

Dear Mattin,

RÉ: UNCONSTITUTED PRAXIS

It seems a long time since I've known you and I feel like well, some eulogy should be necessary. It's as if you've died into the coffin-object of a book, a flaming book, a skorob tower in sound.

I've died too.

An epilogue as an analogue to the burning book that enchants me with the scam happenstance of pretended historicification.

An 'I' will be no more.

An end and a beginning like in the bright sunlight of a once deserted building and a table turned over.

Like all the personas gathering in the social ether, a crowd of selves, some noisy, some provocative, some shy, some tearful, some psychotic. But all 'sequential self states', millions of them provoked by encounter, relation, chance arousals and psychical noise.

Like bleeding ears in the dark basements when we realise that the body exists; the sensual membranes vibrating like a newly-formed 'drive'; an auricular-libidinal 'drive' preparing for the onset of war.

Like the silences that mootance more mass-presences and the dissolution of the spectacle that made us all listeners listening out for a signal wéd sound; the signal that there was no solo-signal, but the enlarging materiality of place and presence sounding louder than noise.

MATTIN

MATTIN

UNCONSTITUTED PRAXIS

Like improvising for a week right up to the 'performance' and going on to improvise some more to the point that there's no distinction when it's 'finished' and all personalised programmatic just get forgotten about.

collective

Patient

Bodies

A gently betraying corrective to virtuosity and ownership

From production to transduction

From demiurgic original to communitarian re-assembly

An 'I' will come again, but this time with more strata, more empathy, more realism as to where it is and what has been made of it; a dawning risk, first shepherded along by musical and textual 'props', then, grouped enough to experience safely its satori: we realise our made status as human capital; as universal prostitutes.

An end and a beginning like before the combative glare of the righteously faithful when all that's left of bandily rhetoric discourse is a wondrously splenetic repeating jibberish that socialises sound poetry and collapses the arena.

Like in the full footlight of a phlegm-inflected abjection all we're left with is to be liberated through a self-disgust that the entire entertainment industry works hard to both proffer and shield us from.

Like in a snow-bound room with tables upturned when almost each has become a stranger to themselves (all the better to see the madness of morono-normopathy that gets into us) there's a dense atmosphere made without instruments but by and with other 'sequential self states'.

MATTIN

MATTAM

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# Unconstituted Praxis

By Mattin

With contributions by:  
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Links to PDF download:

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SALAU EDITORA

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In memory of Jostetxo Anitua (1964-2008)

## Editorial Note

By Taumaturgia (Miguel Prado, Roberto Mallo, Raúl García)

At the beginning of 2007 we created the Taumaturgia project. It was initially conceived as a record label exclusively devoted to experimental and improvised music. After some months of work we contacted Mattin via e-mail to prepare a concert of Josetxo Grieta in A Coruña. The concert was an incredible experience (documented on Taumaturgia's second release), and since then we've shared many conversations, experiences, concerts and a great friendship. Mattin has influenced us a lot. With his will to interpellate and question everything, he made us constantly re-think

our own limits and those of Taumaturgia which have been devoured by the intensities that underlie improvisation.

These intensities are the object of our interest as publishers. We began to release albums excited about subversive attributes of this kind of music, but soon we realised that what is crucial is the intention behind these practices. The sounds generated in an improvisation are a working tool, but have a double edge. They may soon be reified, qualified under the criteria of taste and virtuosity, and enter into an aesthetic process that favours the domestication not only of the discourse but also the potential of improvisation as a form of praxis.

We do not need to enter into a cycle of endless record releases which are a catalogue of fancy and trendy sounds. We need (as Mattin

said) to question the nature and parameters of improvisation:

Improvisation is not only an interaction between musicians and instruments, but a situation involving all the elements that constitute a concert, including the audience and the social and architectural space.

For this task and in this specific time, we consider it indispensable to produce a book with a series of texts that are crucial for the analysis of improvisation and noise. Both as a channel for generating theory; a tool to understand more what it is we are doing when we are improvising, and a way to try to engage with its force as a social practice.

This book contains texts, interviews and responses to performances in which Mattin has been involved, made between 2002 and 2010. Prior to this book's production the different nature,

means of publication and languages of these texts have made access to them somewhat difficult. Here we collect them together for readers to facilitate access and make connections between material which is not necessarily always easy or coherent. Readers can explore the contradictions and problems themselves, opening the texts to critical thinking in a landscape in which today people seem preoccupied by simply confirming their own sense of aesthetics through refinement and innovation.

We have a subjective identification with this book's content. The texts were already there, we only want to unite and share them. We want to distribute them through all the channels that can activate thinking processes, encounters, practices and emancipation. We believe that this way is the only one to keep a text alive. To question it and to be questioned by it.

# Introduction

By Alexander Locascio

*I can't repress a melancholy admiration for this world: what effort is involved in producing so much stagnation! – newer machines for constantly more illusions of sound, increasingly perfect imitations of that which we abhor. but isn't the playback of sound merely a symbol for sound? when i hear the radio, i know that there isn't an orchestra sitting in this box. i don't need any real horses on stage. one can also have imperialism vis-à-vis a bach cantata. – Ronald M. Schernikau, \_Die Tage in L\_.*

When I heard what the title of this book was to be, I was delighted. *Unconstituted Praxis*. Not as a state of affairs currently existing, but as a utopian projection.

Because Mattin knows that existence in this world is a constituted one; constituted by reified social forms, social forms like value (as socially necessary abstract labour time), the commodity (as the receptacle of value), the state (which creates formally equal 'subjects'), and the various types of identity (of 'gender', 'race', 'nationality'). From birth our practice as human beings is pressed into and mediated by these forms. And to make matters even worse, our own activity also recreates and consolidates those forms on a daily basis.

On the other hand, there are many who would exempt creative activity from this state of affairs. Of course, nobody is so vulgar and naïve as to suggest that art stands outside of society in a completely unmediated way, that would be blatantly dishonest and ludicrous. But to the extent that the issue gets raised at all, then usually it is on the terms of which trough to feed from, which foundation one is allowed to accept a grant from, the issues involved in accepting state funds, or some moral reservations one might have about monstrosities perpetrated by a specific private patron.

Not that those aren't important questions. They are fundamental. And facing them with integrity is one of the tests involved in confirming one's humanity. That's why I have such admiration for John Tilbury's refusal to play in the United States, however inconsistent or ineffective it seems to me. Of course, I've attended three concerts by

Tilbury in Berlin, so apparently Germany's pivotal role in the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia or its neo-mercantilist strategy of begging countries like Greece doesn't play a role in Tilbury's considerations, but that doesn't mean that he is a hypocrite. It just points out that any strategy of non-compliance is ultimately incomplete, or to use an already clichéd phrase of Theodor Adorno: *'Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen'* (Wrong life cannot be lived rightly).

So raising such issues is necessary, but nonetheless insufficient. Because it treats the reified commodity society as something that circumscribes and frames our activity, when in fact it also conditions and penetrates it. We are complicit in the reification of our social activity in every waking moment.

And that's what Mattin takes as his point of departure. When I first met Mattin on a windy, bitter winter's day in Berlin, he was wearing a black hooded sweatshirt with an imprint of a mohawked skull (from the band The Exploited) with the word 'Adorno' printed on top of it. I felt an instant affinity with this man. Mattin picks up where the Frankfurt School left off. But whereas Adorno still wanted to reserve some privileged status for art and the artist, still wanted to grant art some special role as a guardian of utopian aspirations long after the potential for realising such aspirations in reality was exhausted, Mattin goes further. He is uncompromising, because he refuses to allow art to maintain that status. Not that Mattin denies art any *prefigurative* politics; it is just that he recognises that such potential is still tainted by this society, by its very existence as 'art'. He does not offer a pessimistic foreclosure of revolutionary possibility, but rather an awareness of its fragility.

And Mattin's chosen field of work is one in which the concept of the creative performer still enjoys a certain sacred cow status. Improvised music often gets a free pass precisely because it's supposed at least to hint at some potential for non-alienated and non-reified creativity. And certainly it does to some extent. Composition itself is nothing but reified improvisation, so there's something to be said for trying to reclaim 'doing' from 'done', for trying to prevent 'praxis' from petrifying into mere 'being'.

But free improvised music still can't ever completely transgress the forms of this society;

and what's even worse, some within it work to affirm this society in their own ways. By perpetuating the lie of artistic 'genius', by evaluating performances in terms of whether they are 'strong' or 'successful', as if discussing a fucking football game, or by conflating music and gastronomy, as when some idiot inevitably writes that his 'mouth is watering' at the prospect of some forthcoming compact disc release, or by describing a particular performance as 'sumptuous', as if it's a seven course meal in a luxury restaurant!

Thus the prefigurative aspirations of Cardew or the Scratch Orchestra culminate in a star system of living 'legends' or 'genius' improvisers (and before someone accuses me of cowardice for not naming names: Keith Rowe), a system of idolatry as wretched and abject as anything one can encounter in guitar player magazines. Improvised music becomes cocktail music for the self-congratulatory international middlebrow set, some nice aural wallpaper for relaxing at a Joseph Beuys retrospective in Kassel or whatever the fuck it is these people do.

Mattin attacks everything worth hating in contemporary improvised, noise and 'experimental' music: everything precious, contemplative, or non-committal. A Mattin performance is not likely to offer 'satisfaction' to its prospective audience; the 'experimental' music fanboys are likely to be vexed not only by the sheer unpleasantness of the performance itself, but also by its lack of innovation, its refusal of novelty.

Not that beauty is foreign to Mattin's work. It's just that the beauty inherent in his work refuses to be *aesthetic*, refuses to form the pleasant background to our complicity in our own self-alienation. It is a beauty as strange and disorienting as anything we encounter in the world.

'Mattin is just a provocateur, this sort of gesture is nothing new', etc. No, he's not a provocateur, but yes, that's right, this gesture is *not* new. But it is *contemporary*, and it will remain contemporary as long as this society of generalised commodity production exists, because it speaks a simple truth; a truth that its intended audience does not want to hear. It reminds us that all 'art', insofar as it is allowed to retain its special status as 'art', is ultimately just complicity with this society. And as long as the audience refuses to take its medicine, then the critique remains current, even if it is not 'innovative' or 'ground-

breaking'. Such a response completely misses the point; Mattin is calling into question the very notion of 'innovation', of 'avant-garde'. The logic of the 'avant-garde' is actually the logic of capitalist commodity production itself, as Frederic Jameson astutely observed over 25 years ago:

*What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to aeroplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. Such economic necessities then find recognition in the varied kinds of institutional support available for the newer art, from foundations and grants to museums and other forms of patronage.'*

But it is not the case that Mattin engages in a mere reversal of the creative genius role. He is not seeking to be applauded for his 'courage' or 'vision'. Quite the contrary; as an adherent of the DIY ethos of punk, he is suggesting that any of us could do this, and should. The dissolution of the performer/audience dichotomy is one of his core intentions. Music has been largely liberated from its traditional role in society. It is no longer confined to a ritual context, nor does it serve merely as accompaniment for dancing. But it still exists as music; that is to say, as a reified sphere of human activity cut off from daily praxis. Mattin's intent, then, is to destroy the *form* music, in order to liberate the non-alienated potential within it.

His critique is not intended to encourage passivity and despair, but rather to clear the slate for utopian aspirations. He still believes in the prefigurative potential of free music, while still engaging in a ruthless criticism of its traps and dead ends. The essays in this volume are interventions; they are statements of intent, reflections on past practice, and suggestions for future possibility.

In that sense, as Mattin puts it in the essay 'A Second Subterranean Ethics': *Destroy all Forms!*

1 Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London & New York: Verso, 1990. pp.4-5.



# Prologue to Unconstituted Praxis

*It's like you look at this lemon and what is it? You have to squeeze it or maybe destroy it or bang it against the wall or bang it against your head to understand it. I am not going to read a book about what is this fruit. It is the same thing that I do with the music.* – Joke Lanz (Sudden Infant) in an interview in *The Wire* (April 2009).

I feel like Joke with his lemon but I relate this to more than just music. Rather than following established modes of improvising or making noise, what if, instead of this lemon, we want to try to understand what the practices of noise and improvisation might be? Or rather, what would be even more difficult, what if we try to use these practices as a way to understand the conditions that we are living in? Or, to go even further, what if we want to change these conditions through the practices of noise and improvisation. Is this possible?

