

John Oswald: Burrows (1974-75) – notes on the work by Barry Truax

John Oswald realized this analog tape work in the Sonic Research Studio at SFU while he was a visiting student (in connection with his studies at York) in 1974-75. It uses the recorded voice of William Burroughs on a mono recording taken from an LP with no attempt to equalize or improve its sound quality. Inspired by Burroughs' literary 'cut-up' technique, John used only fine-grained tape editing to realize the piece, working often at the phonemic and sub-phonemic level. The 9 tape sections were separated by leader tape with durations John thought appropriate.

In several sections, John printed out a graphic level recording from our B&K machine whose speed matched that of the tape - I don't recall whether it was 7-1/2 or 15 ips, but this was a very fast speed for the level recorder to spew out the paper! The purpose was to find the optimum splicing points for the various phonemes by matching the tape with the printout of essentially the waveform (something that became commonplace later with digital editing where a visual display of the waveform is standard). For instance, the reason the various bits of tape in the phase loop ("word falling") recombine so smoothly with no audible transients is due to the precision of this editing.

The other remarkable aspect of the editing is in "Sliding between light and shadow" where the edits drop below the quantum level of 50 ms in length, where we now know (from experience with granular synthesis) that there is little or no aural difference between backwards and forwards. Thus, when the edited bits in the backwards directions are spliced together in retrograde order (not direction) the original text emerges; that is, a reverse ordered set of very short backwards material sounds like a forwards version. In fact, this palindromic theme is found in both sections 2 & 5 where we hear both the forward and retrograde version of the tape with interesting aural illusions occurring. One retrograde element is also inserted in section 4, and tends to fool the ear until it is pointed out.

Except for the long phase loop (section 8), six sections are quite short, bookended by very brief material (1 and 9). Therefore, to get a better sense of what is going on, I have produced a graphic level printout of four of those sections, so that it may be analyzed more precisely.

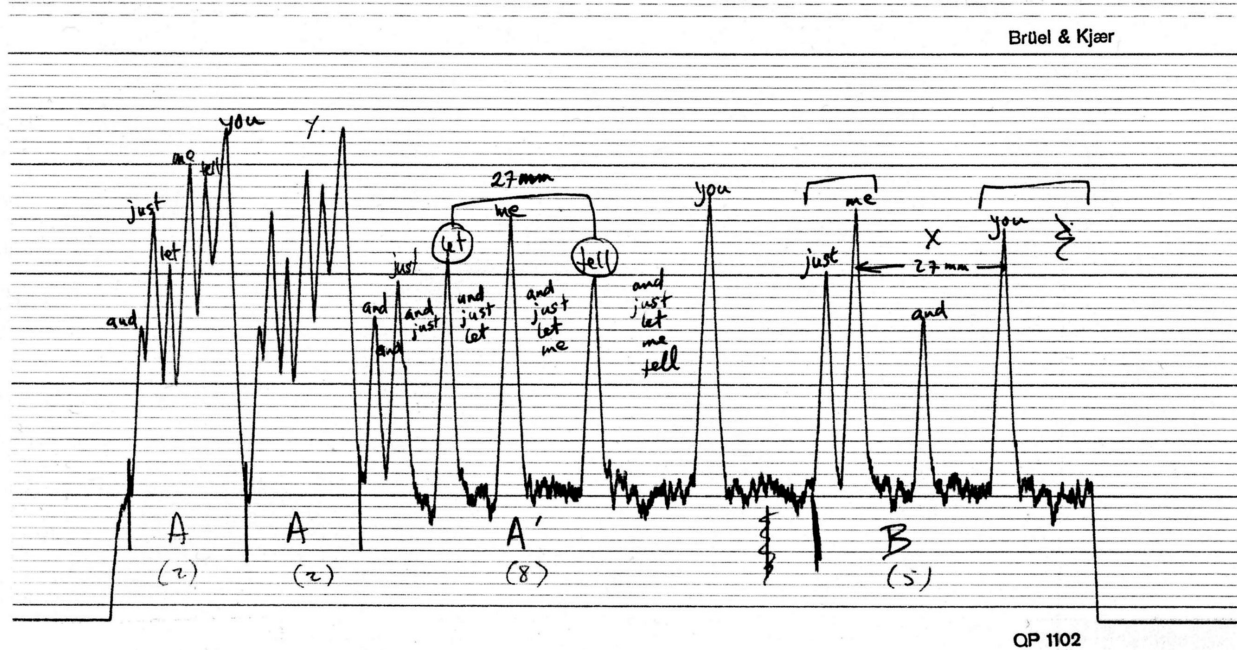
The following comments, as well as the previous material, represent my own interpretation of the work and memory of John's working process, which may not entirely be shared by him.

