I. Introduction

William Basinski’s 2002 work, *The Disintegration Loops*, consists of two pieces, *dlp 1.1* and *dlp 2.1*, which were created by playing tape loops made by Basinski over extended periods of time (*dlp 1.1* is over an hour long) on tape players. Due to dust in the tape heads of the tape players the loops naturally disintegrated during that time, and the result of this process was recorded onto a CD recorder.\(^2\) The effect of disintegration is a very gradual, organic transition from a warm, legato texture to a halting, sparse one. The program notes of *The Disintegration Loops* read “This music is dedicated to the memory of those who perished as a result of the atrocities of September 11th, 2001, and to my dear Uncle Shelley.”\(^3\)

This piece is not only dedicated to but also created within the aftermath of the September 11th, 2001 attacks. About the World Trade Center attacks Basinski, then living in Brooklyn, New York, says “…by the time I got up, it had already started and we watched the whole thing happen in stunned disbelief and then went through what everybody in New York went through. We all collapsed in our own way and disintegrated. … We listened to the music [Basinski’s tape loops] in our stunned disbelief that afternoon outside the windows, sitting on the
roof, looking at the smoke… and I recorded a video of the smoke at dusk. The
next morning I put it with Disintegration Loops 1.1 and I thought ‘Oh my God, this
has to be an elegy!’

_The Disintegration Loops_ can be viewed through many different lenses,
including tape loop music, musical re-purposing, auto-destructive art, and elegiac
music. The work was also devised quite personally as a coping mechanism, in
the midst of a disaster, rather than as a reactionary or dramatic work. Combined,
the genre fluidity and personal genesis of _The Disintegration Loops_ results in a
work that is exploring the threshold between real-world experience and art. By
demonstrating that real-world experience and art can be so tightly connected as
to be inseparable this work is suggesting the potential for art to, in turn, affect
real-world experience. This is the activism of _The Disintegration Loops_.

In this paper I will discuss _The Disintegration Loops_, specifically the first
piece in the series, _dlp 1.1_, through different lenses to better understand it as a
work of artistic activism. I will first analyze it as a piece of sonic art, then expand
into the different contexts it situates itself within, comparing it to other pieces in
those fields, and lastly attempt to define its activism.

II. Sonic World

II.i Material

The musical material of _dlp 1.1_ is simple, consisting of two voices with
timbres reminiscent of strings and brass, albeit created with a Voyager
synthesizer and Revox tape deck. The main voice of _dlp 1.1_ is a short (6.5
seconds) melodic fragment, looped continually during the duration of the piece.
Its timbre is warm and brassy.

\[
\text{\textit{d} = approx. 60}
\]

Figure 1. First voice of _dlp 1.1_
The second voice of \textit{dlp 1.1} is more complex, and most likely created from multiple tapes of different lengths being played simultaneously or a longer tape loop. Its timbre is smoother and more distant than the first voice. A transcription of the second voice within the first minute of \textit{dlp 1.1} is below:

\begin{center}
\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2}
\caption{First minute of the second voice of \textit{dlp 1.1}}
\end{figure}
\end{center}

Beneath these two voices is also a layer of mechanical noises and quiet chordal material (reminiscent of strings). Both the mechanical noises and quiet chordal material are harmonically and rhythmically connected to the two voices, accompanying them throughout the work. Repetition is consistently palpable and is not decorated: within seconds of the piece’s starting its complete material has been presented.

\textbf{II.ii Disintegration}

The sonic effect of the disintegration in \textit{dlp 1.1} is both additive and subtractive. As the piece progresses, gritty clicks and a low hum, byproducts of mechanical and electronic degradation, respectively, are naturally introduced. The subtractive effect is one of gating: only the loudest, most timbrally bright elements of the voices (sounds with the most physical prominence on the tape) are retained, resulting in a transition from legato lines to more percussive ‘stabs’ of pitch material, and ultimately quick bursts of noise towards the very end of the piece. The disintegration is smooth but non-linear.
Even after just two and a half minutes into the piece several shorter, quieter notes of the first voice become distorted. The middle portion of the piece is characterized by silences forming and widening as the loops disintegrate and a transition from a warm sound to a grittier, more nasal tone. Near the end of the piece, at around the forty-five minute mark, a hiss and ground loop enter (seen above in the right side of Figure 3), material that is a direct result of the electronic process of playing back the tape and that isn’t associated with the musical material at all.