I am constantly banging myself against the unspoken rules of noise and improvisation, and the social relations produced by the concert situation. For this I don't need many musical instruments so much as I need tools; blunt tools, theoretical tools, books, friends to have conversations with... really anything that can help. I have been exploring these social and power relations in concert situations by either giving my authority as performer away (and thus realising that this is actually impossible), or by using my authority to the maximum to test how much the audience and myself are willing to give or take. I adopt this power not just for my own sake or to arbitrarily produce social blockages. Rather, I push this social practice into

its negative forms by exercising minor politics at this prime site of the spectacle, the concert, where production and consumption are enacted at the level of experience. What is passivity? What is activity? Is the distinction that clear? What would it require to emancipate oneself from the situation and the roles that we accept when we enter such a space? How are social spaces produced in a given situation? What are the accepted conventions? Can we challenge them? Can we change them? Can we dare together by abandoning old conventions? What first attracted me to improvisation was the possibility for anything to become a part of the situation; the social atmosphere, the inability to play an instrument, unwanted sounds (like feedback and white noise)... This gave me a sense of freedom, even if this quickly became a very questionable form of freedom. After many years of engaging in the improvisation scene I found out that even these unwanted sounds could become just as aestheticised and fetishised as in any other type of music making. Equally I found that the players could become virtuosos showing off their abilities and refined taste deploying these sounds in self-indulgent exercises. My disappointment continued with the noise scene. What had seemed to be a practice exploring the extremes, revealed itself, at a certain point, as a self-congratulatory, ego-maniacal and uncritical mode of expression. The parameters of where this activity happens seem to be already well defined and rarely exceed the reproduction of existing stereotypes and characteristics of what is supposed to be noise. This includes ear splitting volume, dissonance, shock effect, aggressive often misogynist lyrics or introverted-not-giving-a-fuck-attitudes.... (yes I have done some of those

for quite some time but at some point enough is enough). It is not surprising that both scenes are male dominated and give little indication of reflection on gender relations. The improvisers' obsession with their own instruments, and the noise musicians with their visceral expressions and anti-intellectualism fall easily into the male caricature formulated by Valerie Solanas in her *S.C.U.M Manifesto* many years ago:

*The male is completely egocentric, trapped inside himself, incapable of empathising or identifying with others, or love, friendship, affection or tenderness. He is a completely isolated unit, incapable of rapport with anyone. His responses are entirely visceral, not cerebral; his intelligence is a mere tool in the services of his drives and needs; he is incapable of mental passion, mental interaction; he can't relate to anything other than his own physical sensations.*

The more we think about it, the less meaningful political engagement we can find in the established modes of making noise and improvisation. The kinds of alienating effects these practices initially possessed are no longer producing an effect. Rather than trying to deconstruct and fuck around with the power relations produced in the room the players seem quite happy to reproduce them for self-promotion. There is a false promise of freedom in both noise and improvisation that affords a certain sense of individual agency in the name of creativity, but this agency is often present only at the level of personal taste. We are well aware of how creativity is increasingly inserted into the capitalist production process as a means to develop new ways of producing value. Capitalism produces us as 'free subjects' in order to reproduce itself without

much antagonism: is there anything more capitalist than a creative individual, intuitively driven, self-obsessed and constantly promoting himself/herself? The boss of Foxconn Technologies or Steve Jobs? There is a market for improvised and noise music. You tried to make a living out of this, and then you complain about the market? These texts, in different ways, deal with trying to understand these sets of relations. But you are still getting money for what you do (even editing and anti-fucking this text), and it is very likely that by publishing such a book there will soon be invitations from academic and art institutions. I might soon be just as institutionalised as anybody else (if I am not already). All money is dirty, it is the shit squeezed from the circulation of our labouring bodies. I thought that noise and improvisation were the stereo arseholes of culture, and this was their interest, that they are in an antagonistic position with regards to other musics, with regards to entertainment. Yet they have become entertainment. In whatever situation you are in there is a framework that conditions and limits what you can do. If this framework is the market, the options might be many but the limitations (such as having to survive through the wage relation) are extremely complex to understand and even harder to actually change. The practices of noise and improvisation can be elusive and unstable. It is because of these qualities that they may be able to exceed the framework in which they happen or at least temporarily question it and expose its own contradictions and your relationship to them. But this is not just going to happen by itself, in order to have some effect we should get to know and analyse how the

frameworks where these practices take place are produced .

BUT WHAT IF WE SURVIVE THROUGH THE WAGE RELATION PERFECTLY WELL PLAYING NOISE AND IMPROV? ISN'T THAT THE PROMISE OF ENTERTAINMENT/COMMERCIALISATION? WOULD THAT BE OK OR ...? DOES NOISE-PROV REALLY ATTACK WAGE RELATIONS? CAN IT DO SO SIMPLY THROUGH NOT PAYING PEOPLE PROPERLY? IS MONEY SIMPLY DIVISIVE/UNCLEAN? CAN WE IMPROVISE WITH MONEY AS OUR INSTRUMENT? AS HOWARD SLATER DID ONCE? CAN WE IMPROVISE WITHOUT MONEY – YES, BUT ONLY TEMPORARILY. WOULD WE IMPROVISE AS SLAVES? PERHAPS, AT SOME POINT, WE WILL BE FORCED TO DO SO AT GUNPOINT.

During the past years I have been trying to understand the contexts and frameworks that I have been part of. Therefore the main essays in this book are loosely grouped into the following themes:

Improvisation

The Basque Country

Copyright and Authorship

Noise

Representation and Idioms

Estrangement and Idiocy

In the set of interviews published here you can gain a more informal insight into how some of these ideas have developed through the years. In the appendix you can read writings from many different people about concerts in which I have been involved. Overall it should be possible to get some sense of how these ideas have been employed differently in different concerts.

At the core of improvisation resides an opportunity that I still think is worth exploring; an extreme awareness of the potential for going against the normalisation that occurs in any given situation, the production of alternative social relations, and the exploration of basic political issues such as the collective vs. the individual.

We can appropriate the careful perceptive and listening skills acquired through years of playing very quiet improvisation, and we can use these skills for purposes other than the production of abstract sounds. We can appropriate the type of self-empowerment and alienation that noise can produce, not to try to create some sort of sublime experience, but to question what the notion of experience is really about.

If previously, in improvisation, we tried to play our instruments against the grain, against the way they have been conceived and designed, what if from now on we don't just deconstruct the instruments but try to change the conditions that we are living in?

Can we use these material conditions as instruments of improvisation in order to change them? If the material conditions that we are living in are immersed in a capitalist logic, can we pervert this logic by improvising ourselves?

What do I mean by 'unconstituted praxis'? It is a praxis without pragmatism, an intervention without a foundation (an-archic). There is no right or wrong because there is no object and no distance from which to judge it. One is not reflecting from an objective position outside of the situation but in a state of immediacy – reflection is accelerated and pushed to the level of feedback. In this sense, an unconstituted praxis is the opposite of escapism. This praxis is like jumping into the void of the situation that you are in, where you will discover uncertainty in the certainty of where you are as if you were a nyctalopic idiot (one who sees in the dark)..<sup>1</sup> Unconstituted praxis is the process of ungrounding oneself. A constant attempt which never quite arrives because one does not know where one is going. It is like the 'reject' move in jerkin (street dance from L.A.), or like the guy who,

during the 2005 Paris suburb riots, saw cars burning and wanted to do something without damaging someone else's property so he burnt his own car. What was before a normal situation becomes something completely different. This process is strange and disorienting but helps us to understand how normatively we are ideologically constructed or how we are paralysed or activated for purposes that we might not necessarily have chosen ourselves.

It is a praxis without a false sense of agency, without self-congratulation. It is a praxis subsumed in alienation, not liberation. A form of play in which one does not know whether one is having fun or not. It is social in the sense that it questions what individual subjectivity is and how we are produced in a given situation. It can be a practice without usefulness, a speculative practice that does not produce much except ourselves as broken subjects. Meaningless, at least for the time being, because you don't understand yet what the meaning is – language as noise producing a useless general intellect. Today, when our affects are more and more commodified, unconstituted praxis is practical sensuous activity in so far as it produces noise in our nerves – a constant banging of the lemon and the head. It is above all a process of desubjectification. In this sense it differentiates itself from traditions of humanist praxis with their foundation in the individual will or intention; such as in early Karl Marx, Antonio Labriola, Antonio Gramsci or Michel Henry.

Since this is a praxis without prescription, or score everyone present is responsible for what is going on. It is a collective process of disorganisation; going fragile into our deep insecurities together, scrambling the possibility for reorganisation as individuals, dislocating ourselves and making it difficult for us to execute power individually.

A subtle recent moment of unconstituted praxis took place at CAC Brétigny during October of 2010. With some of the collaborators in this book we staged a 'concert' using the material conditions as our instruments (budget, times, space...), lasting for a week during which we were discussing, eating, being an audience, trying things out. At the very beginning we talked about how nobody from the neighbourhood visited the art centre. So then we went to the college that is next door and placed some chairs; we decided to be their audience. The students were curious and they started to chat with us. They understood the situation very quickly: 'Ah this is an improvisation!' The next day we wanted to continue the interaction but we did not know how. The time was running out because they were going to go home so we decided to bring the PA out into the square that separates the art centre and the high school.

We gave the microphones away and the students plugged in their phones and MP3 players. They started to play with the situation, and they were asking us: 'What are you doing?' We said 'We don't know'. For some time a strange but rich atmosphere developed. Something difficult to describe neither one thing, nor the other. People were doing things like dancing or singing for some time but slowly things faded into what one expected, everybody got into their little corner, into their little group or into their comfort zone. Including us. Once again the reproduction of stereotypes. But for some minutes the feeling of ungrounding the situation, of being together without knowing where to go, and with no agenda or leader to follow, was there. While this might be perceived as the worst kind of participatory art project, it proposed no individual authorship, nor manipulation, because nobody knew where things were going until we allowed the normalisation

process to do its job. This state of relative tranquillity lasted only until the next week, when the kids (like in many other French high schools) began rioting and throwing badly made Molotov cocktails at the police in protest of Sarkozy's pension reform. The police clearly knew how to deal with them and they were prepared. A few days later the pension reform law has been passed and it is school holidays. So writing from here everything is quiet.

My attitude to theory is like the kids throwing these not very successful Molotov cocktails, or, once more, like Joke's lemon: punk. One does not need to know how to play the guitar to actually play. It is the attitude that matters but then also the act of questioning this attitude.

While reading the texts you will notice some serious overlaps, for example, 'Oh I love Freedom But What is it?', is a reworked section from 'A Second Subterranean Ethics'; 'Anti-CCopyright: Towards a Naked Culture' is the seed of 'Anti-Copyright: Why Improvisation and Noise run Against the Idea of Intellectual Property'; some parts of 'Against Representation' are included in 'Idioms and Idiots'. Similarly there are several repetitions in the interviews. In the spirit of improvisation and noise you are getting the whole rough version rather than an edited one. I am sure you will be able to edit whatever you need in your head.

I thought it was better to leave it this way, so one can see how similar thoughts are reworked and developed. Both my Spanish and English are pretty rotten and I cannot write two sentences without the help of an editor. During all these years many many friends have helped me to make these texts readable and to develop these thoughts. Many of these texts come out of long term conversations. These conversations blur who I am, and influence me to the point that I don't know who is me and who is the other. This makes

me happy because to be honest I am tired of myself. Hopefully this is a way of ungrounding myself, but of course it is also a clear example of managerial authorship.

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1 See Idioms and Idiots





# OH I LOVE FREEDOM! BUT WHAT IS IT?

NOTE: This article, forming a more developed excerpt from a section of the longer essay, 'A Second Subterranean Ethics', was originally published in *Mute* Vol. 1 # 29, February, 2005. Available online: [www.metamute.org/en/Oh-I-love-freedom-But-what-is-it](http://www.metamute.org/en/Oh-I-love-freedom-But-what-is-it)

*Just as, in a game, the victory of one of the players is not (with respect to the game) an ordinary state to be restored, but only the stake that doesn't pre-exist the game but results from it, so pure violence – which is the name that Benjamin gives to human action which neither founds nor conserves law – is not an ordinary figure of human action that at a certain moment is seized and inscribed in the juridical order (just as for speaking man there is no pre-linguistic reality which, at a certain moment, would fall into language). – Giorgio Agamben, State of Exception*

*Once we understand that we are embedded in contradictory social relations, we can also see that the contradictions themselves run deeper than the law that pretends to organise them. – De Selby*

Improvisation as pure praxis. You cannot be outside of the game, but you don't have to be subject to the rules in order to play the instrument. Sometimes, when musicians use instruments in unanticipated ways, they can create moments of convergence, communication. Exploring the material aspect of the instrument without conceptual restrictions can allow for this. If the musician is able to develop a personal approach to music making, this does not happen in isolation, but collectively, among other musicians and listeners. Improvised music generates meaning from the residue that marketed music tries to exclude, not to be recycled for future use, but momentarily to

destroy the hierarchies of value that structure the physical act of making music. When sounds are thrown in improvisation, this can call into question our temporal and spatial understanding of sound and its place in reality. The inner rules that we bring to the performance as listeners become redundant if musicians present a different way of playing. This moment, in which you realize that you had a 'limiter' on music, shakes other notions and will bring fragility to your understanding. Often the inner rules or parameters that enclose music are the same ones that contain other forces. If we understand politics in terms of potential social relations, we can see a politics in the exploratory element of improvisation.

*So it appears that the common notions are practical Ideas, in relation with our power; unlike their order of exposition, which only concern ideas, their order of formation concern affects, showing how the mind 'can order its affects and connect them together.' The common notions are an Art, the art of ethics itself: organizing good encounters, composing actual relations, forming powers, experimenting. – Gilles Deleuze, Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*

For Deleuze, the powers of a common notion are developed as it is put into practice. Within a common notion, subjectivities are formed; their 'nature' is developed by the common notion's future use. A common notion can only be a rule if it becomes a style: as, for instance, when one musician's traits or gestures infect another's. Unless you are able to bastardize this style it will become another template in which rules can be applied. In that case its political potential vanishes.

## UNCONSTITUTED PRAXIS

Making products (or decisive endings) makes parameters easy to identify, allowing you to appropriate the work

of art (I've got it! I understand it!) Today 'praxis' is generally understood as the making of a specific work. It implies having an end, a deadline, a limit to your potentiality. Improvisation, on the other hand, brings back the act of making as the main focus of artistic praxis. In fact the common meaning of praxis has changed over the millennia. For the ancient Greeks, notes Agamben, the sense of praxis was different from that of production. Production has its limits outside itself; praxis is self-contained and reaches its limits through action. Therefore it is not productive and it can bring itself into presence.<sup>1</sup> In improvisation, thought and action are brought together in an unconstituted praxis. By this I mean a praxis which is not finally constituted, not complete, yet has no end outside itself. Its effect depends on interaction: the participation of others, by listening and/or making sound. In improvisation the gestures made require a response in order for the dialogue to continue. But as the other players cannot anticipate a concrete response, it is the gestures that continuously interrupt and initiate the conversation. Unlike, say, John Cage's pieces, where the conceptual instructions (as 'end') determine the limits of the artificially separated 'chance', improvisation fully exposes each gesture to all others, forcing the singular 'concepts' to coexist. The gestures are never left alone because even the silence has a meaning; there is no such thing as neutrality in improvisation. Meaning is constantly produced and never isolated from its context.

Politics is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the act of making a means visible as such. Politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather, it is the sphere of a pure mediality without end intended as the field of a human thought.<sup>2</sup>

From the point of view of the ideology (long obsolete in capitalist thinking) that identifies value (economic, cultural,

spiritual...) with the tangible, clearly defined product, improvisation is useless, because nothing in it functions outside its context. Improvisation functions only in terms of the moment in which musicians are struggling to find common notions. This struggle is itself the aim. It is in trying to find a language within spectacle, in which musicians can for that time stop reproducing ready-made forms. In making an argot within the brutal and cold capitalist production, points of reference start to disappear. The awareness that we are embedded within this system remains: it would be ridiculous to think that we are not determined by it, but also ridiculous to think, by default, that everything we do must contribute to its efficient functioning.