1. intro: an introduction to Burroughs' distinctive voice
2. I got: heard in both directions where it's arbitrary to say whether the first version is forwards or retrograde since there are instances of both in each version. Most striking is that what stays the same in both versions is "I got" which functions as an acoustic palindrome. The key words seem to be 'screams' and 'images', strategically placed within the shorter and longer subsections (whose durations are close to the golden mean).

4. And just let me tell you – after the initial two repetitions, silence is increasingly inserted (with durational proportions of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). Spoiler alert: John subtly exchanges a backwards 'tell' in place of 'let' in the 3rd repetition! The last version drops out those two words and re-arranges the text as 'just me and you'.

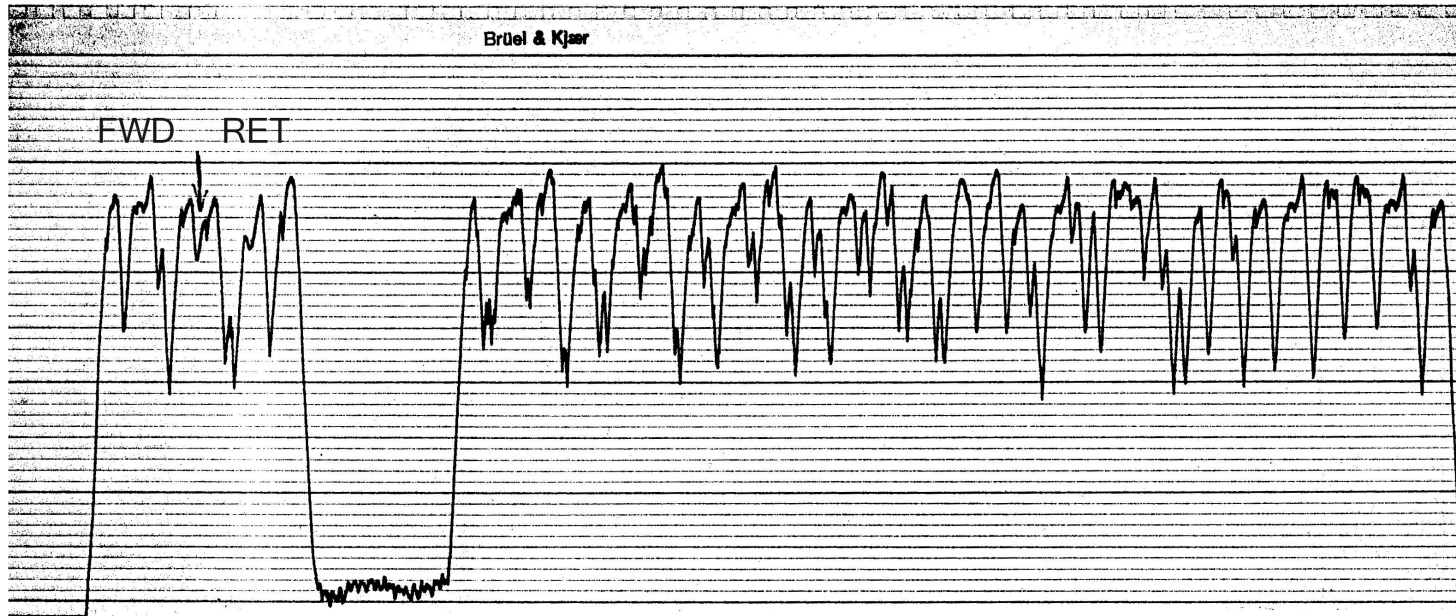
AND JUST LET ME TELL YOU

and just let me tell you &



7 7 1 1 1 1 1 1
 1 2 3 4 5 6
 27

5. Sliding between light and shadow: the forwards and backwards version are heard first, then progressively cut up in smaller and smaller tape sections, with the sections always placed in retrograde order (not direction). So the forwards version eventually sounds backwards, and remarkably at the end, the backwards material sound forwards!