Interestingly, Basinski also collaborated with arranger Maxim Moston to create an orchestral version of *dlp 1.1*, first premiered at the Metropolitan Museum on the tenth anniversary of September 11th. The orchestral version offers a unique window into the way Basinski views the sonic world of this work, revealed through its conversion to the acoustic medium. In the orchestral version the piece starts with solo trombone as the first voice, quiet vibraphone as the second voice, strings with chordal accompaniment acting as a resonant bed upon which the two main voices lie, and snare drum simulating the clicks and pops of tape noise. Later in the piece more percussion (bass drum) and winds enter on the melody and chordal accompaniment, filling out the brass and strings. Finally the texture transitions to legato low strings and staccato high strings accompanied by percussion, simulating the low ground loop, hissing, and bursts of noise prominent at the very end of the electronic version of *dlp 1.1*. 
III. Relationship To Other Practices

III.i Tape Loop Music

In an interview with Fluid Radio, Basinski cites John Cage, Steve Reich, and Brian Eno as influences, calling them his “Holy Trinity.”\(^1\) *dlp 1.1* and *The Disintegration Loops* as a whole owe many ideas and techniques to the tape music of Reich and Eno. Consider Reich’s early tape work *It’s Gonna Rain*,\(^5\) which takes a very short snippet from a Pentecostal preacher’s sermon and repeats it, exploring and dramatizing (with phase-shifting) the sonic results of extended listening to a short fragment of sound.\(^6\) This relates to the first voice of *dlp 1.1*, consisting of a single loop repeated over 600 times within the work’s hour-long duration.

Basinski’s use of synthesized sounds differs from Reich’s output and more closely resembles the work of Brian Eno. The way that the second voice of *dlp 1.1* is presented is both timbrally and texturally reminiscent of Eno’s *Discreet Music*,\(^7\) created using a tape-delay system in which several loops of synthesized material of different lengths interact, creating a rhythmically amorphous, ‘floating’ texture. While the repetition of the first voice of *dlp 1.1* is foregrounded as in the Reich, the second voice borrows both the obscurity-by-texture technique and synthesized timbres from Eno.

In both these works by Reich and Eno, as in the Basinski, memory acts as a catalyst for the musicality of the loops, transforming them from something mechanically repetitive into something musical within the listener’s minds. Basinski says that “our memories are made of loops”\(^1\) taking the relationship between loops and memory even further, and hinting at the connection between decay that both human memory and the loops in *The Disintegration Loops* have in common. This idea of natural decay suggests another lens to view this work through, that of auto-destructive art.
III.ii Auto-Destructive Art

Auto-destructive art is a term invented by artist and activist Gustav Metzger in the early 1960s. It is a particularly appropriate lens to view the idea of decay, not borrowed from the work of Reich or Eno, that is so important to *The Disintegration Loops*. In his 1960 *Manifesto Auto-Destructive Art* Metzger writes “Auto-destructive art demonstrates man's power to accelerate disintegrative processes of nature and to order them. … Auto-destructive art is the transformation of technology into public art.” Both the importance of technology and the amplification of natural disintegrative processes within this practice clearly relate to the use of the tape player as an agent of destructive development within *The Disintegration Loops*. The technology by which Basinski performs the tape loops he has created, the very way they are sounded, is the means that ends up permanently destroying them. The resulting sound of decay is a product of analog technology instability and showcases its failure to accurately reproduce a loop over a long period of time, much as the human brain fails to retain memories indefinitely.

In another manifesto Metzger declares that “when the disintegrative process is complete the work is to be removed from the site and scrapped.” By capturing the auto-destructive transformation onto a CD player (a degradation-free means of recording) Basinski has extended the auto-destructive nature of *The Disintegration Loops* into a documentation of a process. Capturing the disintegration softens the effect of destruction, as what has been lost still exists in documentation, and also allows for the distribution of the work on fixed media, rather than as an unrepeateable performance.

Other composers and performance artists have experimented with the documentation of destructive processes. Alvin Lucier’s *I Am Sitting In A Room*, in which the sound of the composers voice is repeatedly played back into a room and re-recorded, has strong connections to the process of disintegration in *The Disintegration Loops*, albeit through a different means. As Lucier plays the recording of his voice into the space the resonance of the space warps the initial
recording, at first causing the text to become unintelligible and finally generating a wash of pitched resonances matching the resonances of the room the recordings are being played back in. Lucier’s iterated feedback resonance is Basinski’s tape player degradation, and both works harness the beautiful, natural decay of the physical world.

Another example of destruction through technology for art is in the music of Oval, a German electronic music group that mutilates CDs to damage their playback and uses the resulting musical fragments for composition. This approach differs from Basinski’s because the disintegration of the musical material is derived from human action rather than a natural mechanical process, however there is still an inherent lack of control present in both the sonic effects of the CD mutilation and tape disintegration. Both speak to the physical nature of technology and ways in which its failure may be harnessed for artistic means.

III.iii Elegiac Music

dlp 1.1 can also be viewed as an elegy, of which there are many musical examples. Elegies are artworks that harness the collective memory of a society to create context around a work. Penderecki’s Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima, a dissonant work for 52 strings, has a very different sonic world than dlp 1.1, but is both an elegy and another example of artwork repurposed as elegy. Originally titled 8’37, Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima was retitled after the composer “searched for associations and, in the end, … decided to dedicate it to the Hiroshima victims”, a process similar to Basinski’s accompaniment of the video created during the dusk of September 11th, 2001 by dlp 1.1 the day after. However, Penderecki’s work is more of a tribute than a sonification of personal experience, as the work was not created with the catastrophe it references as a close, personal memory, but as a collective, global memory. This difference emphasizes the minimization of distance between dlp 1.1 and the event the composer associates it with.