## ARGOT

The age in which we are living, in fact, is also the age in which, for the first time, it becomes possible for humans to experience their own linguistic essence – to experience, that is, not some language content or some true proposition, but the fact itself of speaking. The experience in question here does not have any objective content and cannot be formulated as a proposition referring to a state of things or to a historical situation... this experience must be constructed as an experiment concerning the matter itself of thought...<sup>3</sup>

If we are conscious of how these systems are able to cut off or actually introduce our objects of desire, we may be able to find ways to produce moments of resistance. It would be difficult to aim for a perfect (i.e. finished) situation in which you think everything would be fantastic (What happens once you achieve it? You stop?). The situation emerges out of a practice: it is a *modus operandi* that you should be aiming at. Once the eyes of capital – whether market research or the police – know what you are looking for, then you are easy to deal with.

The concept of argot may be useful as an analogy here, although music and language work in different registers. Argot, not being a proper language, is difficult to institutionalise. Argot has the aspect of appropriating a language and making it personal (sometimes it is used in secret trading or other obscure business). In argot readymade meaning is twisted to serve the purpose that the particular user wants to give it at a specific moment. As improvised music is produced by the combination of the exploration of the instrument against its intended purpose and a 'personal' way of responding, produced collectively among musicians and hearers. Therefore the musical language that is created serves only the communicability of that moment. It cannot be exported elsewhere. You can take ideas but you will also have to contextualize, in the sense that each element of the music is there to be activated by the consumer (who, in the process, becomes a producer). Decision-making is made more prominent in the consumption of this music than is the case with other genres where stages of the process are more clearly defined, i.e. composing, performing, getting recognition, etc. Improvised music scorns divisions of 'aesthetic' labour in order to crack packaged meanings: infiltrating, deforming and extending enclosed vocabularies of praxis.

#### NOTES

1 Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

2 Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

3 Ibid.

## A SECOND SUBTERRANEAN ETHICS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE POLITICAL AND ETHICAL CONNOTATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY IMPROVISED MUSIC

#### NOTE:

Originally submitted as a thesis for a Masters in Art and Theory at Goldsmiths College, London, 2003.

During the summer of 2003 I spent some time in Vienna researching improvised music. Having spent six years in London involved in the improvised music scene, aware of how it has developed, I was interested in finding musicians who were challenging the approaches that I was familiar with. In London I saw how this music could get trapped within its own aesthetics. At the same time there had been a lot of discussion about the political potential of this music. My research in Vienna consisted of interviewing musicians, organisers and others involved in the improvised music scene there.

At the end of the process I was interested in two particular musicians for whom the political potential of the music was immanent to their practice rather than stated before or after the fact.

This essay consists of three parts: an introduction to the way this music has developed in Britain, an enquiry into potentiality and problems of its development, and an exploration of my experiences in Vienna with the musicians Radu Malfatti and Hiaz (from the group *farmersmanual*). This final section takes the form of diary entries, since I wanted to communicate my discoveries as they happened: as a living process, thought in practise rather than as a consolidation of the music and its possibilities (a problem which I hope to show has affected the playing and reception of improvised music in the UK).

## PART I IMPROVISING AS A TERM: ATTEMPTING TO BREAK WITH TRADITIONS

Improvisation, a term of consequent importance, began to be used as the loose name for a genre of music in the '60s. It is true that many musicians

and non-musicians have been improvising for a very long time. But it was in the '60s that some musicians breaking away from jazz and contemporary music were developing a kind of music that would counter traditions and make playing as free as possible. Musicians, in trying to break with conventional models of playing, were looking at their instruments in a more material way. They wanted to find ways through which to experiment with their creativity without the restrictions of history. Some examples: Keith Rowe (part of the group *AMM*), inspired by Jackson Pollock's action painting, started to play the guitar on a table and to play things on top (e.g. radio through the pick-ups); Derek Bailey explored the guitar at the margins of notes dealing with a strange harmonics and rough chord-playing. Eddie Prévost brought a wine barrel to the performance space and, rather than inviting people to drink from it, he started drumming on it as if it was a percussive instrument (I guess he emptied it out on the way). As you can imagine, when this music started to be performed in public, it provoked a variety of reactions and forced a redefinition of terms (the distinction of 'noise' over music). At the beginning there was not yet a network for this music to be presented on

its own terms. As a consequence AMM (whose members included both Keith Rowe and Eddie Prévost) would share the bill with bands such as Pink Floyd or Cream.<sup>1</sup> As time passed, the audience became more specialised. Networks and promoters helped to consolidate a terminology and classification for this kind of music.

This would impede the more direct impact that this music could have on unfamiliar audiences. It might be that the terminology and the specialised atmosphere that this music developed helped to suppress its wider political potential. This is the issue that I would like to discuss in this thesis: the openness of the music, that might have reached new audiences, gets overexposed by having to deal with a (recent) history.

These musicians created a scene, but in creating it they also created its limitations. Because of this, it is difficult for those musicians that follow to break completely with their ancestors; they are more likely to follow their deconstructive methods. I do not mean to depreciate the creativity of the new musicians. What I am saying is that once improvisation became a genre it also became easily pigeonholed: when certain stylistic approaches get consolidated, others are put aside and thus, hierarchies are created.

## EFFERVESCENT TIMES EXCEEDING POLITICS

During the '60s agitation was, apparently, in the atmosphere. Issues like art and music were constantly questioned in relation to politics.

*Any alteration in the modes of music is always followed by alteration in the most fundamental laws of the state.<sup>2</sup>*

It is interesting to consider this quotation from Plato in relation to the trajectory of the English avant-garde composer, improviser (part of AMM), and later member of the Communist Party, Cornelius Cardew. Cardew grew up with an interest in a politics for which there was no room for activities that did not have an interest for the industrial working class. In the introduction to his book, *Stockhausen serves Imperialism*, Cardew wrote:

*In fact this whole polemical attack, including this book, takes place outside the working class movement and is therefore politically relatively insignificant.<sup>3</sup>*

Here we should make it clear that Cardew later stopped improvising and composing avant-garde music in order to write popular liberation songs against capitalism.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, Eddie Prévost recognises that

the interaction between improvising musicians is a possible space for socio-political consciousness. It is up to the musicians to recognise this or not.

*The meta-musician must put music aside or else be consumed by music. All meta-music's aesthetic priorities arise from the direct relationship of player with materials, player with player and players with audience. A meta-aesthetic only emerges when performers perceive their engagement with the socio-political consequences of these relationships.<sup>5</sup>*

Prévost has devoted his life to improvisation, being part of the group AMM for almost 40 years, running the Matchless Recordings label, organising workshops, writing on the subject and so on. His theory of the 'Meta-musicians' states that the practice of this kind of music cannot be limited to music.

*What I am questioning here is whether Prévost, by defining the way socio-political relationships occur in improvisation, is not in fact contributing to the generation of a style?*

So with this paper I am putting myself in the impossible gap of trying to articulate the political and ethical connotations that occur in improvisation, with the awareness that this can

run the danger of falling into stylistic rhetoric. For Cardew, political consciousness cannot be raised simply from micro gestures. You need to have a global view, an opinion about the exploitation that is taking place throughout the world. If you do not clearly state and denounce this within your practice you are not being political. What I am interested in showing in this paper is not the political consciousness that might be applicable to improvised music, but to bring articulation to the smaller gestures that emerge out of this practice. The hidden, or imperceptible, social aspects that can grow out of the interaction that the 'freedom' of improvisation offers: what potential do these have, or is there a 'meaning of resistance'? By this I mean that in the practice of improvisation (perhaps because it is simple, primitive or straightforward) there is a social interaction, which has not yet found its full potential in language. And this is one of the qualities that makes improvisation exceed, or at least resist, commodification. The intensive creative course of action in which the musicians are involved makes the improvising situation a laboratory in which the audience is able to continually grasp results but not consume them as

products. The musicians – giving all their desires, passion and creative process – open themselves to the responses of other musicians in such a way as to exceed understanding and assimilation. These responses cannot be isolated as a one-off gesture. Therefore the responses that follow are not just individual, but are melted together with the various responses the situation has provoked. The performance space can be the place in which, dependent on degrees of intensity, new subjectivities might arise.

*I call 'subject' the bearer [le support] of a fidelity, the one who bears a process of truth. The subject, therefore, in no way pre-exists the process. He is absolutely non-existent in the situation; before the event. We might say that the process of truth induces a subject.<sup>6</sup>*

The players, by pushing each other to an 'open permission of possibilities', are forced to question their expectations. As different players can antagonise each other, and in doing so find new ways of dealing with the performance outside their familiar habits. Cardew mentioned that political consciousness does not arise from one moment of inspiration. He may be right that one is not going to realise in one second

how fucked up the world is. But one might be able to bring out those creative elements that the fucked-up-ness of the world normally suppresses. And this is the reason for the title of this essay: 'A Second Subterranean Ethics'. This ethics might emerge once the improvisation pushes the players into areas of intensity that force them to question their modus operandi. The musicians are there but they cannot apply their well-rehearsed ritualistic approach. Once the performance reaches this point (of no way back, even if you would wish for it), any gesture which is not as fragile as the intensity of the performance is exposed as a stylistic cliché. Surprise, and the necessity to react to this moment simultaneously with the other musicians can produce a creative feedback. But as I mentioned before this surprise is not an isolated event, it comes from an awareness of what has been done before and how it can be disrupted. It is a constant challenge to the notions of cause and effect. The ethics that I am talking about here are not the sticker that you carry as a nice human being, nor the ethics that you are conscious of and you behave according to. They are the ethics that emerge out of the



collaboration with the other musicians. It is here that the intensity of the situation gets to question anything that tries to fence in its potentiality. In improvisation, to collaborate is to work together in order to achieve nothing other than the dissolution of egos into one another. This music does not sell many CDs.

## STRONG INDIVIDUALS

Improvising musicians were desperately trying to get away from music history by creating new 'argots' with the instrument. Improvisation has been related to strong individuals, as each of the musicians had to find his or her own path within the instrument. It is not just the players that need to be persuasive. Usually festival organisers, record labels, and critics of this music are very motivated in order to remain in this field of music, which is still very marginal. Those running record labels are happy to cover expenses in order to keep putting things out. The first time that I asked Eddie Prévoist of Matchless Recordings the number of CDs he produced of each release, I was very surprised to hear that just one thousand

copies were manufactured. Another aspect that also reinforces the idea of strong individuality is the multi-tasking way in which musicians and promoters have to work; in fact, musicians are often promoters, record label runners, critics and so on. The idea of the strong individual also gets reinforced at the beginning of each performance, as no one, at that moment, knows who will start nor how.

*In the moment just before a performance begins, his fingers poised, the meta-musician does not know what to play. He knows that he will play, and has some reasonable expectation of what might develop. But there is no certainty. Yet the moment the first note is negotiated then all else will follow, seemingly out of control and at the same time inevitable. The meta-musician makes no false starts and plays no wrong notes.<sup>7</sup>*

This moment of uncertainty in which any of the players can break the silence prior to the performance, in which no language has determined the first action, forces the music to be always at the border of what has been done in the past and what you can add or subtract from it. But of course our knowledge about the musician and his or her music can work as a score for our expectations. In some

cases the musician himself can be a slave to his own trajectory. This is something that I will try to discuss later on: how style can work as a limiter of freedom and how working within a very narrow space for intervention can lead to surpassing the clichés that this music often provokes.

## DESTROY ALL FORMS!

*Perhaps I have given the impression that there is no forward planning, no overall structure, and no 'form'. Adverse criticism of free improvisation, pretty nearly the only kind available, almost always aims itself at the same two or three targets and the clear favourite of these is 'formlessness'. As the criteria for assessing a piece of music, any piece of music, is usually inherited from the attitudes and prejudices handed down by the mandarins of European straight music, this is to be expected. Nowhere is the concept of form as an ideal set of proportions which transcends style and language clung to with such terrified tenacity as by the advocates of musical composition. The necessity for design and balance is nowhere more imperative than in music, where all is so fleeting*

*and impalpable – mere vibration of the tympanic membrane'. Although written many years ago, that is still probably a fairly accurate indication of the importance attached to form by those people concerned with composed music. Even in those parts of contemporary composition where the earlier types of overall organisations no longer serve, a great deal of ingenuity is exercised finding something upon which the music can be based. Myths, poems, political statements, ancient rituals, paintings, mathematical systems; it seems that any overall pattern must be imposed to save music from its endemic formlessness.<sup>8</sup>*

In his book, *Improvisation*, Derek Bailey tries to explain how this music challenges previous notions of what music can be from a western perspective. As we can see from this quotation, improvisation has been trying to escape any term that is not related to freedom. Once something becomes formal and easy to identify, it can be appropriated by the establishment (something that improvisation has always tried to evade). It is true that the abstraction of this music makes the audience engage in the process of participation (as they are working out, at the same time as the musi-

cians, what is going on). I presume that the constant encountering of differences must be exhausting. Miscellaneous tastes, rather than emerging into one final product (here I am thinking of a pop-rock group working together on a song and then delivering it in public) are continuously presented in juxtaposition with each other. The constant encounter of different personalities in a performance obviously dissolves the idea of the author, giving the audience more points of view to relate to what is being done, as there has not been any previous author's overview on what is being presented. This is precisely because in improvisation the production and the presentation occurs at the same time. Everyone, whether they are a part of the audience or a performer, is at the same level in the reception of the improvisation. But I must admit that I am suspicious of this amazing free flowing amount of creativity trying to evade any categorisation. As a listener of this kind of music I have discovered that you can find a diversity of approaches (that are not necessarily compatible with each other) and they actually can become very narrow. This is fine if its inten-

tion is not to have a 'politically correct' ethos that everybody can join in with, and there are no hierarchies. Another problem is that in this music a star system can operate in a pretty much similar way as it does in the mainstream. As festivals of improvised music have been established, there are some musicians who are participating in many of them and others that never participate. Trends are also important in this kind of music (not that this is so wrong but it can actually counter the idea of being open to the risk of the unfamiliar). This might be a difficult field and it can easily be said that the musicians asked to participate are the best improvisers. But in improvisation there is not just one way of doing things. In fact no other type of music making challenges the notion of right or wrong as improvisation does. Unfortunately we have some EAI gourmet guardians ready to apply their implacable taste on young improvisers, taking away any political potential from this practice. Often in different places musicians develop a certain style of playing and so-called 'schools' are created: London school, Berlin school, Japanese school, Vienna school, New Zealand

school and so on. They all have their particularities but not all are so clear. Other ways of playing improvisation can be very loud ('noise'), very quiet ('reductionism'), fast and active ('plinky-plonk' or 'salad music' as Radu Malfatti calls it), slow gradual changes, drone-like. At the moment we could say that the Japanese school (which is quite reductionist) sells more CD's than, let's say, the New Zealand one for example (which is lo-fi and drone-like).

