaving and simmering baseline intensity, but the most striking passages are those in which a fresh cello theme vividly blossoms into sharp relief. It can be a truly dazzling performance at times, as Lee seems to effortlessly conjure a wide array of vibrant sounds from her cello. Naturally, there are plenty of visceral howls, moans, scrapes, and shudders that are essentially the cello equivalent of free-jazz flame-throwing, but Lee thoughtfully times her eruptions to yield a coherent arc of well-earned crescendos rather than a nerve-jangling and exhausting one-dimensional assault of cacophony. In the spaces between her more fiery passages, Lee delves into some rather striking and inventive territory, sometimes mimicking speech; sometimes wresting deep shudders, swoops, and rattles from her instrument; and other times evoking a wildly fluttering bird. She also fluidly cycles through an atypically rich palette of emotions, eschewing anything resembling melancholy to convey a kaleidoscopic swirl of passion, tenderness, sensuality, calm radiance, and something approaching the ecstatic.

Normally, the "some artists meet for a largely improvised one-off collaboration at some festival" genre of experimental music album is a reliably consistent source of instantly forgettable, half-baked, and indulgent fare, but *The Air Around Her* is an absolutely wonderful exception to that trend. Part of that is likely due to the fact that Fullman and Lee have performed together at a handful of previous festivals, I suppose, but a deep chemistry is quite different from mere familiarity. While I have always prized vision and craftsmanship far more than musicianship, listening to how Lee seamlessly and gracefully dances around and through Fullman's churning web of buzzing strings and ghostly overtones is almost a transcendent experience (albeit one prone to sudden flashes of violence as well). I had forgotten how mesmerizing it can be to hear a great musician effortlessly and fluidly voice whatever ideas pop into their head in real time. Sadly, a lot of technically brilliant musicians just do not have particularly interesting ideas to conjure up. Lee, on the other hand, arguably has the opposite issue, as some of her previous work errs on the side of too challenging and outré for even my jaded ears. I suppose that might make Fullman the perfect foil for Lee as well, as she provides a solid and listenable foundation for Lee's more radical impulses. As such,

The Air Around Her

is the rare pure collaboration that is more than the mere sum of its parts, as the organic, effortlessly intuitive, and utterly egoless way the two artists intertwine makes this one of the strongest releases in either's discography.

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Samples can be found [here](#) .