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Septation: An Eye-Witness (Re)Composition of the September 11 Attacks

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Septation: An Eye-Witness (Re)Composition of the September 11 Attacks

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in

Music

by

Joshua Irving Weinstein

Committee in charge:

Professor David Borgo, Chair
Professor Anthony Davis
Professor Nancy Guy

2011
The Thesis of Joshua Irving Weinstein is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2011
“It is possible through sound to realize truth.”

—Alice Coltrane,
The World According to John Coltrane
1990
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

*Septation:* An Eye-Witness (Re)Composition of the September 11 Attacks

by

Joshua Irving Weinstein

Master of Arts in Music

University of California, San Diego, 2011

Professor David Borgo, Chair

The events of September 11, 2001, are now as iconic as the World Trade Center Towers themselves. Even in the moment, those of us present during the attacks knew that what we were seeing was important, seminal, and historic. They also represent the type of “single-blow” trauma that is most difficult for victims to effectively process, leaving them “stuck” in the moment of attack.

*Septation*, a five-movement multimedia work for eleven instruments with prerecorded audio and video, is an artistic revisiting of my own experience of the
September 11 attacks. The piece is designed to convey such emotional elements of the lived experience as constriction and claustrophobia, disorientation, surprise, powerlessness, felt terror, transformation, and lost innocence. *Septation* achieves this through a combination of fully composed music; guided solo and ensemble improvisation (involving a variety of pitch, noise and conceptual resources); prepared, spatialized and processed instruments; found-sound audio; and symbolic video elements.

In addition to a detailed exploration of the compositional strategies employed in *Septation*, the thesis argues that the public record of an event of explicit terrorism must convey felt terror and other emotional elements of the lived experience to be complete. Further, it argues that, for a variety of reasons, the nexus of composed and improvised music may be best suited to this task. In composing and presenting *Septation*, I exorcised some of the lingering demons of this single-blow event in ways that I hope can provide a compelling example for other victims of single-blow trauma.
SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

BOOM.

I knew without looking what the reverberative impact was that woke me from a short, alcohol-muddied sleep: a flatbed construction truck, working on the parking lot across from my apartment building, had overturned and dropped a stack of massive I-bars into our narrow lower-Manhattan alleyway. The sirens that followed confirmed this. I was too tired to satisfy my mild curiosity; I drifted back off to finish my third and last hour of sleep before I had to get up for good and ride off to work, past whatever had fallen, on my trusty Cannondale.

My phone rang. I’d obviously overslept. I ran down the treacherous staircase from my loft to answer. The young couple across from me, the stripper and her boyfriend, were on their patio, and he was filming something straight ahead, north. I continued past my window and answered the phone.

“Josh?” My sister, calling from her work. “Josh, are you OK?”

Her apartment, a block or two southeast of mine, was where I’d done the biochemical damage the previous night that was slowing my brain this morning, and where I’d spent what would turn out to be the last night of the first half of my life just hours before.

“Foggy but I’ll live. You OK?”

“Um, Josh? Two airplanes just hit the World Trade Center. There are bad fires. You need to get out of your house right now.”
I lived on the top floor of my building, 75 West St/110 Washington St., just south of the South Tower. (See Figure 1.1.) My own apartment faced mostly southeast—away from the towers. I brought my sister with me as I headed to the roof to get a look north.

“Holy shit,” I said into the phone.

“It’s bad, Josh. They think there are bombs, too. You need to get out of there now.”

“OK, sister.”

I called work and told them I’d be late but that I still intended to come in, then I put the phone in my pocket and watched the World Trade Center, that blocky, iconic cornerstone of our little after-hours neighborhood, and outsized symbol of our overconfident city, burn above me.
“Front row seats for history, huh?” one of my neighbors said. Indeed. I ran down for my video camera and spent most of the next half hour alternately filming the fires and making and fielding phone calls. I assured work again that I would be able to ride past the towers and that I’d be there soon. Their skepticism amused me. I was a good rider.

There were bits of human bodies on our roof, a headless, legless torso on the roof below ours. Explosions every minute or so. Among the small crowd of us up there, the understanding of what those explosions were seemed to unfold exactly as gradually, and to arrive simultaneously. A woman watching with her husband voiced our collective internal narrations:

“Oh God, please tell me that that’s not…tell me that’s office furniture. They’re pushing office furniture out of the windows to make more room, right? Please tell me that’s not….” She cried. In the days to follow, I found myself envying her ability to process the emotional component in real time of what we were seeing. I could not.