*The meta-musician looks for meaning, and for a music with meaning, and looks to invest as much meaning as possible in the music. The intention is to transcend all previous experience of music production and music consumption. The intention is making music, and listening to it, as if for the first time.<sup>9</sup>*

As we can see in this quotation by Eddie Prévost, there is a necessity to break with any previous understanding of music. The meta-musician is not just a player/composer/listener at the same time, he or she is a revolutionary and consumer of the other players revolution. Is this not too much to ask of a human being? So what I want to say by bringing together

the specific styles that have emerged out of this music and 'the radical new-creative-self' that Prévost is talking about is that the romantic aura that can be wrapped around this kind of music, is sometimes put forward to reinforce a specific understanding of politics (and perhaps as an example of social understanding) and in others it is hidden and not so clear within the aesthetic choices of the musicians (but then perhaps there it occurs more naturally, without pretensions). But what does happen is that the freedom of this music creates its own limitations. Exercising freedom in a certain way makes it stylised and sterilised.

*If improvisation does not become a method, an aim, a genre, if it is not seen as a specialist endeavour through which virtuosity can re-emerge, if it is seen as a continual accompaniment to our everyday lives in which meaning and responses do not always emerge instantaneously, if it is heard as that which contains the phases of its own construction and carries the emotions to which it gave rise, then it can operate as a 'practice of self-invention' that is spurred-on by negotiation between the determined and the undetermined, between pleasure and displeasure.<sup>10</sup>*

## PART II CONSIDERING THE PROBLEMS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF IMPROVISED MUSIC IN LONDON

### OH, I LOVE FREEDOM BUT WHAT IS IT?

*I) Being beyond 'music', it is noise.*

*II) Being beyond 'rules', it is free.<sup>11</sup>*

Free improvisation, as its name suggests, has a relationship with freedom. The sounds originated in its practice have a relationship with noise. If we follow the above quotation from Bruce Russell we might think that improvisation is by itself progressive. There is nothing implicit in improvisation; it is what the musicians make out of the performance that can have potential. If the musicians bring an openness to creating common spaces or ways of understanding, it is more likely that the improvisation can take unexpected and interesting paths. By common spaces I do not mean to try to find the lowest or more common denomi-

nators, which would mean to actually bring what they have from the past. As I mentioned above, to try to articulate the potential of this music might also be to constrain the spectrum in which one can act. This attempt is bound to fail. This is similar to what happens to improvisation once you try to see it as the final result. This would mean to contextualise it and give it a purpose – to think of it only in formal terms (this was fine here or that worked there). One of the biggest problems during the course of this essay is thinking of improvisation in temporal terms. There is some potential in short, fast, disruptive actions, but they will always be subject to what happened before. This would be a nihilistic self-destructive gesture rather than a long-term commitment to finding alternative ways of dealing with the way that we are determined by power. How to reconcile these two temporal perspectives and how to sustain this emancipatory transition is the purpose of this section of the essay.

## OBEYING WHAT?

Gilles Deleuze writes in *Spinoza*:

*Practical Philosophy:*

*In every society, Spinoza will show, it is a matter of obeying and nothing else. This is why the notions of fault, of merit and demerit, of good and evil, are exclusively social, having to do with obedience and disobedience. The best society, then, will be one that exempts the power of thinking from the obligation to obey, and takes care, in its own interest, not to subject thought to the rule of the state, which only applies to actions. As long as thought is free, hence vital, nothing is compromised.*

I am afraid that thought is not free in the present conditions. Capitalism, in order to reproduce itself, needs to produce workers and consumers. This is what has been called the 'production of subjectivities'. With the convergence of material and immaterial production capitalism has dissolved into people's minds and habits: a subtle infiltration blurring the distinction between one's own desires and capitalist desires. How can the production of noises disrupt the production of subjectivities? Musicians, in constructing

a dialogue out of an empty score (which actually makes more transparent the social condition as there is no final responsibility attached to an author or score) are showing that the effects of their choices induce a responsibility. This responsibility (which actually gets its meaning diluted by the musicians' interaction and their subterranean understandings), introduces further responsibility. The musicians, in having a past (time passing, sounds created/listened to) are able to choose the way they deal with the present according to their decision-making. This decision-making might simply reproduce aesthetic choices from the past, an act of consolidation rather than discovery, unless it is adapted to the nature of the new improvisation, which relies on careful listening and an awareness of the precedence of the music. This does not mean that ready-made sounds are not welcome, but that your choice gives them a reason to be there. The musicians and listeners are giving a new context to them. The production of communication does not mean just to talk better but to struggle with getting the most out of its possibilities. In capitalism, communication means transaction of knowledge and information.



In improvisation what is produced and distributed are momentary gestures of sound; what they induce is a response. Capitalism works towards a directional interest (reproduction of itself.) If it gets responses, it learns from them in order to infiltrate further and produce better. Improvisation is antagonistic to this process, because while it appeals to an audience's desires, it then invites a dialogue. Notions of good or bad get deformed because their general meaning is not used in order to pursue an interest outside the situation. Because improvisation is not aiming for finality, fixity becomes flexibility. Flexibility in improvisation does not mean 'free flowing', but instead implies an ability to accommodate difficult and uninspiring sounds. In doing this, conventional ways of listening are transformed for the musicians to amplify their scope of action. The general meaning of these notions are appropriated for that moment in which musicians decide to play with them, but then they are only used for specific occasions which you cannot take away with you. Human freedom, though not free will, amounts to the power that one possesses actively to select one's encounters rather than suffer

chance associations.<sup>12</sup> John Cage managed to open the parameters in which music was previously thought of. But actually the chance pieces in Cage's work (e.g. *Music of Changes*) are always subjected to strict rules. The difference with improvisation is that the musicians are always exposed to its determination and response without having rules to back them up. Improvisation challenges the notion of divisions. Cage's compositions have the finality of showing what is possible in music and our preconceptions of it. He might perhaps not be in charge of the content of the form, but it is still a very strict way of defining a spectrum of action. What improvisation does is to show that there is not an outside to its practice. There is a big difference in hearing a 'chance' piece by John Cage and an improvisation. Even if the sound might be similar, the approach comes from a different angle. In John Cage's pieces there is a clear division, the chances encountered within them are the purpose of them. They stop being chance. In improvisation chances remain the whole potential to be taken in to account or not. Let's say that some loud sound comes from outside. While in more general music it would be a disturbance and exclud-

ed, in Cage's music it would be anticipated. In improvisation it would be listened and questioned and if someone thinks that he can do something with it, used. Usually the performance spaces can be extremely varied and with different acoustic properties. In no other music are these qualities explored as thoroughly. What I want to get at is that improvisation is able to understand that it is part of a bigger context, and is able to do something with it. The rules in John Cage's pieces seal the interaction of the musicians. Improvisation recognises that there is no division between the conceptual approach and constant intervention within it. In improvisation, there is neither a concept to save, nor a rule to be applied.

*Just as, in a game, the victory of one of the players is not (with respect to the game) an originary state to be restored, but only the stake that doesn't pre-exist the game but results from it, so pure violence – which is the name that Benjamin gives to human action which neither founds nor conserves law – is not an originary figure of human action that at a certain moment is seized and inscribed in the juridical order (just as for speaking man there is*

*no pre-linguistic reality which, at a certain moment, would fall into language).*<sup>13</sup>

Once we understand that we are embedded within a system in which contradictory social relations are played out, we can also see that the contradictions contain aspects that exceed constrictions or law. Improvisation as pure praxis: you cannot be outside of the game, but you don't have to be subjected to the rules in order to play the instrument, and create convergent moments of communication. This can be similar to when the musicians use instruments in ways that were not anticipated before. Exploring, without conceptual restrictions, the material aspect of the instrument achieves this. In making and listening to the results, the musician is able to develop a personal approach to music making. This is not done in isolation, but within the appreciation of other musicians and listeners. In having a positive reception for that which 'Marketed music' tries to exclude, improvised music manages to give meaning to the residue without making a statement nor a question that it needs to answer. When sounds are thrown in improvisation, this pushes the temporal-spatial understanding that we have about

sound and its place in reality. Later on I will explain how the trombonist Radu Malfatti is pushing this notion to the limit. The inner rules that we bring prior to the performance as listeners become ridiculous once musicians manage to show a different way of playing. This moment in which you realise that you had a 'limiter' on music disrupts other notions and will bring fragility to your understanding. As in many cases those inner rules or parameters through which music can be enacted are the ones that hold other notions. If we understand politics in terms of their potential in social relations, we can see that in the exploratory element of improvisation there is a politics involved. By making the most of its interactions, the musicians project their subjectivities and they discover other people's receptions of it. *So it appears that the common notions are practical Ideas, in relation with our power; unlike their order of exposition, which only concern ideas, their order of formation concern affects, showing how the mind 'can order its affects and connect them together.'* The common notions are an Art, the art of ethics itself: organising good encounters, composing

*actual relations, forming powers, experimenting.*<sup>14</sup> Deleuze describes the way a common notion can be put into practice in order to develop its own powers. But the nature of the way in which subjectivities are developed with it is conditioned by its future use. It cannot become a rule unless it becomes a style that other musicians can be infected with. And unless you are able to bastardise this style it will become another template in which rules can be applied. In that case its political potential ceases: *The more the body politic, that individual of individuals, develop its own powers, the more the real-imaginary complexity of social relationships as Spinoza conceives it is revealed as a principle of mobility. Obedience itself (and its correlative representation, the 'law'), as it is institutionalised by the State, religion and morality, is not an immutable given but the fulcrum of a continual transition. Or, more precisely, since progress is never guaranteed, it is what is at stake in a praxis (a struggle?) whose decisive moment is the transformation of the mode of communication itself.*<sup>15</sup>

# UNCONSTITUTED PRAXIS

In an essay entitled 'Poiesis and Praxis', Giorgio Agamben explains how the terminology of praxis has been modified through time to eventually direct itself towards finality. In ancient Greece, work was the lowest in rank of the terms: work, praxis and poiesis. The slaves executed work in order to achieve something concrete. We live in a time in which this has been inverted, and now any production has an end.

Agamben continues to explain that the Greek understanding of the making of an artwork did not include a moment in which the artwork would be finished. Rather the artwork would be process and by itself would come into essence; therefore it could not be directed towards an end or a limit.

It is important to acknowledge that the making of products (or decisive endings) makes its parameters easy to identify and this means that you are able to appropriate the work of art (I've got it! I understand it!). This also gives consumption a clear-cut meaning. For the Greeks, making art was concerned with creation: making something out of nothing. Now we can see that praxis

would be the medium in which you make a specific work. It is to have an end; to have a deadline, a limit to your potentiality. Improvisation instead brings back the act of making as the main focus of artistic praxis.

But praxis understood by the Greeks had a different connotation to production. Production has its limits outside itself; praxis is self-contained and reaches its limits through action. Therefore art is not productive and it can bring itself into presence. In improvisation, thought and action are brought together in an unconstituted praxis. By this I mean a praxis which is not exterior to it, but neither is it finally constituted. It is in need of other listeners to actually obtain an effect; it needs interaction to fulfil its main purpose. This is similar to Agamben's use of the concept of means without end.

In improvisation the gestures made require a response in order for the dialogue to continue. But as the other players cannot anticipate a concrete response the gestures give birth to the conversation, and from there something develops. But as we mentioned before, with Cage's pieces the concept works as an end; but in improvisation each gesture can be as single concepts, forced to

coexist. The gestures are never left alone because even the silence has a meaning; there is no such thing as neutrality in improvisation. Meaning is constantly produced and never isolated from its context.

*Politics is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the act of making a means visible as such. Politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather, it is the sphere of a pure mediality without end intended as the field of a human thought.*<sup>16</sup>

Agamben suggests in an essay in his book, *The Coming Community: Notes on Politics*, that praxis and political reflections operate today exclusively within the dialectics of proper and improper, which means inclusion and exclusion. And if we are able to perform acts which are indifferent to this dialectics (therefore impossible to be categorised and excluded), we are able to posit a politics in which the notion of the common acquires its meaning without being based on concept of appropriation and expropriation. If improvisation is able to work outside this dialectic and function as pure mediality then must be able to show its political potential. Because of the lack of

functionality outside of its own context, improvisation cannot reproduce ideologies concerning product as finality ('reproduction of capital'). The functionality in improvisation works for the moment in which musicians are struggling to find common notions. This struggle is itself the aim. It is in trying to find a language within the spectacle in which musicians can, for however limited a time, stop reproducing ready-made clichés. By making an argot within brutal and cold capitalist production, one starts to leave behind those rules of obedience that were produced in musicians. Obedience, points of reference, disappear as you construct the object, not out of form but with the awareness that we are embedded within this system. It would be ridiculous to think that we are not determined by it, but also to think that by default we cannot stop reproducing its negative connotations.

## ARGOT

*The age in which we are living, in fact, is also the age in which, for the first time, it becomes possible for humans to experience their own linguistic essence – to experience, that is, not some language content*

*or some true proposition, but the fact itself of speaking. The experience in question here does not have any objective content and cannot be formulated as a proposition referring to a state of things or to a historical situation. It does not concern a state but an event of language; it does not pertain to this or that grammar but – so to speak to – the factum loquendi as such. Therefore, this experience must be constructed as an experiment concerning the matter itself of thought, that is, the power of thought (in Spinozan terms: an experiment de potentia intellectus, sive de libertate).*<sup>17</sup>

If we are conscious of how these systems are able to cut off or actually introduce our objects of desire, we can be able to find how to produce moments of resistance to this aim. It would be difficult to actually aim for a clear situation in which you think everything would be fantastic (What happens once you achieve it? You stop?). The situation emerges out of a practice, a modus operandi you should be aiming at. Once the capitalist producers know what you are looking for it is easy for it to be dealt with. But if there is nothing clearly positioned, it cannot apply recuperative responses to it.

Argot, not being a proper language is difficult to institutionalise. It is a good analogy to bring in the concept of argot here, even though music and language work in different registers, for argot has the aspect of appropriating a language and making it personal (sometimes it is used to do secret trading, or obscure business).

