

CATALOG FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

# Drone and Apocalypse

An Exhibit Catalog for  
the End of the World

Joanna Demers



Winchester, UK  
Washington, USA

*Drone and Apocalypse* answers Jankélévitch's call for a definitive action that acknowledges the ineffability of music through doing rather than just writing. Since drone music is especially difficult to read and interpret, we may well already have arrived at a point where there is nothing substantially new to say about it, and certainly nothing definitive to say about its content. We could continue to talk about the production of drone music, or its history and reception. Or, we could experiment with the ways it simultaneously evokes and deflects meaning. I have therefore made the decision to write a literary non-fiction work rather than one based exclusively on research or criticism. *Drone and Apocalypse* is the next step in my scholarship on the aesthetics of recent electronic music. My methodology is to relate technical qualities of specific drone works (aspects like space, duration, repetition, and register) to pertinent moments in literature, philosophy, and art. These skeins of associations are ahistorical and poetic, but they are informed by a musicological and aesthetic reading of drone music. *Drone and Apocalypse* is thus a creative work

movement of shadows; this movement is repeated through looping, and slowed down to domesticate the most unnerving of calamities.

## **“After Apocalypse”**

### **An essay**

...people are talking about apocalypse and the last judgment, because they do not know that there will be neither apocalypse nor last judgment ...such things would serve no purpose since the world will quite happily fall apart by itself and go to wrack and ruin so that everything may begin again...

László Krasznahorkai

Nothing that is past is an object of choice. No one chooses to have sacked Troy; for no one deliberates about the past, but about what is future and contingent, while what is past is not capable of not having taken place....

Aristotle

The cliffs of the Palos Verdes peninsula are strewn with

of “the end of the world” is even obscurer, for even the most pessimistic anticipations of apocalypse tend not to proclaim that Planet Earth will disappear. What, then, will end? A hyperobject as conceived by Tim Morton, apocalypse is something we can theorize or foretell, but not know in its entirety.<sup>14</sup> We know of it only obliquely through works of art that speak of it (such as Basinski’s *The Disintegration Loops*) or that speculate about its attributes (such as Basinski’s *The River*). And while I agree with Morton that the end of the world has already occurred because “world” means a series of ideas about what life should and should not be,<sup>15</sup> we should nonetheless understand that the recent usage of “apocalypse” indicates a belief that the worst is yet to come, that apocalypse is an event from which humanity will not emerge. This sense of “the end of the world” is aesthetically significant, for as this book demonstrates, it drives much of our art and culture and feeds our political malaise and spiritual cynicism. The writer Cynthia Wey takes apocalypse literally to mean the end of human existence on Earth, although she acknowledges the inherent narcissism in apocalyptic theories that harp on humanity’s disappearance to the exclusion of any other object or being. Many of us share Wey’s parochial notion of apocalypse, for we assume that if we ever do experience apocalypse, it will be just as we are about to disappear.

Drone music is the sound of death. Consider drone works

named with death in mind: *Trilogie de la mort*; *Ravedeath*, 1972; and more abstractly, *The Disintegration Loops*, where disintegration means death of magnetic tape, the World Trade Center, and the American empire. There is also the fact that the sounds of the beginning of life in the womb consist of low hums and heartbeats, an enveloping sonic blanket undergirds experience and sensation. (Drone artist Éliane Radigue created a work in 1974 called *Biogenesis*, which consists of recordings of her own heartbeat and the heartbeat of the baby she was then carrying). Thus, drone is also the sound of life at its inception, for Celer’s music in its sparest moments (such as in the albums *Merkin* or *In Escaping Lakes*) recalls the womb’s protection and comfort. Drone music’s paucity of activity or events such as cadences, solos, figuration, or expressive gestures shakes off conventional musical interpretation, yet also exists as a music of afterness, that which resounds after machines and chatter have died off. Drone music is a music for when the markers of time such as clocks, metronomes, alarms have stopped. It is an acoustic foundation from which other sounds emerged, and to which all sounds will eventually return. Just as apocalypse is an ending, drone music often taxes listeners’ sense of time and duration, as well as space and distance.

*Drone and Apocalypse* excavates the traces of apocalyptic dread and longing that pervade not only drone music, but literature and philosophy and art since antiquity. For