“People,” was the unspoken end of her sentence. Those falling objects whose explosions on impact reverberated through the narrow downtown streets like mini-echoes of my presumed flatbed truck, were human beings.

“That’s 10,000 dead, easy,” the guy next to me said. “Maybe 20.” Over the next 20 minutes or so, I said the same words to others at least three times.

I remained on the roof longer than most others—long enough to note the difference between the stark, ominous fire I was now seeing and the smoldering flames of the previous half an hour. The unsupported yaw of the stricken South Tower—think of the ax-wedge bite out of a tree being chopped down—seemed ready to fold over and collapse southward. That
is, onto us. The North Tower was spewing out oppressive black smoke. I finally decided it was time to leave.

As I entered the stairway, the earth began to rumble with diabolical force and intention. It was a complex sound and sensation, foundation-shaking, relentless and undulating. Massive. I had spent almost every day of my tenure in that apartment entertaining the (purely intellectual) thought that if our country should ever go to war, whomever we were fighting would bomb the World Trade Center and it would fall on our building. I regarded the idea as either science fiction or too many years off to be an actual concern. Now it was happening.

As the earth shook, there was no doubt what happened next: I was to be crushed to death by whichever building was falling—a World Trade tower or our own building. At some point in the next few days or weeks, my mother would get a phone call that they'd found me. But it was utterly clear that my life, whatever my hopes for it may have been, ended there.

My memory of that panicked dash down those 17 flights of stairs (really 19; our top-floor apartments were two-level lofts, with an additional flight to the roof) is a multitrack mental recording of three distinct elements that both competed and intertwined, and which I remember almost second-by-second and sound-by-sound to this day. The first element is the ghastly, soul-deep, foundation-shaking rumble of the collapsing tower. The second is the machine-gun *pah-pah-pah* of my footsteps as I raced alone and then (on lower floors) with others down the dark–darker–pitch-black stairwell, its walls seemingly constricting, my ears and other senses frantically scanning the incoming sensory information for some warning of the particular millisecond that crushing death was arriving for me. And third, most notably, a running monologue of sadness, disbelief, calculation,
anger, resignation and deep disappointment in myself that for whatever success I’d had, I’d been most successful at stifling my potential at every turn. I had time, in that panicked seconds-long, decades-seeming flight, to build considerable hatred, remorse and puzzlement for the way the man who was about to die in that stairway, had lived.

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I didn't die, of course. Through a series of circumstances, I ended up remaining in the building after many of the others had evacuated, through a second ghastly rumble, presumably the one that was actually going to take our building down, since the first had not. When a paramedic made his way to us through the black, dust-thick air, and announced his name and his intention to get us all out safe, we listened. Among us was a man with a bike helmet and shorts on, who asked if he could just ride past the damage to his job. With no self-awareness, I shared our collective condescending chuckle. It was just one of the ways—along with my verbigerative echo of the conversation on the roof and my own inability to tear myself away from what I was seeing, even after it tried to kill me—that somewhere along the way that morning, I got 'stuck.'

The paramedic somehow managed to secure a small school bus for us, and drove us—improbably—south through the small Battery tunnel/underpass to the East Side of Manhattan, past the Brooklyn Bridge, to Bellevue Hospital, where he dropped us so we could be examined for smoke inhalation and other damage. Along the drive, we encountered a stunning tableau: a massive sea of people walking, dazed and beaten, toward and over the Brooklyn Bridge—a wash of bodies filling the bridge, escaping the island in

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1 Paradoxically, those closest to the attacks knew the least about the event. Cell-phones were unreliable, we weren’t watching television, and the sheer volume of solid matter that pulverized and blanketed the area with the first collapse meant most of us (including the emergency responders) were not entirely sure what had collapsed. One policeman who limped into our building thought that the first rumble was simply the face of the South Tower sheering off—which meant the second rumble could just as easily have been the rest of the tower collapsing, or a building next door, or even the top of our own building.
voluminous slow-motion, walking without New Yorkers’ customary high-gear sense of purpose and forward-motion, directed away-from, this time, not toward, and with a palpable collective trepidation and sadness.