*Languages are the jargons that hide the pure experience of language just as people are the more or less successful mask of the factum pluralitatis. This is why our task cannot possibly be either the construction of these jargons into grammars or the recodification of people into states identities. On the contrary, it is only by breaking at any point the nexus between the existence of language, grammar, people, and state that thought and praxis will be equal to the tasks at hand. The forms of this interruption – during which the factum of language and the factum of community come to light for an instant – are manifold and change according to times and circumstances: reactivation of a jargon, trobar clus, a pure language, minoritarian practice of a grammatical language, and so on. In any case, it is clear that what is at stake here is not something simply linguistic or literary but, above all, political and philosophical.*

Pure language for Benjamin is irreducible to grammar or a particular language. But its purity is not that it comes out of nothing, it is still language, but not subjected to particular rules. Its indetermination makes it difficult to appropriate.

As improvised music is produced by the combination of the exploration of the instrument against its intended purpose and a personal way of responding to other musicians, the musical language that is created serves only the communicability of that moment. It cannot be exported elsewhere. You can take ideas but you will also you will also have to contextualise them; in this way each element of the music is there to be activated by the consumer. By this I mean that the decision-making is more prominent in the process of the consumption of this music, as opposed to in other genres in which each stage of the decision-making process is more clearly defined and separate (i.e. composing, presenting, getting recognition). This music works like an elusive liquidity in the hands of the musical grammar in order to keep reaching other people's ears. As there is not much interest from a general audience in this music it

is the musicians who make the most out of it. The marginality of this music functions at two levels, one which exposes the idea of the spectacle and the other, which poses the question of how to live within it and yet be antagonistic to it.

It can just fall into a dead end, and we all know that it is difficult, if not impossible, to make a child out of sodomy. But there can be a lot of pleasure in doing it.

## PART III DIARY FROM VIENNA

29.8.03

An exhibition of great importance opened yesterday in Vienna (Abstract Art Now at the Kunsthalle Wien), as you can imagine many computers and much pixellation were present. farmersmanual (all lower case, for internet use), a group of male individuals (transgressing definitions, how can you define them? computer programmers, musicians, artists, researchers) from Vienna but based in different cities (Berlin... ) have a project there which questions aspects of improvisation. A huge metal-ball-structure was in one of the big rooms of the

Kunsthalle. At the opening members of farmersmanual started a performance consisting of moving the ball. The movement would trigger some loud sounds. The sound was generated through the network between farmersmanual's computers. This approach had been developed when some of the members of farmersmanual left Vienna and had to find ways to keep collaborating together without sharing the same physical space. This led them to explore the possibilities of networks. So they started to use networks as a sound source (through some programming in Max/MSP). Their approach uses improvisation as an operative system to discover new ways of interacting with technology. It is interesting to see that there is no such thing as a final stage of the work. In bringing networks, and communication (which they are always working with, file sharing and so on) there is no specific point at which you can say you have a representation of it. These days their projects exceed what the concert venues can accommodate. They bring their networks, video and usually they perform for three hours, in which the audience is not just asked to sit down and listen but to actually walk around and look at the work and

their activity. In fact they just released a DVD in which they document all their performances in MP3 format. Contrary to what people would expect of a DVD of music, farmersmanual reverse our preconceptions of its possibilities. It might be a product, but one that challenges one's notion of consumerism. farmersmanual do not come from an improvisation background, they are not subjected to any of the particular methods or ideologies that we mentioned above, instead they push technologies without restriction, focusing on different aspects of what one can do with them. To listen to farmersmanual as just formal music is missing its political potential. It is the way it is made which could counter the standardised production of subjectivities. Some of the projects of farmersmanual have included inviting strangers to improvise with them through the internet. The situation becomes special, on the one hand because they are using technology to encourage creative subjectivities and on the other because their openness invites one to be a listener, or even producer. Its instant character is reinforced through the possibility of intervention, you are not constrained to maintain silence or a socially respectful behaviour

(one might be in one's room enjoying an orgy and having a break from it to search out different avenues of ecstasy). Another project of theirs which I found interesting, took place at the Venice Biennale in 2001. They were invited but a week before they were told that there was no space. Hiaz (the only member of farmersmanual who considers himself an artist) went there and tried to find possibilities and spaces for interaction. As Venice is full of canals and there was no space on dry land it made sense to do something on a boat. After a really intense process of dealing with the owner of the boat (every minute asking for more money) FM were able to have their huge PA and their noise networks ready for improvisation. Here the concept of the audience and how to present your work was completely challenged. Venice is a really quiet city (no vehicles) but does not have any rules for the amount of noise you can make on a boat, so FM were free to push their energy through the speakers. It created a great deal of confusion and some people thought some weapons or fireworks were being used. During the opening of the Venice Biennale there are so many events and openings that is difficult to

attract an audience to your event. But with the boat they were able to do the opposite:

*We could go wherever the people were [I could not stop laughing thinking of all these arty-fuckers-object-observers running away from these Viennese-freaks-boaty-noise-makers.] We were able to produce very loud volumes and the first people to call up the water police were the Italian navy marine school next to the Giardini, because they had the impression that some of their gunships had been stolen.<sup>19</sup>*

## RADU MALFATTI (TROMBONIST)

Including silence in order to exclude stagnation, Radu Malfatti has been concerned with the problems of style in improvisation. He criticises those players with whom he started to play with in the '60s and '70s for sounding the same now as they did at that time. If this music is about constant renewal, reinvention and breaking new grounds, you should do it constantly, not just once. He is famous for giving ultra-silent performances which many people he has played with find too much to take or boring. What is it about silence in an improvised context



that up to a certain point is fine (and at the moment it suits the trend) but after a while people cannot cope with it?

Do they find themselves being cheated? (You can listen to silence at any time, I do not need to pay for that!).

The questions that this inclusion of silence raises for me are: virtuosity gets reduced as not everybody can be active, the audience is more exposed and by default more included within the performance, the same goes for the space and its acoustic qualities. Everything becomes fragile and exposed. One criticism that is levelled at this music is that it is dogmatic (almost exclusive). The work of Radu is the opposite of the work of Hiaz. Radu is concerned with his own interests, taste and history. Radu believes in the idea of constant self-renewal but this is different from the idea of self-invention that Prévost talks about. Radu is more interested in what is actually being produced rather than how it is produced (as Prévost or Hiaz would be). It is not a matter of making a product (as he would be one of the few consuming it) but rather, a question of, as musicians, putting oneself in a situation in which you feel something is happening but do not

know how to describe it. (I guess here Eddie would bring one stick and hit it; Radu would do nothing or breathe and wait). I shall try to explain what it is that affects me about Radu's playing. One aspect is that he is pushing the limits of minimalism (and here it's not a matter of discussing John Cage's 4''33'' as Radu comes from a different angle). He is still interested in playing, but also in extending the fragile moment of nothingness with what the context does. What happens in between is listened to and appreciated, actually very close to real time field recordings. For example, *Dach*, a CD documenting a performance by a trio in which Radu was involved: at the beginning it was raining and you can hear the raindrops more prominently than the playing. What you get is the context eating into, or actually taking over, the ego of the players. Democracy suddenly enters into the performance situation during Radu's 'silences' in the sense that everybody is at the same level of sound production (the performer/audience division disappears momentarily), but it is apparent that the audience do not want to deal with this (during the long silences that Radu performs one hears people squeaking

uneasily, stomachs, saliva, nervousness their discomfort). The only possibility is to leave the room, which obviously will become a statement. What fascinates me about Radu is his radicalism (as in the second definition that comes out the dictionary of the word processor I am using to write this text: 'far-reaching, searching or thorough-going'. Let me also give you the third definition: 'favouring or making economical, political, or social changes of a sweeping or extreme nature'). The fragile moment of encountering difference (and being involved in producing it with other musicians): this is improvisation. But obviously not everybody is trying to achieve the same differences (some are not even trying to achieve anything except filling their pockets and their big tanks of ego with the constant presentation of the one difference that they have achieved in their lives as musicians). Here is where Radu does not fit, since what he has achieved with his constant renewal is a very unmarketable music (I am actually going to record with him in a proper studio, which means money, and what if he does not play more in total that 5 minutes in the period of 3 hours?).

## CRITICISM BY

## EDDIE PRÉVOST

Criticising Radu's approach to improvisation, in *Wire* issue 231, May 2003, Eddie Prévost said: 'If Radu Malfatti is the Pope of the New Orthodoxy, Keith Rowe is Christ.' Prévost, as we mentioned before, has been making this kind of music for a long time. In fact he could be considered part of a particular way of dealing with improvisation (temporally expansive, as opposed to the fast playing of free jazz). In consolidating this way of playing, perhaps intentionally, he is putting himself at the top of the hierarchies of this way of playing (and defining improvisation – as the movement of which he has been a pioneer of). In his criticism of Radu Malfatti, he suggests that silence must come out of a catharsis, and that therefore there is no possibility of interaction with other musicians.

For me the problem is this: How can you put 'limiters' upon a music that calls itself free improvisation?

As we mentioned above, Eddie demands for an awareness of the socio-political implications of this music. But the way in which he is asking us to do this is by trying to bring common denominators to the perfor-

mance, rather than our most idiosyncratic elements.

There is a contradiction, then, when he criticises others for sampling his sounds.

He sees the music as hermetic. How can you see this music as hermetic when what it does is to appreciate the context it is made in? As Cage already proved, there is no silence, and as I mention above musicians in improvisation are able to appreciate and integrate aspects outside of the music production. I feel that in Eddie's response there is a certain fear that his approach might be overcome by a perhaps more concise, different mode of listening to and creating sounds. He criticises this music for being formal, but he comments on Keith Rowe's playing at the beginning of the article:

*Essentially what Keith (Rowe) does now is not that far away from what he did in 1966. What's changed? The world of music.*

And even if Keith Rowe's radical approach stays up to date, his way of interaction has not developed. How long can his Unorthodoxy and Radicalism last?

I think there is more hermeticism present in the gesture of trying to cover over the situation, not opening up or getting the most out

of the situation, rehearsing gestures for 40 years, than actually questioning the whole way the music is made (its cause and response) and its structures.

It is true that Radu Malfatti is the precursor of a way of playing which has inspired many musicians, but it is also true that he is the one that takes the situation the furthest. Other musicians in Vienna appreciate very much his work and his attitude towards risk, but they do not easily get into it (it might become boring if you listen to it 15 times).

Perhaps I have not listened to him that many times, but the impression that I have listening/not listening to him is that it makes me question: Why activity? It is not silence for its own sake, it is an understanding of the placement of the sounds and how they can produce tension and effect. Unfortunately I could not go, but Klaus Filip organised 'chess & music' at the Rihz in Vienna and apparently the concert featuring Taku Sugimoto (Japanese quiet guitarist) and Radu was an amazing disintegration between the sounds of the clocks and the pieces moving and their sounds' implementation. It seems to me that in Prévost's work there is certain fear to be

noticed or heard, my problem is this might become an end in which the music is contingent on this. Or more problematically, that this music challenges the notions of what Prévost has been writing about for so long. What is contemporary about Radu's approach is his attentiveness to what Eddie actually finds dull sound (which in doing so exposes his hierarchies of sounds developed through the years): attention to that which usually goes unperceived or thrown away. Radu brings another level of radicalism to this music which Eddie is not interested in. But we should not think that the amount of action and its volume level restrains its responsibility. It can very easily be the contrary; allowing more space to uncover that which is a gesture (by this I mean an already rehearsed one) or actually a fragile moment of praxis in which you throw yourselves and your past in order to get somewhere you have not been, somewhere where you have to respond differently to what you are accustomed to. I have been playing quite a lot with Eddie and I respect him for his music, thoughts and generosity but this does not let him off from my criticism. In his *Mute* magazine article

about sampling, Eddie criticises the idea of processing or taking his sounds from elsewhere. As if his sounds were the only ones put at the right place at the right moment, as if his sounds have characteristics only applicable to his hands and his long history. It's a long time now since the idea of the author has been dissolved into the text. His recreation of sounds might have been done with the idea of self-inventiveness. Nothing wrong in being creative but what is ridiculous these days is to try to preserve oneself and one's work from use and transformation by others. It is all right for Eddie to produce sounds that provoke thoughts and reactions and events, even better if he produces conversations about the sounds (how beautiful it was!), but what is not fine is to actually make music with them. The placement and the use of them for sure are going to be different to the ones that Eddie gives, it is here, then, that Eddie exposes his love of form and his fetish for his own sounds. His ego trip about the music: not everybody can do this music if you do not have your sounds; you are not allowed to borrow from Eddie's improvisational ethos. I am not really sure if Eddie has

heard about 'open source', but then he really is missing a way in which information can be treated. As he said, with technology things get more mediated and we have two choices here; we take the most out it, or we can react like John Zerzan: believe in primitivism (and if we live prior to language, all the better). But Eddie is not really making a decision that matches his original approach: full of self-invention. Which as Radu suggested actually should be self-inventions (and not be so profoundly frozen by the first one). Again another problem: his beautiful wine barrel, which he uses very interestingly, but there is an aspect of this which again shows his fear of attention to the context, the little motor which rotates a piece of plastic which hits the barrel. The motor might be wound by him but obviously its hitting is not done by him, is this as far as his understanding of the technological changes of time can go?

## NOTES

- 1 In fact the first AMM record, *AMMUSIC*, was released by the major label Elektra.
- 2 Plato, *The Republic* Book IV.
- 3 Cornelius Cardew, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*, London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1974. p.8.
- 4 A couple of years ago there was a memorial concert for Cardew (he was run over by a car in 1979) at the Conway Hall in Holborn. AMM played alongside the revolutionary popular song-writers. It was surprising to me that while AMM received from the audience an average response, the popular songs produced so much euphoria (here I perhaps should mention that I was probably the youngest person in the space and may people were close to half of a century old). For me the popular songs sounded so dated and stank of nostalgia while AMM somehow retained some contemporaneity.
- 5 Edwin Prévost, *No Sound Is Innocent*, Essex: Copula Press, 1995. p.103.
- 6 Alain Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, New York: Verso, 2000. p.23.
- 7 Edwin Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, p.115.
- 8 Derek Bailey, *Improvisation*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1993. p.111.
- 9 Edwin Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, p.9.
- 10 Howard Slater, 'Stammer Language', available: [www.metamute.org/en/stammer\\_language](http://www.metamute.org/en/stammer_language)
- 11 Bruce Russell, 'Free Noise Manifesto', available at: [www.corpushermeticum.com](http://www.corpushermeticum.com)

- 12 Moira Gatens, 'Through a Spinozist Lens: Ethology, Difference, Power' in Paul Patton (Ed.), *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997. p.166.
- 13 Giorgio Agamben, *Etat d'Exception*, Paris: Seuil, 2002. p.103.
- 14 Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988. p.119.
- 15 Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, London: Verso, 1998. p.96.
- 16 Giorgio Agamben, *Means without Ends*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. p.116.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p.115.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p.70.
- 19 Hiaz, in a talk 'see with your ears and listen with your eyes', as part of a sound workshop held at the center for contemporary art (cca) Kitakyushu (Japan). 29th July – August 3th 2002. Published in *Substantials*, Kitakyushu: CCA, 2003.