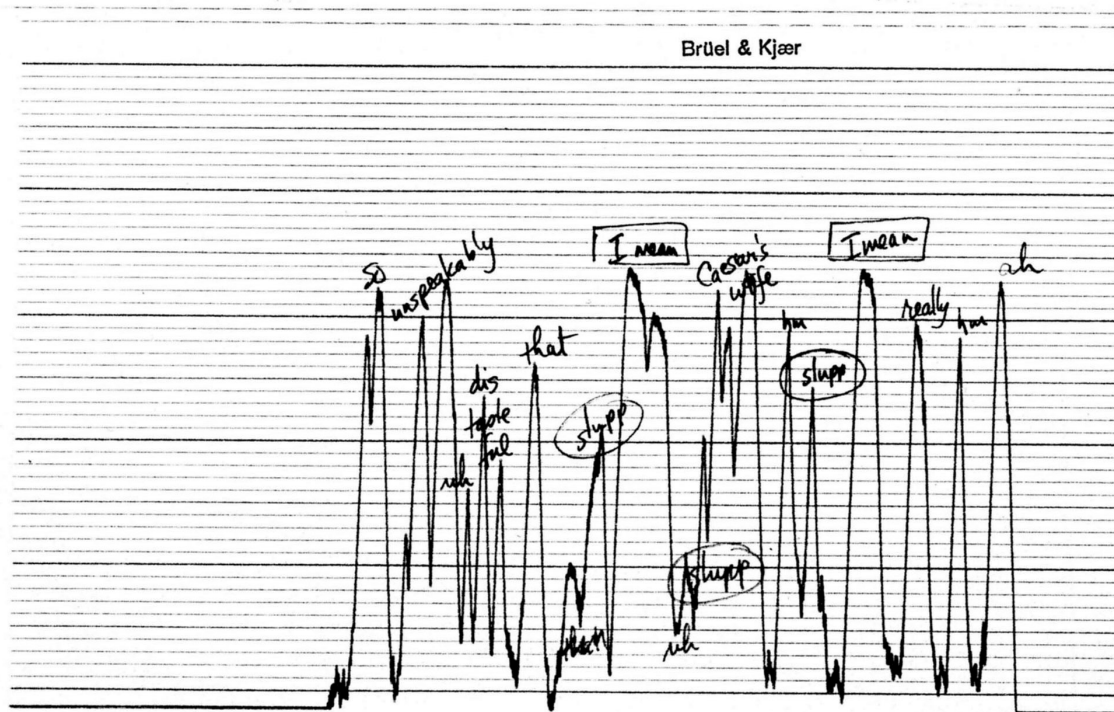


SLIDING, BETWEEN LIGHT AND SHADOW,
 SHADOW BETWEEN LIGHT 'N SLIDING.
 DOW SHA LIGHT 'N BETWEEN ING SLRD

ab|cd|ef|gh ——— yz
 yz ——— gh|ef|cd|ab reverse order

- 6. Duets: two related texts are overlaid in this slower and more imagistic section in such a way that often two simultaneous words or phrases fuse into something else. By the end, the two texts pull apart.
- 7. So unspeakably distasteful: a humorous text with sudden interjections as if from an inner voice.

So unspeakably - uh distasteful that - slupp - I mean uh, slupp - Caesar's wife
 hmhm slupp - I mean - really - hmhm - ah



8. Word falling: a pair of phase loops constructed with alternating tape sections and leader sections such that when precisely synchronized at the start, you hear the original phrase.

Loop 1: S₁ L₂ S₃ L₄ S₅ L₆ where S₁, S₂, etc. are
the pieces of recorded
Loop 2: L₁ S₂ L₃ S₄ L₅ S₆ tape and L₁, L₂, etc. are
equal lengths of leader.

If the two machines are running at exactly the same speed, then the two loops, one length L, the other length L + ΔL, will return to their original phase relationship (phase in the sense of where each is in the loop) after a time, T, which may be calculated as follows:

$$T = 1/S (L + L^2 / \Delta L) \quad \text{where } S \text{ is the tape speed}$$

The number of revolutions of the longer loop will be L / ΔL; the shorter one takes one revolution more.

Therefore, because of the slightly different lengths of the loops, they gradually go out of synch – but surprisingly, new words seem to emerge (and create a kind of Rorschach test as, in my experience, listeners project their own ‘words’ onto what they hear, often with amusing results). However, by the end, the inflection of the original, and then the actual text inexorably re-appears, and the trance is broken. In other words, the words ‘fall apart’ and are re-assembled.

9. endings: a phrase separated by long silences, and a final phoneme.

Note: there is an error in the numbering of the sections on the SFU-40 CD (the piece has 9 sections, not 8).