We occupied a spot of privilege in that tableau, riding movie-like out of the smoke and fire in a commandeered ark, past the sea of shocked faces and beaten bodies. We were located both physically and experientially almost exactly halfway between the haggard refugees and the event they were fleeing. While we did not die in the attacks, we also did not fully escape them, and have not even to this day.

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Although over time, elements of my life have shifted back to everyday-normal, I have never woken up into the same world that I went to sleep in that night of my sister’s party. Movie scenes about which most people would not think twice about often call up mental images for me that are gruesome enough to ruin an evening. Routine percussive sounds are jarring (“Please tell me that’s not…”). Essential ‘trusts’ of everyday life for most people—that airplanes do not fall out of the sky, that buildings do not topple over—are exercises in conscious mental will for me.

I have spent most of the ensuing decade as a working musician and songwriter. Yet I have never dealt with the attacks\(^2\) in a creative context. The event was simply ‘too big,’ and the moments too personal to those who were there. The mere fact of being present at the deaths of so many people, all at once, implicitly confers a duty on the survivors neither to squander nor to exploit those lives that end around you, and I have taken that duty to

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\(^2\) Throughout, I use the term ‘the attacks’ as shorthand for the event I experienced that day—that is, the attack on and collapse of the World Trade Center towers, with its attendant related elements. I don’t mean to disregard the totality of the events or to gloss over those who died elsewhere.
heart in many ways for the last decade, wary of producing any work that slips over the
borders on either side to disrespect or commodification.

If I am honest, I also have not wanted to stir up the mental dust that such a work
would require, reliving those movie-scene moments that were too difficult to get through
once, let alone again and again, as the composition process would require, and reawakening
sounds and sights that have spent the better part of the last decade surfacing only to wake
me in a panic from a night’s sleep or to serve as fuel, fear or fire as the context dictated.
Creatively at least, I have kept my 'front row seats for history' to myself.

For a variety of reasons, I finally felt ready this year to attempt a work that captured
the attacks in their full scope—the lived experience of them, not just the fact or description
of them. I undertook it trepidatious of the feelings it would inspire. But I also felt ready to
‘unstick.’ The process was deeply difficult but also surprisingly therapeutic, a second
chance to visit a singular event that, left to its own devices, may have been an insuperable
weight on the lower floors of my consciousness for the rest of my life.

That work is called Septation, a multimedia composition that premiered April 6,
2011, in the Conrad Prebys Music Center at the University of California, San Diego. It was
composed for eleven instruments (piano; electric keyboard; double-bass; electric guitar;
tenor, alto and soprano saxophones; trumpet; bass clarinet; and two hidden percussionists)\(^3\)
plus a concurrent recorded tape track. There is a video component as well.

I’ll discuss the composition of the piece in the section immediately below, and
share some reflections on its broader implications in Section 3.

\(^3\) The San Diego premiere featured eight musicians playing the 11 parts.
2.

THE PIECE(S)

_Sepation_ is five movements plus a coda, meant to represent roughly chronologically (in event order, not in time-proportion) the events of the day, with each element designed to evoke some aspect of the lived experience of the attacks. Among those elements are:

- the theme of **transformation**. None of us—New York City included—came out of the attacks the same as we went in.

- the feelings of **constriction** and **claustrophobia**. It was important to me to represent the ‘closing in’ that was so integral to the experience of the day, from the general sense in which history had zeroed in on our location to unfold; to our increasing isolation (and experiential separation) from the outside world as the attacks proceeded; to the very real sense of being trapped in increasingly smaller spaces waiting to die, often in pitch-black and with choking smoke; and finally to the realization, after the attacks, that the experience of having been in them was non-finite, and that our world would always be just a bit different from other people’s.

- the sense of **disorientation** and **surprise**; of the **loss of power and control**.
Nothing that happened during the attacks came with any precedent-event for most of us. Once a passenger jet can hit a city building, anything can happen next.