# THE MULTITUDE IS A HINDRANCE\*

## NOTE:

Originally published in Spanish with Bruce Russell's CD *Los Desastres de las Guerras* on w.m.o/r. Bruce recorded his guitar solos on the 13th of March 2004 in Christchurch, New Zealand. In Spain that same day there were very big demonstrations against the conservative party.

In late April 2004, Antonio Negri came to Madrid and spoke with a lot of enthusiasm about 13-M<sup>1</sup> as a 'Madrid Commune', a clear example of the concept of the 'multitude' in action, a set of singularities gathered at a crucial moment without having to comply with any acronym, party or specific identity. This situation shows how easily the multitude can be redirected for some particular purposes or interests (in the case of 13-M, as a political strategy strongly directed by the PRISA (Spanish Media conglomerate who own *El País*, and Cadena Ser Radio) who were countering the PP's information, and in doing this they directed votes towards the leadership of a particular political party, the PSOE. Yes, in these demonstrations there were lots of people and perhaps many ideas, but without sufficient imagination to make it capable of anything beyond conventional expressions. The ambivalence of the multitude, as dangerous as it is powerful, can lead us to moments of fierce resistance and also to the most reactionary conformism. By its nature, the multitude finds itself confronted by problems of the creation of constancy, this also goes against its way of being, because underpinning such a constancy would be the definition of an identity. As we said, the power

of the multitude can be easily recovered and used to serve certain interests: fitted into political strategies or into trendy theoretical concepts. By trying to give maximum visibility to its actions, the multitude can arrive at a loss of control over its own self-representation. But here we are playing the game of the mass media, where, again, the constancy loses any effect.

The multitude, being used by others to obtain an identity not desired by it; and here is where the problem lies, in the inability of this multitude to take responsibility for its acts, to take the reins of its actions.

The concept of the multitude is giving way to a more constant shape with characteristics with which many people today can identify, which is the condition of the precarious. If the ambivalence of the multitude was less defined and more fluid, the ambivalence of the precarious subject is her life's condition. In one moment of time we are working and in the next we are trying to break the production line. This only leads one to think in a schizophrenic way: knowing that however forcefully you are resisting today, you can't forget that one day, one month, or a year later you will return to work.

How can you express your uniqueness in the most singular way whilst being in communication with others? In the Appendix to the Spanish edition of the book *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Paolo Virno discusses how language has become the backbone of work, a tool of work itself:

*In the contemporary work processes there are constellations full of concepts that work by themselves as productive 'machines', without a mechanical body, not even a little electronic soul.*

*It is a mistake, to understand this mass intellectuality as a set of functions: Computer technician, researchers, employees of the cultural industry, etc... . By this expression we called them a quality and a distinctive sign of the full power of social work of the post-Fordist era, this means: The time when information and communication plays a role essential in every withdrawal of the production process; in a few words: The time in which language has been put to work, in which it has become wage labour – 'Freedom of language' today means nothing more nor less than the abolition of wage labour.*

So, how can we find the freedom of language?

Improvised music is a quest for this freedom, because it's practice constantly moves around a language that cannot be established, solidified or institutionalised.

The concerts' ephemeral nature, and at the same time the necessity of the presence of others (to play with and as an audience), can be put into relation with the activity of political 'actors'.

The performing arts, which do not lead to the creation of any finished work, have indeed a strong affinity with politics. Performing artists – dancers, play-actors, musicians, and the like – need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organised space for their 'work', and both depend upon others for the performance itself.<sup>2</sup>

This is why it is necessary to find new forms of language. In the case of improvised music, experimentation with your instrument and the situation that you are in, reaches areas where previously stipulated rules are broken, gives way to the seizure of your desires while at

the same time questioning how these desires are produced. It is important to open new fissures in the conventional ways of playing, finding new allies in this quest. In this way, improvised music is capable of opening different communication possibilities where the important thing is not to reach agreements or produce finished songs. Improvisation is not about communication in the sense that one is not trying to understand each other through the lowest common denominators, but rather it is about exploring expression in extreme and unique ways while realising the fragility and precariousness in our established modes of understanding each other. This means that, as opposed to the multitude, one cannot be subsumed under established structures of communication such as the 13th March example. The key is changing the material conditions of the situation, of the instruments that you are using, those marginalised and sterilised by manufacturers of instruments and musicians who do not focus their business on giving free rein to their desires but fulfil a function in the cultural assembly industry.

In improvisation, it is the desire to counter the normalisation process that moves the players, the desire to 'skip the rules' as Bruce Russell puts it. We have a dissatisfaction for what we have in front of us and we want to act with whatever means we have. These desires might have been instilled by knowledge structures, but in the process of going against the grain of the instrument and how it has been conceived, the situation and how it has been produced, and our position within it, established power structures can be left behind. New ones might emerge but our perceptions are

more acute more alert, and more sensitive so we might be able to deal with them quicker – without establishing spontaneity we can nevertheless accelerate towards a constant notion of ‘politics by the second’.

This would be a politics in which at every moment everything is at stake and we are without fear of collapse, nor concerned with the safeguarding of secrets or tricks.

## NOTES

\*‘La Multitudes son un estorbo’, this is the Spanish title of a song by Eskorbuto, a classic punk band from Santurce, a workers’ area of the suburbs of Bilbao.

1 Two days after the bomb attacks on the trains in Madrid (11 March 2004) many people went into the streets of Madrid to protest against the PP’s (Partido Popular, conservative party) media manipulation – declaring the Madrid attacks as being carried out by ETA rather than al-Qaeda. After a campaign against ETA which helped them win a lot of conservative support, the PP distracted public attention from the possibility that the bombs were direct retribution for going to war in Iraq. It was a very intense weekend as the national elections were held on the 14th of March.

2 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: eight exercises in political thought*, New York: Penguin, 1968.

# GOING FRAGILE

NOTE:

First published in the book, Ulrike Müller (Ed.), *Work the Room: a handbook of performance strategies*, Berlin: b\_books, 2006, as part of the CD, *Going Fragile*, by Mattin & Radu Malfatti published by Formed Records in San Francisco, 2006 and in the book, Anthony Iles & Mattin (Eds.), *Noise & Capitalism*, San Sebastián: Arteleku, 2009.

*Of course it is not easy to get out of your own material, and it can be painful, there is an insecurity aspect to it. This actually is probably the most experimental level. When do you think real innovation and experimentation are happening? Probably when people are insecure, probably when people are in a situation very new to them and when they are a bit uncertain and afraid. That is where people have to push themselves. People are innovative when they are outside of their warm shit, outside of the familiar and comfortable I don’t know exactly what I want, but I do know exactly what I do not want.* - Conversation with Radu Malfatti

Improvised music forces situations into play where musicians push each other into bringing different perspectives to their playing. Improvised music is not progressive in itself, but it invites constant experimentation. When players feel too secure about their approaches, the experimentation risks turning into Mannerism. What I would like to explore here are the moments in which players leave behind a safe zone and expose

themselves in the face of the internalised structures of judgement that govern our appreciation of music. These I would call fragile moments.

During the summer of 2003 I had the opportunity to spend time in Vienna researching the political connotations of improvised music. Not that I found a direct relationship, but through conversations, going to concerts and playing with other musicians, I became aware of some of the potentials and limitations that improvisation has in terms of political agency within the space of music production. For this text, I draw from the conversations I had with the trombonist Radu Malfatti as part of my research. While Malfatti’s roots are in the chaotic-sounding improvised free jazz of the 1970s, he is currently more focused on ultra quiet and sparse playing. His approach to performance runs against the stagnation that might occur in sustained improvisation. In his quest to avoid stagnation, Malfatti looks for those insecure situations that I mention above - situations that can call into question the dominant structures of music appreciation.

How could you anticipate what you might achieve if you do not know what you will find on the way? To be open, receptive and exposed to the dangers of making improvised music, means exposing yourself to unwanted situations that could break the foundations of your own security. As a player you will bring yourself into situations that ask for total demand. No vision of what could happen is able to bring light to that precise moment. Once you are out, there is no way back, you cannot regret what you have done. You must engage in questioning your security,



see it as a constriction. You are aware and scared, as if you were in a dark corridor. Now you are starting to realise that what you thought of as walls existed only in your imagination.

While your senses alert you to danger, you are also going to use them to deal with it. Keep going forward toward what you do not know, to what is questioning your knowledge and your use of it. Keep pushing yourself, knowing that the other players will be pushing you, replacing traces of comfort. This is an unreliable moment, to which no stable definition can be applied. It is subject to all the particularities brought to this moment. The more sensitive you are to them, the more you can work with (or against) them. You are breaking away from previous restrictions that you have become attached to, creating a unique social space, a space that cannot be transported elsewhere. Now you are building different forms of collaboration, scrapping previous modes of generating relations.

Something is happening here, but what is it? It is hard to say, but certainly there is intensity to it. These moments are almost impossible to articulate, they refuse pigeonholing, and evade easy representation. We are forced to question the material and social conditions that constitute the improvised moment - structures that usually validate improvisation as an established musical genre. Otherwise we risk fetishising 'the moment' and avoid its implications.

*When we talk about stagnation and progression there is just one instrument to help us explain what we mean, and this is time, history.* - Radu Malfatti

When Radu Malfatti talks about the breaks that some musicians have made from musical orthodoxy, he looks at the ways that they have dealt with these breaks. Some seek to consolidate or re-metabolise the fragile moments they have encountered, others simply return to the safety of their previous practices. Only very few manage to keep searching for fragility, it requires musicians to make multiple breaks from their own traditions. It's easier to develop coherence within one's practice: there is a fine line between being persistent in pursuing a particular line of research, and getting comfortable within one's methods.

*When something new happens, people do not like it. It's as simple as that. There is nothing I can do about it.* - Radu Malfatti

When something different and hard to place appears within the dichotomy of the new and the old of mainstream values, attention cannot easily be drawn to it. While nobody might recognise the importance of what you have done, you need to keep your confidence. It is difficult to be alone in working toward something and yet not know where it will take you, something which threatens to destroy your artistic trajectory, which you have worked so hard to build up. Of course when one uses music, not as a tool for achieving something else (recognition, status), but in a more aggressively creative way, it is going to produce alienation. But what do you want to do as an improvised musician? Work toward the lowest common denominator, making music which more people can relate to?

Improvised music has the potential to disrupt previous modes of musical production,

but it is up to the players to tear them apart in order to find a way in. Opening new fields of permissibility means to go fragile until we destroy the fears that hold us back.

We are not talking here about changing the labour conditions of a majority of people, but, having an awareness that culture, creativity and communication are becoming the tools of the 'factory without walls', we need to be suspicious of ways in which cultural practices can be exploited by capital. Because of this we must constantly question our motives, our *modus operandi* and its relation to the conditions that we are embedded in, to avoid recuperation by a system that is going to produce ideological walls for us. To be antagonistic to these conditions means danger and insecurity. To go through them will mean commitment and an element of what Benjamin described as the 'Destructive Character':

*The destructive character has the consciousness of historical man, whose deepest emotion is an insuperable mistrust of the course of things and a readiness at all times to recognize that everything can go wrong. Therefore the destructive character is reliability itself. The destructive character sees nothing permanent. But for this very reason he sees ways everywhere. Where others encounter walls or mountains, there, too, he sees a way. But because he sees a way everywhere, he has to clear things from it everywhere. Not always by brute force, sometimes by the most refined. No moment can know what the next will bring.* - Walter Benjamin, 'The Destructive Character', 1931.



# BECOMING BILBAO

## NOTE:

First published under the name Paulus Snyder, MEM codex 2002. Later the text was included in Spanish in the book I edited *Bilbao Acabado: cultural practices or gentrification*. Published by w.m.o/r in February 2005.

Becoming Bilbao is just what declining cities wish for. Today's Bilbao is held up as an example of miraculous regeneration. In the Basque country now, art institutions are growing like mushrooms (Vitoria Artium, Bilbao Guggenheim...). How is this regeneration influencing contemporary art from Bilbao? Before the regeneration, when my friends – foreigners to Bilbao – used to go to its old part, the strongest memory that they would bring back home, would be the smell of piss on the streets. Now that has changed and tourists enjoy the polish and cleanliness that one can find in other European cities. This is partly the result of the Ria 2000 project of urban regeneration in the city. Bilbao, a post-modern city, might well have been created by the government's desire to profit from the sense of renewal swept in with the new millennium.

*History is a process of decay and ruin – this is the quintessential perspective that emerges from Bilbao's fin-de-millennium. Were it not for the spectacular ruins of its metropolitan area of about a million people, Bilbao would be a typical European provincial city that exudes bourgeois life style. But it is the aesthetics of the 'tough city' that sets Bilbao apart.<sup>1</sup>*

In the 1980's in Bilbao there was not a consciousness of being a tough city; it just was. The city

was at the peak of its decadence. The industrial city had once driven the Basque economy; now people were struggling to keep their jobs. The city was marginal, people were emigrating and there was a strong counter culture (strikes, demonstrations, Punk rock, *gaztetxes*...).

This counter culture is now being recuperated by some of the city's young artists. This can lead to formerly subversive forms being stripped of their meaning. This is something that postmodernism has been characterised by, but we should be careful not to fall into naivety. These artists' works seem to fall into what Frederic Jameson critiques as postmodernism, what he calls pastiche: history and past events are flattened out and become an accumulation of emptied out stylisations that can easily be commodified and consumed without any struggle. The capitalist logic wins.

What happens if these forms are used in a systematic way, knowing already the tricks that contemporary art uses while recuperating Basque conflictual history?

How could you distinguish unique approaches from such familiar strategies?

Work that would once have been presented in alternative spaces such as *gaztetxes* (squatted cultural centres) now has the chance to be presented in one of the multiple institutions. For example Iñaki Garmendia has made a video called *Rock Radical Vasco* in which he shows some young people rehearsing in a punk rock bar, this can bring the idea of young people generating alternative, self-sufficient culture, but this is not the case when this video is seen (as I saw it) in a pre-selection stand for the Gure Artea Exhibition (the equivalent of a Young British Artist prize).