* The concept of collective memory was developed by Maurice Halbwachs
Many other artistic works were created in the aftermath of the September 11th, 2001 attacks. John Adams composed *On The Transmigration of Souls*, a work for orchestra, chorus, and pre-recorded tape as a commission from the New York Philharmonic, winning the 2003 Pulitzer Prize and several Grammy awards\(^\text{15}\). Like *The Disintegration Loops*, this work also touches on concepts of memory. In an interview Adams explains “I want to avoid words like 'requiem' or 'memorial' when describing this piece because they too easily suggest conventions that this piece doesn't share. If pressed, I'd probably call the piece a 'memory space.'”\(^\text{16}\) This work combines recordings of New York City and the names of those who perished in the September 11th, 2001 attacks with a beautiful and haunting acoustic soundscape. While both *On The Transmigration of Souls* and *The Disintegration Loops* are dedicated to those who lost their lives in the September 11th, 2001 attacks their forces and creative contexts are very different. While the lives of those lost in the September 11th, 2001 attacks are embodied through vocal recordings and the sizeable human presence of choirs and an orchestra in Adams’ work, *The Disintegration Loops* disembodies all human presence, relegating not only the sounding of the piece but its development to technology. This disembodiment further emphasizes how *dlp 1.1* is an elegy for a personal memory rather than a collective one.

### IV. The Activism of *The Disintegration Loops*

Now that *The Disintegration Loops* has been viewed as a work of sonic art and through a number of different artistic practice lenses we can begin to synthesize what this work means as an activist artwork. It is clear that *dlp 1.1* explores many of the ideas of memory and looping and uses techniques pioneered by tape loop music composers. It also acts as documentation of an auto-destructive process, speaking to the power of technology and its ultimate failure, and the importance of memory (remembering what something once was) in transformation. The work also functions as a very personal elegy for the September 11th, 2001 attacks, not created as a dramatization or a tribute.
(harnessing collective memory) but as a sonic coping mechanism (built on personal memory). The activism of this piece comes from the combination of all of these characteristics.

Ultimately, in *The Disintegration Loops* and specifically *dlp 1.1*, Basinski has created a work of art where not only the characteristics of the work, but the medium of production (the recording of tape player disintegration) and the context of production themselves are born from the catastrophic event it is referencing. In other words, Basinski’s personal experience of the destruction of the World Trade Center, a seemingly immovable marvel of technology disintegrated into rubble, has bled into the composer’s practice, and not only a new work but a new work built on a new technique, custom-made for the composer’s experience of the catastrophe, is created. This modeling of the catastrophe and subsequent capturing of disintegration gave the composer control over a disintegrative process at a time when a real-world disintegration going on around him was completely out of his control. This intense relationship between composer, event, and artwork suggests the possibility that not only can *The Disintegration Loops* help Basinski through his personal memories, but the work could also potentially affect the collective memory, that is that the coping effect that *The Disintegration Loops* had for its composer could be extended to the rest of humanity affected by the catastrophe it was spawned from.

The nature of the process used to create *The Disintegration Loops* is made all the more powerful by the material that Basinski works with: tape loops consisting of simple, beautiful material. The tape loops correspond to memories within Basinski’s practice, and the decay of them is a poeticization of the decay of human memory. The means of decay is a technological process, further tying the work to a world in which technology proliferates and can create both works of beauty and also catastrophic destruction. Finally, dedicating the work to the memory of those who perished as a result of the atrocities of September 11th, 2001 establishes *The Disintegration Loops* as a particularly potent form of elegy, one that is uniquely tied to a personal memory within the collective memory.
V. Conclusion

In this paper I have viewed William Basinki’s *The Disintegration Loops* through lenses related to both the sonic and artistic contexts within which it associates itself including sound art, tape loop music, auto-destructive art, and elegiac music. Ideas of memory (both personal and collective) associated with musical loops, the concept of decay as it relates to technology and the physical world, and the idea of a work of art created so tightly within the context of a real-world experience that it distorts the threshold between the real world and art are explored.

There is great power within works of art that unashamedly function both as personal coping mechanisms for the artist who created them and also investigate ideas outside of the art. They are particularly good at demonstrating both how the real world affects art and how art affects the real world. All art created by humans is influenced by their experiences and enhancing this connection as an integral part of the genesis of the art will lead to more art that has the power to change the real world. To quote Basinski, “The loops helped me to resolve my own bad feedback loops and let them go. Our world is in a bad feedback loop right now. … We’re at a point right now where we need to get rid of some bad feedback loops and it’s happening. It’s not gonna be pretty but eventually things will resolve.”^1
Works Cited