- the sensation of **in-the-moment fear/terror**. I felt it was important to convey this without resorting to terrorizing the listener/audience themselves—to convey _felt_ terror, not to evoke terror.
• the representation of time and events in their perceived proportions, rather than their literal unfolding. My run down the stairs, for example, likely lasted no more than 30 seconds (the South Tower took about 25 seconds to collapse, all told). But its importance and relative mental cache-space is a far greater proportion of the event than those seconds would otherwise represent.

• an underlying feeling of lost innocence or childhood’s end, for both those in the attacks and for the city (and perhaps the country) in general

• the essence not only of that particular morning in New York, but also of New York in general. The spirit and personality of the city is often overlooked in both the record of and artistic responses to the World Trade Center attacks. New York was as much a character in the circumstances of the day as the fires, the towers, and the raw events were. I wanted my piece to be ‘located’ there—and unlocatable anywhere else.

I also felt it important that the piece hold together as a composition, rather than read as a linear narrative or pure documentary. As the events unfolded that day, they did not erase everything that preceded them, they augmented, distorted, sometimes obscured, sometimes existed side-by-side with, but ultimately existed in a continuum with it. I wanted the piece to represent this complicated, multifarious reality.

And finally, I wanted the piece to capture a particular paradox of the day, which is that the attacks were, among other things, a media event. They played on live television broadcasts worldwide. There was a public narrative running concurrent with our ‘private’

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5 Karlheinz Stockhausen famously called the attacks “the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos.”
event. Throughout, most of the outside world knew more about its objective details and progression than those of us on the ‘inside’ did.

That central/uncentral-ness was an element in itself: the World Trade Center was ground zero not only for the attacks but also for the plexus of broadcast coverage of the attacks. We were only privy to the former, in spite of being the featured subject of the latter.

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**Figure 2.1**

Graphic score overview for Josh Weinstein’s *Septation*.

*Septation’s* five movements work palindromically to equate the ‘normal’ that began the morning with the new one that ended it (and vice versa). Steel is the pivot-point for the palindrome, using the ‘life-span’ of the Towers as its metaphor: take iron ore Fragments and apply enough Heat, you get Steel. Take Steel and apply enough Heat, you end up with Fragments again.

The piece progresses from almost fully composed, tonal and pitched material (Movement 1, 0:00–8:45 on the sound recording) to largely improvised, mostly ‘noise’ or timbral expressions (Movement 2 through most of Movement 5; 8:45–26:15 on the sound recording). When the opening themes recur (Coda, 28:00 on the sound recording), they are transformed into a unison statement meant to evoke that resigned, communal mass of
beaten (but living) souls walking, changed, away from the very different city they’d traveled into earlier that morning.

For purposes of this piece, I took ‘pitch’ to represent people or humanity and ‘noise’ to represent fire or other elements with the capacity to extinguish life.  

As the pitched material diminishes, so do the intervals available to the performers for their guided improvisations. The fifths, sixths, and major sevenths of the opening movement constrict down to half-steps and closer by Movement 4’s electric guitar solo. Similarly, the tape-track that plays concurrent with the performed elements opens with a broad media- and city-scape meant to capture (in concert with the composed melody) the wide-open promise of that particularly clear New York City day. It then steadily becomes more ‘local.’ By roughly 20:00, it consists entirely of sound located amid the onlookers and rescue vehicles at the foot of the towers. The reverb and other ambient effects that color the opening sounds eventually constrict as well, until the recording becomes completely “dry,” placing it inches in front of the listener.

**Movement 1** (Fragments; 0:00–8:45 on the sound recording) introduces the individual melodies and intervals upon which later improvisations and expressions will be built. The first of these (Theme A) consists of two-note phrases in perfect fifths and wider; the second (Theme B) uses primarily tritones down to perfect seconds; and the third (Theme C) incorporates tight clusters of half-step phrases. Together, these three melodies combine into a single ‘monolith’ motif meant to be a Gershwinesque evocation of New York City itself. (More on this below.)

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6 I was surprised and gratified to read the following response from a UCSD student in the audience for the April 6 premiere: “The pianist had melodies that reminded me of people.” (!)
The movement is written for full ensemble, and is almost entirely composed, save for a short ‘foreshadowing’ of the events to come with a trio improvisation based on Theme A (4:35–6:10 on the sound recording).

It begins and ends with explosions—one for each of the airplanes that hit the towers. The tape track contains several ‘cutaways’ to the media plexus.