Leisure activities and so-called 'cultural industries' become most relevant in regenerating urban centres. The distinction between 'art', communication, 'culture', and 'entertainment' disappears.<sup>2</sup>

If we use the metaphor of the city as a text, we can see clearly how Bilbao is becoming another example of a post-industrial city that makes many references to postmodernism. Are these references formulated in a certain way or is there a different way in which Bilbao is *becoming* a post-industrial city, as opposed to, for example, Birmingham? As Richard Peet says when we read the city as a text we fall into an idealist interpretation that is detached from the physical reality of things. If Basque artists are taking references from the past in order to put them into their own narratives (here again we have to assess how unique their own narratives are), how can they be subversive? The material or language that they are using is in a way fictitious. What I mean is that the aesthetic aspect of the sign is never going to be able to be recharged with the same amount of agitation as it was for the first time. With historical hindsight we can see past events as naïve, but at least they were politically engaged; to reuse them now, stripped of their context, is a retreat from commitment.

Now, inevitably detached from the socio-cultural context in which these events took place, we are not able to go back to the roots of the city in order to apply an alternative practise in the light of its regeneration. And now that the Basque government is taking Bilbao in to the future by importing postmodern practices from other places, the artist is required to respond to this by bringing a foreign perspective in order to create new relationships or criteria.

The way the local part of their work is used is transposed to the perspective of contemporary art. As Jon Mikel Euba says to Peio Aguirre:

*The American system of production of images is imposing a landscape onto the world, I try to do the same with a context that I know well and that I think is not completely exploited in an iconic way.<sup>3</sup>*

Another aspect that Peio Aguirre draws upon is that the art that is practised now in the Basque country is not positioned on one side or another with regards to the problem of Basque sovereignty; it is supposedly not ideologically political, but from my point of view it is dogmatic in its use of deconstruction. The only uniqueness that we find here are the signs (or subjects) that are being played with and recontextualised. How can artistic practice become 'minor' if there is a certain paranoia about being read as political; and an equal anxiety about being closed-off to the debate within the Basque Country? It seems that even those artists that get close to the heat of the debate are still scared of getting burnt; always returning to postmodernism to cool them down when they get too hot. It seems that they want to evade the Basque cliché, but in doing so they become unable to directly address the subject, always moving on the periphery of meaning without dealing with physical realities or social possibilities. As Txomin Badiola puts it:

*If there is something that characterised these practices, it is their ambiguity. I would like to understand this aspect in its more radical and transformative [sense], taking away from what it could be [as an] act of hiding but the contrary: in [proposing this ambiguity as] the act of revelation.<sup>4</sup>*

What is this positive view of the Basque artists' practice trying to show us? That we know our position within the times in which we are living? That we are able to deal culturally at the level of western art discourse, and even add an exciting local factor in order to sell ourselves through our exoticism? But what does this change in local terms? Is this locality exposed just to be seen through global eyes? In transporting this local factor into the deterritorialized language of contemporary art we are forgetting the local; we are leaving it aside. As Deleuze says, in order to *become minor* you should refuse the major language (its imperative expression).

The art produced in the Basque country is neither refusing nor questioning the current trends in contemporary art practices, it is just making a subtle dialect out of it, which is not of practical or intellectual use in the everyday life of the Basques. There is skepticism about trying to draw critique into everyday debate, as it is always filtered through the art institution.

What happens here is that the counter-culture does not function at all levels, when it is always alternating between the underground and the institution in order to avoid sinking into normativity or anonymity. Could it be possible to produce what Deleuze defines as 'becoming'? These artists cannot become 'strangers in their own language' simply because they are trying to adapt to the predominant strategies of contemporary art. The minor elements of Basque social conflicts are used in their work and exported to a contemporary art audience hungry for material to feed the discourses around identity politics. However it is not themselves who are producing these

strategies; it is the establishment. The city planners and the gallery owners are happy to have a bit of this rough aesthetic to promote a city in conflict while remaining critically detached from these conflicts. This way, the government does not even need to translate the work for export. They show a need for Basque culture to be exported to Europe as characteristic of its origin without digging in the places where it hurts.

*It is a question of becoming that includes the maximum of difference as a difference of intensity, the crossing of a barrier, a rising or a falling, a bending or an erecting, an accent on the word.*<sup>5</sup>

In a way we can say that these contemporary Basque artistic practices are minor within the major language of contemporary art practice, but I think there is not an awareness of 'becoming minor'. Rather, there is the demand that exists for the juicy subjects of minority cultures and terrorism to be included in the institution.

Here we can reverse the question: could this artist do something else, produce artefacts whose origin cannot be traced?

What I am arguing here is that 'Basqueness' is inscribed without the possibility to escape totally from it – partly because its Basqueness is profitable, and partly because it is impossible to become completely detached from Basque identity.

So, how can this be judged from a political perspective? One of the most important things in becoming minor is to always be political.

In the Basque Country there is a strong movement of resistance in politics, actions, demos, talks... .

They are taking place all the time, usually just on the left.

This is something that you can easily get saturated in.

This might well be the reason why Basque artists don't throw themselves completely into 'becoming political', they are afraid of being read as part of the side that is always present in the Basque everyday life, of becoming vulgar.

We get caught between a rock and a hard place, which is not necessarily a difficult situation; but it is important to escape from the institutional landscape, otherwise you are being absorbed into the Basque government's export of contemporary Basque culture.

## NOTES

1 Joseba Zulaika 'Postindustrial Bilbao: The reinvention of a new city', in *Basque Cultural Studies Program Newsletter*, no 57 April 1998.

2 Joseba Zulaika, *Ibid.*

3 Peio Aguirre, 'Basque Report', available at [www.artszin.net/basque\\_report.html](http://www.artszin.net/basque_report.html)

4 Peio Aguirre, *ibid.*

5 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'What is a Minor Literature', in *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. p. 20.

# THE RE-ANIMATED CORPSE OF BASQUE CULTURE

## NOTE:

Originally published in *The Wire* issue 276, February 2007 as part of the Global Ear section.

*Ondamendia* ('catastrophe' in Basque) is a recent work by the multidisciplinary artist Oier Etxeberria questioning the general health of Basque culture. *Ondamendia* is a collection of parodies of Basque iconic images in the format of postcards accompanied by a 20 minute-long 3" CD of concrete music called *C14*. The name comes from carbon 14, a radioactive isotope of carbon that is used to measure the age of an object in archaeological research. The title is also an ironic reference to the ancestry of Basque culture (Euskara, the Basque language, is the oldest living language in Europe). *C14* combines fragments of typical Basque folk sounds made by *txistularis* (flute players), *bertsolaris* (poetry improvisers) and some classic songwriters from the Basque Country such as Mikel Laboa and Benito Lertxundi. These fragments are sometimes processed and mixed with other sounds more related to contemporary life such as advertisements and cash machines. Running alongside this is an underlying narrative of an autopsy performed on a body. 'It seems dead', you hear the doctors comment, 'but sometimes it seems to re-animate.'

According to Etxeberria, this pseudo-zombie is a metaphor for the actual status of Basque culture. In an informal conversation at the end of last year he commented: 'Because the Basque culture is such a minority, it really needs to rely strongly on itself. Unfortunately, this means that it often lacks criticism.' As many readers will be aware, the Basque Country has particular sociopolitical problems stemming from the impossibility of being able to decide whether or not to be a sovereign nation due to its geopolitical location across northern Spain and southwestern France.

These problems are often misused by the media to serve the agenda of different political parties which, to varying extents, emphasise cultural authenticity as the unalloyed voice of the people. Understandably, musicians in this part of the world are therefore reluctant to be over-simplified in such a way. At the governmental institutions run by the PNV (the Basque Nationalist Party, which has been in power for the last 25 years), the purity of the Basque folk tradition and its historical construction remains unquestioned. However, works such as *C14* bring new possibilities of dealing with one's own heritage. Humour, imagination and conceptual rigour make this work an interesting platform for discussion about the notion of Basqueness.

Last summer, a meeting called MRB | AMM was organised at Arteleku, a contemporary art centre in Donostia/San Sebastián, by Audiolab and myself where people involved with experimental music had the opportunity to spend three days talking about what we are doing and how it relates to such a specific context. Among many discussions, one about the problems of generating a scene stood out: how to avoid generalisations, simplifications and the dichotomy of who's in and who isn't. This is something that we really know in the Basque Country as we are often forced to define ourselves either as Basque or Spanish. Contrary to this, if there is something characteristic about the musicians now working in the Basque Country, it is their diversity.

The variety of approaches are broad: from Alex Mendizabal's constant questioning of what music is; and Arakis' personal questioning of gender (apart from making electronic music, s/he is an international renowned curator dealing with feminism and queer theory); to the industrial soundscapes of Tzesne and his young and very enthusiastic friend Oier Iruretagoiena (who, apart from being a musician runs the Webzine *Sotatik*, a radio programme and a Net label) is mind blowing. Other examples of the Basque multitude are Pilar Baizan, characterised by her double life as Miss Toll (Electroclash) and Baseline (old school power electronics); the classically-trained cellist Maite Arroitauregi; 'el palo' (the stick) player Iñigo Telletxea; Löty Negarti and his pranks and anti-virtuosism (he also runs Hamaika, the most refreshing noise and Improv label that I have encountered recently); the broken glamour of Baba Llaga, and the surprising re-birth of Cancer Moon singer Josetxo Anita as the beast of improvisation in Josetxo Grieta.

It is not by chance that so many musicians are emerging from the Basque Country right now. For several years a handful of committed people have worked hard to develop a fertile ground for experimentation. Xabier Erkizia of Audiolab is not only one of the most talented musicians that I have ever met, but also an activator, someone who is constantly injecting questions and developing projects where the participants have to take an active role. At Arteleku, he has developed Audiolab, a laboratory for the development of experimental music via workshops, talks, presentations and concerts. It is also a studio where people are welcome to explore the universe of sound. Another project that Erkizia is part of, together with Dimitris Kariofilis, is [UN]COMMON SOUNDS, a theoretical and practical research into the international experimental music community. Kariofilis has also recently released a CD of tracks by young Basque artists on his label Antifrost.

And then there is the Ertz collective. Founded by Erkizia in 2000, it has organised a festival in the small but beautiful town of Bera for the last seven years. Thanks to Ertz and the Musica Ex Machina (MEM) festival in Bilbao, people have been able to see performances by many of the most interesting current international artists. While Ertz is mainly concerned with sound art, MEM is trying to bring back the image of Bilbao as an industrial city in cultural terms and focusing on the rougher side of things as it presents international noise artists alongside emerging local talent. MEM has helped to invigorate the city's underground culture through organising noise concerts in different venues such as a sixth-floor metal workshop in the neighbourhood of San Francisco and at Bilborock, a church dedicated to the preaching of rock 'n' roll. Another interesting place is the Matadero of Azkoitia, a squatted ex-slaughter house that has been organising concerts for many years. This is also the territory of the legendary cult band Akauzazte, an obsessed, dense and obscure experimental rock band singing in Basque who, on a good day, can beat any other such act, even though they are not so well known outside the Basque Country. Furthermore, Akauzazte, Tzesne and the Ertz collective have just started a new DIY distributor and Net based shop called Arto Artian, where you will be able to find the works from many of these talented and challenging artists. So even if former Akauzazte member Oier Etxeberria thinks that Basque culture needs some serious revitalisation, it seems obvious to me that it is already getting some potent electric shocks in the form of experimental music.

*Ondamendia* and many works by the mentioned artists are available at [www.artoartian.org](http://www.artoartian.org)  
Further information: [www.ertza.net](http://www.ertza.net); [www.musicaexmachina.com](http://www.musicaexmachina.com)



# IMPROVISING GAZTETXES

By Mattin & Loty Negarti

## NOTE:

Distributed in the Summer of 2009 as a flyer for a series of interventions in Gaztetxes (squatted cultural centres in the Basque region). First written in Spanish.

In what way does improvisation need to learn from squatting to create and live in the most autonomous and free social environment?

How can being squatted by improvised music affect the organisation of gaztetxes?

What would happen if squatters began to play improvised music and improvising musicians began to take steps towards self-management?

How can we violate the roles and identities that are adopted and adhered to even in alternative scenes?

We invite you to produce unrepeatable and unique situations that collapse the idea of squatter/musician/audience as well as talking/meeting/concert from an experi-

mental point of view; situations that help us to develop new strategies.

There is no future (R.I.P.)\*

Squat the present (A.V.C.)\*\*

*In this constellation of occupied spaces in which, despite its limits, it is possible to experiment with forms of collective aggregation outside of control, we have known an increase of power. We have organised ourselves for elementary survival – skipping, theft, collective work, common meals, sharing of skills, of equipment, of loving inclinations – and we have found forms of political expression – concerts, leaflets, demos, direct actions, sabotage. Then, little by little, we have seen our surrounds turn into a milieu and from a milieu into a scene. We have seen the enactment of a moral code replace the working out of a strategy. We have seen norms solidify, reputations built, ideas begin to function, and everything become so predictable. The collective adventure has turned into a dull cohabitation. A hostile tolerance has grasped all the relations. We adapted. And in the end what was believed to be a counter-world amounted to nothing but a reflection of the prevailing world: the same games of personal valorisation as regards theft, fights, political correction, or radicalism – the same sordid liberalism in affective life, the same*

*scraps over territory and access, the same scission between everyday life and political activity, the same identity paranoia. In addition, for the luckiest, the luxury of fleeing periodically from their local poverty by introducing it somewhere else, where it is still exotic. We do not impute these weaknesses to the squat form. We neither deny nor desert it. We say that squatting will only make sense again for us provided that we clarify the basis of the sharing we enter into. In the squat like anywhere else, the collective creation of a strategy is the only alternative to falling back on an identity, either through integration into society or withdrawing into the ghetto. – L'Appel (Call)*

What kind of relationships can be established between squatting and improvised music? In squats there is a tendency to generate self-determination and self-management. When playing improvisation there is an intention of playing instruments in a strongly personal way, rejecting the obligation of its history and trying to establish a self-determined kind of music and a relationship between musicians. So it is possible to produce subjectivity beyond the logic of the market, getting subjectivity from the production of objectivity, that is, from the material conditions in which it happens (there is a concrete space with specific material problems; if a stage is used or not, fixing bathrooms, assembling a bar or a kitchen, etc...).

