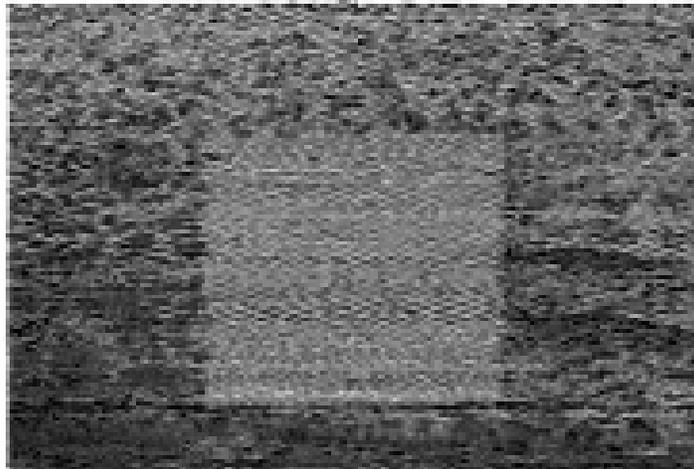


Grouper: Grid of Points

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Grouper's new album *Grid of Points* has an apt title: this is an album about individual moments, and its sparse arrangements make even the smallest moments devastating: The subtle, soulful blue notes in Liz Harris' voice on "Driving"; a comprehensible lyric among the cavernous ambient drift of her vocals; and, at one pivotal mark, a sound that shatters the illusion and brings us back to reality. You'll know it when you hear it, and if you've heard it, you understand how Harris built this glass castle only to shatter it.

Grid of Points was made with only voice and piano. The music stands naked; it's the emotions that hover just out of reach. It gives the impression of being a personal record, and such titles as "Thanksgiving Song" and "Birthday Song" suggest they might be about specific incidents. But only about one word in ten can be made out, and the ones that stick out aren't much help. "Driving." "Smells like rain, it is raining." Perhaps she's saying "it isn't raining."

The album was made during an artistic residency in Wyoming that was cut short by an illness. The 22 minutes of material she managed to record make up *Grid Points*. Yet in the press surrounding the album she emphasizes its finality, as if some divine intervention told her to hang up the project and move on. It's almost aleatoric, a purposeful removal of the artist from

the art, and her decision to leave this album (her first in four years!) in the hands of fate suggests the material somehow stands outside her.

It's common for musicians making personal records to downplay their art, either out of guilt or a desire for authenticity. Stripped-down arrangements have always been associated with pop artists' "real" sides. We saw the extreme of this with Mount Eerie's *A Crow Looked at Me*, which didn't trust its own nature as art born from grief. Perhaps by leaving her album to a process beyond her control, Harris found a way to reconcile art's ability to convey unvarnished emotions with its inherent artificiality.

But that's assuming this *is* a personal album. Who knows what it's about? It could be about the ecology of the Wyoming desert for all we know. This might irritate listeners who find the hunt for meaning more frustrating than tantalizing and would prefer to sink into something like her 2011 album *A / A*, which made no effort to give anything up and thrived in murkiness. Others will appreciate its tangible thrills—few ambient artists make music as purely *beautiful* as Grouper's—or bring their own interpretations to the table.

Though its 22 minutes might forever consign it to the ignominious role of a quickie ambient album to throw on while you walk to the corner store, the best place to listen to it is in nature. Meaghan Garvey from *Pitchfork* recently tweeted a picture of her first experience with it on an idyllic beach. I listened to it for the first time overlooking the Lobos Creek canyon in San Francisco, filled with sagebrush and just within sight of the sea. To hear it in the Wyoming expanse where Harris made it must be beyond powerful.

Out in nature, it's easy to feel melancholy, an awareness of the vastness of the world and how your own smallness inhibits you from ever understanding or exploring all of it. That's not what you're thinking in your head when you feel it, of course; it's more mysterious than that. Perhaps that's why *Grid of Points* works so well in the wild. Just like the universe, it never gives up its secrets, but it keeps us searching.