**Movement 2** (Heat; 8:45–14:20 on the sound recording) is a bass solo played interactively with the tape track. The tape contains a reading of an L. Frank Baum story called “The Capture of Father Time,” one of several elements meant to evoke the theme of lost innocence or childhood’s end implicit in the attacks. The solo is built on a variation of Theme B, and is intended to capture the harrowing but still human nature of the early moments of the attacks.

**Movement 3** (Steel; 14:20–20:00 on the sound recording), is a duet for two hidden percussionists, with a drone-and-spike guided improvisation played by the remaining ensemble. It is performed in pitch-blackness.

In his World Trade Center Task Force interview, a paramedic named Joseph Jefferson tells of hiding in a small enclave on West Street as the South Tower collapsed. He describes the sound as an “avalanche” or a “freight train.” Then,

> Once it stopped…it was like just nothing, just silence and you couldn’t see because of the cloud of dust. Trying to breathe, it was like you started coughing and gagging. Then you started hearing people calling out for help….I started feeling around. I called out for help a couple times for myself and then I realized I’m supposed to be the help. Then I started telling people come towards my voice, come towards my voice, because I knew I was on West Street, I didn’t know exactly where, but I knew that if they were
further into where the buildings were, they should probably come out
towards this way.7

I made a point, years ago, to find Jefferson’s interview, because he is the paramedic
who then entered our building, announced his name and his intention to get us all out safely,
and commandeered a bus to fulfill that promise. His words echo my own experience—pitch
blackness; thick, choking air; senses heightened and confused, desperate to connect with
other voices.

I wrote this ‘hinge’ movement of Septation to represent this experience. The two
hidden percussionists call to each other unseen from opposite sides of the theater,
sporadically at first, and then finally “finding” each other and entraining. The drones and
then spikes are meant to suggest the in-the-moment terror of a threat pushed past its tipping
point. Both percussion set-ups consisted solely of metal and other industrial materials.

The section gives way to the raging fire of the electric guitar solo in Movement 4,
(Heat; 20:00–23:45 on the sound recording), which captures the moment the fire changes
nature. Electric guitar ‘plays’ the roar of killing flames. Horns play a guided-improvisation
‘chase-and-follow’ intended to reflect the heightened panic and unpredictability of the
moment. Piano and bass intone a constantly descending set of whole-tone scales at different
intervals from each other, with each instrument repeatedly cycling back up to the top of a
two-octave range and beginning again with the “other” whole tone scale, to give the
foundation a sense of spiraling descent/falling away.8 The instrumental rumble that ends
this section is the one that began my flight down the stairs at 75 West/110 Washington. It is

7 “World Trade Center Task Force Interview: Paramedic Joseph Jefferson.” Conducted Jan. 16,
8 This is a musical interpretation of the Shepard scale, the auditory illusion of a constantly
descending tone named by Roger Shepard.
to be played at one or more of the lowest frequencies that resonate the performance space.

In the case of the Conrad Prebys black box theater, those frequencies were 38 Hz and 45 Hz, corresponding roughly to D#1 (38.9 Hz) and F#1 (46.2 Hz).

**Movement 5** (Fragments; 23:45–28:00 on the sound recording) was perhaps the most important to me compositionally: My stairway journey was marked by intense, fundamental fear of the most primal order. It also looms large in my memory of the event, its time expanded to equal most of the aggregated preceding events of the day. On a basic human level, it was transformational. I felt it needed to occupy a critical place in the composition, not a 45-second afterthought. I also felt that I needed to ‘put myself out there,’ alone, for the section to work. The listener needed to understand how harrowing and emotionally complex that moment was, and I needed to play it without a net.

The tape track here is only the *pah-pah-pah* of feet on concrete steps, descending in impossibly repeated spirals like an audio version of an M. C. Escher image; and whispers calling indecipherably from all directions. In “cutaway,” a selection of actual messages from my answering machine that morning cascade across the aural landscape.

But the focus is on the keyboard and piano. It is intended to show (rather than tell) how it felt to be in that stairway: the certainty of death, the disappointment, the anger, the resignation, the ticker-tape chatter of overlapping internal narrations. The improvisation starts in distortion—played with ring-modulation and delay on an electric keyboard—and slowly, over its course, brings the composition back to pure “pitch.” By then end of the section, 27:20, I arrive back at the piano for a call-back of the opening theme. In the end, life did emerge from the tragedy that day, and I felt it important to reflect that.
Performing this improvisation—which is only four minutes long—was the single most difficult and emotional bit of solo playing (indeed, any playing) that I’ve done in 20-odd years of performing. But also the most important. It allowed me a second trip down that staircase, which has proven to be an unexpectedly important facet of the piece for me.

The final element in the piece is the **Coda** (28:00–31:15 on the sound recording), which is the opening ‘monolith’ played in unison by the reeds and brass over deliberate bass-and-piano pedal phrases. In addition to the ‘wounded’ (but alive-together) mass of survivors, this elegy was a musical evocation of the scene we saw north of us as we evacuated with Paramedic Jefferson onto West Street that day: A stories-tall skeleton of one of the towers, barely visible through the smoke-thick air, standing still (in both readings of the word *still*) even as the rest of the structure had crumbled around it.

The Coda features video fragments of mid-1940’s New York City, with images selected to subtly but pointedly reference the iconic events and elements of the attacks: an airplane flying over the George Washington Bridge; bodies falling through the air on a trampoline-like blanket at the beach and on a ride at Coney Island; a wash of bodies parading down a promenade; scenes of Manhattan streets buried under deep blankets of snow, a fire burning in its midst, evocative of the strangely beautiful blanket of pulverized-concrete dust and ash that blanketed the streets upon the towers’ collapse, with its bits of paper and other lighter matter floating down like particles in a life-sized snow globe while the towers smoldered and smoked. The time-period reflected in the video was also meant to carry through the ‘lost-innocence’ themes and conscious nods to the era of ‘grand New York’ suggested by the Gershwin-like monolith motif. There was a time, it suggests, that an
airplane flying over the George Washington Bridge was simply an airplane flying over a
bridge. (See Figures 2.2–2.7.)

The tape track ends the piece, cutting back away to the media for their post-
mortems and recalling the L. Frank Baum story, coming full-circle out to the ‘new normal’
on the other side of the attacks.

*Septation* runs 30–45 minutes. The April 6, 2011, performance was about 32
minutes long.
Figure 2.2
Scene from the video component of *Septation*: An airplane flies over the George Washington Bridge, 1944. Prelinger Archives (public domain).

Figure 2.3
Scene from the video component of *Septation*: A body falls through the air, Coney Island, New York, 1944. Prelinger Archives (public domain).
Figure 2.4
Scene from the video component of *Septation*: A body falls through the air, Coney Island, New York, 1944. Prelinger Archives (public domain).

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Scene from the video component of *Septation*: A sea of bodies marches along a promenade, Coney Island, New York, 1944. Prelinger Archives (public domain).
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Scene from the video component of *Septation*: A New York City street blanketed in white, 1944. Prelinger Archives (public domain).

Figure 2.7
Scene from the video component of *Septation*: A New York City street blanketed in white with an active fire burning amid it. Prelinger Archives (public domain).
3.

REFLECTIONS

On “Composing Oneself”

Without dwelling too deeply on the much-covered area of art as therapy, one aspect of the process of composing this piece/recomposing this memory is worth mentioning. Lenore Terr, a psychiatrist specializing in trauma, notes a distinction between ‘expected’ trauma and the “stormy onslaughters upon the perceptual apparatus” of a “single-blow” event. In short, these single blows catch the body’s limbic system and other perceptual processes unprepared, and the event remains un-‘finished.’ Stuck.

Among the witnesses and residents I became friendly with in a support group after the attacks, the phrases “stuck in neutral” or “idling” or “frozen” or “caught in quicksand” came up often. I have simply assumed that that was the immutable nature of our particular event, a circumstantial cross to bear of sorts, and that was that.

My avoidance of the memories and emotions of the events were both a result of and a contributing factor in the attacks’ ongoing ability to affect me in difficult ways. And in fact, writing this piece—curating field recordings and news broadcasts, recalling the terror and sadness of the progressive remembered moments, reading difficult passage after difficult passage in the ‘public narrative,’ and, hardest, watching the seemingly endless supply of video footage available online, in addition to my own—was nearly as challenging as the original event.

But I discovered something important: it also, inadvertently, transformed the event from a ‘single-blow’ to a repeated trauma. While there is an entire field of therapy built

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9 Lenore Terr, *Too Scared to Cry: How Trauma Affects Children* (New York: Basic, 1992), 135
around desensitization, my experience has been one of ‘resensitization.’ What I could not process in real time (“Please tell me that’s not…”) and could not face in retrospect, I was finally able to experience in composition.

The processes of the limbic system and basal ganglia—the areas that perceive and respond to instances of lived input both emotionally and physically—contribute directly to the development (or nondevelopment) of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. These are also the areas that perceive and respond to music in real-time.10 For myself, the process of turning those remembered events into music was also the process of finding a new “new normal” of equanimity with the sights, emotions and memories of that day. Giving the event recurrability finally kept it from being “too big.”

I suspect—although it’s hard to know—that my preference that Septation be recursive and motivic rather than through-composed and linear, even in light of its inclusion of improvisational elements and techniques, was driven by a subconscious desire for recurrability in the face of the single-blow events of the day. Whatever the case, I can report that after the April 6 performance of Septation, I watched an airplane approach along the famously low flight path into San Diego’s mid-city airport—a sight that otherwise would have brought me up short—and experienced it with more of a shrug than a shudder.

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On Autoethnography as “The Record”

The events of September 11 are now as iconic as the Towers themselves. Even in the moment, we knew that what we were watching was important, seminal, and historic—‘front row seats for history.’

Among eye-witnesses, residents and survivors, there is often a sense—frequently stated explicitly—that if you weren’t there, “you just can’t understand.” Even those closest to us often have difficulty grasping why, five or ten years on, the attacks still occupy the mental and emotional real estate that they do in many of us: ‘It was one day, an awful one, yes, but life goes on.’

Over time, I have come to think of the attacks as two parallel events—the ‘public narrative’ most people watched on television and about which articles, analyses and textbook chapters are written—the geopolitics, the timelines, the post-mortems on airport and border security, the profiles of rescue workers and employees inside the Towers, even eyewitness accounts given to news organizations and movie makers from those of us who were there (some even given by yours truly). This is the ‘record’ of the event. The ‘history,’ in its purest (current) sense.

But it is arguably incomplete, and therefore also arguably inaccurate. *Experienced* events are not geopolitical, they are local. *Felt* time is not linear and proportional, it is elastic and variable, affected by emotion, memory, and tricks of real-time perception in moments of crisis and fear. That fear is by definition incompatible with words; it is more primal than language and more immediate than grammar. Any verbal description only
approximates. In these cases, the artistic response—what Tami Spry called the “I-Witness”
expression of embodied praxis—might arguably be deemed the more accurate one.

George Devereux (via Ruth Behar) said, “What happens within the observer must
be made known if the nature of what has been observed is to be understood.” In an act of
terrorism, the terror itself is integral to the event. In such an instance, can a historical record
that does not convey felt terror, in the most direct way possible, be considered complete?

Compellingly, many of us required the artistic metaphor to process the events in the
moment. Our conversational consensus during the event and in the days that followed was
that the ash-covered city and fallen towers were “like a movie.” In fact, we routinely use art
as a referential metaphor for those experiences too large or perfectly arranged or unusual or
coincidental for everyday grammar to convey effectively. Just because one of those
experiences happens also to reside in the public narrative, should not make art any less
relevant as a descriptor.

I mentioned earlier that my flight down the stairs contained a multitrack recording
of ‘elements that both competed and intertwined.’ Elements that both compete and
intertwine is as close to a definition of improvised music as one is likely to get. The most
complete and direct conveyance of that experience in this case, therefore, may be musical.

The root that gives us the word history is *weid-, which means to know or to see. When Francis Bacon spoke of historia, he used the term to distinguish those elements of
knowledge conferred by memory from those provided by reason (science) and fantasy

11 Tami Spry, “Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis.” Qualitative
12 Ruth Behar, The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart (Boston: Beacon,
13 Brian Joseph (Ed.) and Richard Janda (Ed.), The Handbook of Historical Linguistics. (Blackwell,
2008),163.
(poetry). The ‘history’ of an event is incomplete without the testimony of those who ‘know’ or who ‘saw.’ And that testimony is also arguably incomplete if it does not truly convey the experience of having been present. I hope through *Septation* to have added to the public narrative some crucial elements of private knowledge, and that in fact through it, you ‘just might be able to’ understand.

Several evenings after the attacks, I sat alone in a hotel in Soho, in the room that would be my home for the next three months. For the first time in my life, I understood suicide. I did not intend to kill myself. But it was the first time that I’d understood the burden of a weight that was enough “too big” to seem insuperable.

Too many people had died in front of me. Too many changes had stacked up in recent years—the death of my father, a nasty divorce, and now the contemplation of a permanently changed reality that struck like lightning in a single moment one hungover morning and now intended to stay around forever. Remaining in New York would mean constantly feeling the weight, threat and reminders of those attacks. Leaving New York would mean feeling “marked” in some new town or city as the one who had been in the September 11 attacks, that historic transformational chapter in our nation’s public narrative.

I had no apartment to live in. At that point, all I had were the clothes that co-workers had donated to me, a cheap portable television/am/fm radio that I bought the day of the attacks, and the weight of the sights and sounds I carried around and would undoubtedly take years to sort out.

I’d spend the week volunteering at the disaster assistance center in the 69th Regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue and 25th Street in Manhattan. But face-to-face with so many people who had either lost someone or fled death from the inside of the Towers, I felt like an outsider. Outside the center, I felt even moreso. When I confided this to one of the volunteer therapists at the Center, she said, “Would you prefer that you’d been injured or killed?”
My family tried, but simply couldn’t understand what I felt, or why I’d stuck around during the attacks.

I felt rootless. On this particular evening, it got the best of me, and I had a rare “why me” moment.

“Enough, world,” I thought. “Leave me alone already. You’ve tested me enough. I pass your tests. It’s tiring. I didn’t need this, too. I didn’t ask to be there. It’s too big.” I cannot ever remember having thought that way, before or since, but there it was.

I considered whether I would be able to carry the weight of it going forward. More accurately, I considered that I would not be able to. That’s when I understood why some people kill themselves.

A moment later, a second thought came to me. I can’t explain how it worked its way through my staggered mind, but it did. It went something like this: “Listen to what you just said. You’ve been tested before, and you pass the tests. Some people don’t. Better you this time than someone who couldn’t take it. Better you than someone who would kill themselves tonight.”

I understood that night that my means of “taking it” would be creative—that I would write about it—but I did not know what that would mean.

Ten years later, I found myself sitting in a doctor’s office on the other side of the continent, getting news I didn’t want to hear. In the intervening years, I’d married again. I now have two children, who represent the defining happiness of my life. I’ve made a series of lifestyle adjustments theoretically designed to ensure that, should I have my stairway narrative again, it will reflect a more fulfilled life that ends there.

As it turns out, the doctor’s office was my stairway this time. A cyst in my kidney had shown signs of “septation,” containing the internal walls or divisions of a potentially
cancerous cyst. I was forced, a second time, to evaluate the life that was at stake there, and a second time, I felt I’d come up short.

I remembered the promise I’d offered up to myself years before, in that hotel room, to write about the attacks, and I added it to a new list of regrets, alongside the larger protective worries involved with the consideration of my children losing a parent. However, I had no “why me, world” moments this time. On the contrary, my response could best be characterized as “try me, world.”

My follow-up appointment to confirm or rule out the presence of cancerous cells was scheduled for a date that turned out to fall in the middle of my composition of this piece. I cancelled it, fearful that bad news would make the piece unfinishable, and good news would dampen the emotional vulnerability necessary to make it work. I’m glad to say that the composition is the only ‘septation’ that will endure in this case; my delayed follow-up showed no signs of cancer in those internal walls.

In the meantime, I co-opted the term, concept and implications of ‘septation’ for the title of this piece (and even for the design of the program; see Figures 5.1 and 5.2). Through this latter Septation, I hope to have finally paid off the promise I made that difficult hotel-room night ten years ago. Along the way, by allowing me to face many of the thoughts and images I’d previously run from, it may even have allowed me finally to begin ‘standing, still.’
Figure 4.1
Front and back cover of *Septation* program, April 6, 2011.

Figure 4.2
Inside content of *Septation* program, April 6, 2011.