Improvisation and squatting share an attitude when it becomes the time to question conventional ways of inhabiting places or the relationship between instrument and/or places. In gaztetxes there used to be more freedom of behaviour in terms of sexuality, morality, political thought, etc. Squatting is the strengthening of present time in overdetermined places, an improvisation with our bodies in which the future is always uncertain and unstable and what joins us together is the responsibility of the moment, the here and now.

In Euskal Herria there is a very strong tradition of squatting and self-management with social aims – the gaztetxes. In the history of the gaztetxes movement there was always a strong connection with punk, a tradition that still exists today. Punk gave a strengthening, bravery and bad temper to these first kicks when squatters began to open spaces. Punk was much more than only music: it was a social scene that included different aspects like radio stations, pamphlets, music, literature, politics, etc. ... but the strength of music has been, and still is especially important.

Concerning gaztetxes, punk has been key to the focus of a lot of energy and creativity. People needed to look for places in which they could practice.

Many gaztetxes began being rehearsal rooms and many squatters were born from this necessity. Musicians became squatters.

To play punk it is necessary to compose songs and have a place to practice. The energy has been shown not only in the first manifestations of squatting, but also in concrete and everyday actions to maintain the possibility of making music. In gaztetxes, among other things, people organised themselves to follow through the planning of concerts with everything this implies from the social point of view.

But nowadays punk rock is on the way to death because of a constant reproduction of clichés and stereotypes caused by a progressive self-exhaustion exercise. There are 'manuals' about how to make good punk rock, implicit rules adopted after years of practice and social experience. The 'solidification of rules' was established with the practice out of which many spaces were born. How does this standardisation of music affect the rest of the activities in these spaces? Isn't it a new institution inside of the spaces that is doing almost everything in an 'extremely predictable' way?

Moreover, in improvisation the musical production and its presentation take place at the same time. There is no pre-made structure like 'a song' that mediates between the proper musicians or between musicians and audience in a foreseeable way. Because of this, it is

possible that anybody can join in with the improvisation at any time or leave it when he/she wants. Punk songs are strongly tied up with certain structures like riffs, chorus, intros, refrains, melodies, etc. The practice of improvisation is open to any element that can appear in the right situation where the improvisers are. This opening makes it possible, for example, to have a conversation while playing instruments. Improvisers interact and listen amongst themselves unlike, for example, a punk guitarist who only interacts with other musicians or even only with himself.

Although punk tries to break with the notions of virtuosity and 'good playing', in its 'rock' version, it is still necessary to have an instrument and play it. Improvisation tries to break with the features and conventional hierarchies of musical quality. But improvisation also has its conventions. There is still a division between a musician and the audience at concerts: usually musicians are respected for their musical abilities and talent. When an improvisation begins, it may not be known who is definitely inside and who is definitely outside the 'concert', and this converts the relationship between participants into something political and public. As Jean-Luc Guionnet says, every time we improvise we have a new opportunity of building a temporary small society and deciding which kind will be: anarchic, democratic, totalitarian, aristocratic, etc... it is in our hands. Improvisation as social experience begins with the

'collective making of a strategy' to transform the space as it is experienced by those present.

Nowadays there are a lot of people improvising in Euskal Herria and on many occasions improvised concerts are organised in gaztetxes. But seldom has the relationship been kept in mind between this musical practice, its connotations, impact or possibilities and these special kind of spaces. With this experiment we want to expand and explore what improvisation could become in relation to squatting. Experiment: we want to collapse formats of talking, conversation, meeting and concert to produce a social space that is as open as possible. Words, gestures, noise, silence... Questioning the usual barriers between squatters, musicians and audiences. We are not trying to define this experiment in a specific manner (everyday situation, performance or concert), we want to create a unique and unrepeatable situation for those people who are going to participate in it. We don't need to hide behind expectations. It's about trying to deal with the relationship with the environment from a different point of view, with neither roles nor established hierarchies (e.g. musicians are active agents and the audience is a passive being). We will talk, play and connect with ourselves in many ways, not to be one thing nor another, mostly in a way in which practice shows us its possibilities. With this experiment we want to understand better not only the gaztetxes actual situation

in Euskal Herria, but also to produce situations that help us to understand what squatting can be when connected to improvisation and vice versa. What kind of relationships can exist between these two practices and in which ways they can complement each other in a social and cultural experience as powerful as the gaztetxes' one.

Dates:

- August 24, Txorimalo Gaztetxea presentation, Algorta 7pm
- August 25, Udondoko Gaztetxea, Udondo Enparantza 18. Leioa 7pm
- August 27, Matadeixe, Azkoitia 7pm
- August 28, La kaxita, Irun 7pm

Everybody Welcome!

Sometimes gaztetxes have been contacted in advance and people know that we are coming. In other cases when we couldn't contact anyone we will simply appear with no announcement. We are still looking for more dates, if you can help, please call us.  
[Mattin [at] mattin.org / aiznad [at] gabone.info]

\*R.I.P. 80's punk band from Mondragon associated with RRV (Rock Radical Vasco)  
\*\*Asociación de Víctimas del Capitalismo (Association of Victims of Capitalism)

# GIVE IT ALL, ZERO FOR RULES!

## NOTE:

This article was originally published on metamute.org March, 2005.  
[www.metamute.org/en/Give-It-All-Zero-For-Rules](http://www.metamute.org/en/Give-It-All-Zero-For-Rules)

## WHY FREE SOFTWARE IN FREE MUSIC?

Arriving from the position of playing improvised music, I am interested in trying to question how a musician is supposed to interact with his instrument, in my case a computer. In other words, what I want to do is to play the instrument against the grain and to expose the way a computer constructs you as a user.

In order to do this I use various rudimentary tactics such as playing just the hard drive, bowing the case of the computer or using the plastic box as a resonance box. I direct my attention towards the things the computer demands from the user as much as the things it can do for you, the need for constant attention to the screen, the need to turn the machine on, etc. For me it is important not to make hierarchies between the sounds that the materiality of the computer would produce, over those which could be produced with software. Playing this way makes the computer an electroacoustic device in itself, interrupting the ideologies behind music software. Improvisation makes implicit a constant search of making sounds or reusing found sounds always with an emphasis on that very process in production. What you find, you have to give a use, and to use this to serve your own needs without having to change your own approach to music making. As we will see later on, much of music software does exactly the opposite, that is, allows the musician to produce easily a genre of music.

The machine that I was hitting was a G3 Powerbook, the same machine that musicians like Kaffe Mathews, Tujiko Noriko, Merzbow, Pita, Fennesz, Hiaz (farmersmanual), Zibigniew Karkowski and many more use, or have used, in the past. At a point in the late nineties it became the new icon of electronic music. Artiness, coolness, glitchiness and Mac were all in the same pack. As with rock music, it all seemed all to be a matter of style. The Mac, an icon signifying artistic production could become a substitution for the lack of performance that usually computer players offer. Now, there are emerging artists like Jason Forrest who are showing us the possibility of hyper performance in front of the computer. His performances do not produce anything new, but instead, import an image from another genre of music (i.e. disco and rock). The spectacle keeps making you produce cultural overdose. The more obviously you give, the more obviously you get recognition.

*I smashed a G4 laptop computer one time.* - Jason Forrest (aka Donna Summer)

The destruction of iconic musical hardware feeds into two processes of myth making, that of both the performer and the commodity-instrument. It is an intensification of the moment that diverts our attention from the performance of music production, a diversion elsewhere into the image of the intense rock-star giving you all possible clichés at once for just the price of a one-man-computer-band. In staging the brand does the performer want to demonstrate

the value of the computer? Does it really matter whether it was a PC or a Mac? Or is it just a case of: 'think different' pay the same?

Things are developing very fast in the world of free software, and what in the past would have been a PC running windows can now be a powerful sound tool running GNU/Linux. The development of software has been decisive in the way computer music has been developed. A classic question among computer musicians is, what software do you use? In some cases there would not be the need to ask, as the sounds would be easily identifiable with certain software, just the same as a guitar pedal or an amplifier. Although there were many computer musicians who would just press the space bar to play a sound file (and I have nothing against this), new software would bring the possibility of processing sound in real time, not just sound files but instruments, environment sounds, even errors (the already mentioned pastiched glitches). This now means that musicians using computers have more possibilities at their disposal to improvise in live performances. The computer musician finds herself not in the studio, but in a situation.

Much music software is still proprietary, made by companies whose primary concern is to increase their sales. Making the software appear as close to hardware as possible can momentarily distract the user from its virtual quality, making him pay for his weightless gear. Regardless of this commercial relationship, my key question here would be: how does this software condition the user?

*I used a lot of cracked commercial software for many years when working with sound and I always got a couple of feelings out of it. One feeling was that you get these fancy programs with these fancy user interfaces, but at the end the more they have created this environment that's very easy for you to use, the more they've actually determined the kind of work you can make with it. If you look at a program like Ableton Live which is used by probably about eighty percent of people making sound and performing out live these days, it seems like it's good for a very few things, it's good for working with loops, putting effects on these loops and sequencing them, but it pushes you in one creative direction, it pushes you into making a certain kind of music, really it pushes you towards German techno more than anything else.* - Derek Holzer

There is free software available that can do the job of very expensive proprietary software, like Ardour (a multichannel digital audio workstation), Jack (audio server), Jackrack (effects), Ladspa (plugins), Rezoond (graphical audio file editor), but for performing live, the most useful is likely to be PD (aka Pure Data), a 'real-time graphical programming environment for audio, video, and graphical processing'. PD gives you the freedom to construct your own instruments and give them any parameters you want. It can also do much more than that, but you would have to develop your programming and mathematical skills, as numbers are extremely important. If you want to get into the theory see Miller Puckette's *Theory and Techniques of Electronic Music*.

There have been a lot of interesting new situations developing from people using free software that question the whole idea of the presentation of a performance. During a tour in USA in 2003, Dion Workman and Julien Ottavi produced long performances in which they would arrive at the venue to soundcheck, start playing straight from the soundcheck during the arrival of the audience and continue for as long as the people from the venue would let them (sometimes



performances lasted six hours). They played using PD patches programmed with the possibility of doing random automatism. Julien Ottavi is part of the Apo 33 collective in Nantes. They organise many events and workshops that range from teaching Pure Data, to philosophy, political activism and art, but always with a relation to audio and its social connotations. CIA, an installation that I have seen by them consisted of many wires attached to computers running PD. The audience would go into the space, would hit any of these wires, and this would provoke a reaction in the computers from which they would start to generate lots of sounds and combinations of sounds. Thanks to complex mechanisms of automatism from PD patches the audience could improvise with the space but not in such a clear way as call and response.

Openmute organised a Pure Data workshop in London on the 13th and 14th of Dec. 2004. The workshop was run by Aymeric Mansoux and Derek Holzer. It was an introduction to how to use PD, along with externals such as GEM, PDP and PiDiP for a more visual orientation. It introduced briefly the many and various possibilities that PD offers. The audience was diverse, coming from the visual arts, as well as music production and the free software movement. One example of a group combining all three of these approaches is the recently formed London-based group OpenLab (see below). The poster advertising the PD workshop had an emphasis on VJing. This might have been the reason why it was difficult to focus in on the most interesting aspects of what PD offers from my point of view (sound production and live performance), but as an introduction this was helpful.

PD is a program which lets you do pretty much everything and it is up to you what direction to take. It is true that at the beginning it is an intimidating interface to work with, but this kind of introduction helps you to get a clear picture on how to start your first steps. In free software as in improvisation the restrictions are not as clearly defined as in other genres of music or proprietary software in which you are supposed to follow and obey certain histories, certain codes, certain legal rights. Free software activates you as a user as you are often confronted with an immense amount of possibilities. What I am wondering is whether the new opportunities that free software offers could represent in the music the same radical effect that they have on the user, and extend this through its presentation. Free software is helping to bring into question how the producer wishes to distribute their work. With the availability of licences from Creative-commons greater than that of frozen items in Western supermarkets, a question of conflict emerges: anti-copyright or pro-copyleft?

This text is anti-copyright

#### SOME GROUPS WORKING WITH PURE DATA

##### OpenLab

This project provides a meeting place for London based artists who use and develop open source software as their creative tool. As a result, the project will attempt to organize performances, events, meetings in London for the participants to share and exchange ideas.

Furthermore, the project will also promote and demonstrate the use of open source software through the performances/events. OpenLab currently is preparing its first performance event, which will take place on the 1st of April at the Foundry. Since the start of OpenLab at the end of 2004, many members have quickly become friends and meet regularly. OpenLab was also very happy to take part in the PureData Bigband event in Köln in February 2005. We hope to have many friends and all share our resources to make great things happen. [www.pawfal.org/openlab/](http://www.pawfal.org/openlab/)

##### Goto10

Goto10 was founded in 2003 by Aymeric Mansoux and Thomas Vriet in Poitiers, France. At this time the primary goal of this non-profit organization was to support and produce local live alternative electronic music events. It was a gamble to see if there was an audience for such events in Poitiers. It turned out that not only was there a large enough audience, they were asking for more. Thus goto10 quickly started to set up workshops and exhibitions and started looking for partners in some of the rare local institutions that try to support digital art and media hacktivism. Today the goto10 team is made up of people living in different places around Europe and is part of a network of similar young non profit organizations sharing the same vision about free software and arts. While the original structure is still based in France, and prepares at least one event each month, goto10 is now most of all a collective name under which highly skilled artists and hackers work together in numerous places in Europe. You may see them in workshops, performances, software credits or as producer of unusual events. The current projects of goto10 rank from linux live CD-ROMs to a series of connected performances. The new website (online in April) is meant to provide documentation on alternative free software and new-media-whatever cookbooks. Last but not least, in June goto10 will launch gosub, its free media weblabel. [www.goto10.org/](http://www.goto10.org/)

##### Umatic.nl

Umatic.nl is an arts group based in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Derek Holzer and Sara Kolster represent the Free Open Source Software area of this group by giving lectures, performances and workshops involving the use of FOSS tools for audiovisual synthesis. In their 'resonanCITY' performance, Holzer and Kolster employ Pure Data, PDP and GEM to manipulate field recordings, photographic or video images and found objects gathered in the various locations where they have travelled, creating an improvisational audiovisual journey. Both are also active in educating artists about the importance of free software, and in developing end-user audiovisual applications within the Pure Data environment.

[www.umatic.nl/info\\_derek.html](http://www.umatic.nl/info_derek.html)

[www.umatic.nl/info\\_sara.html](http://www.umatic.nl/info_sara.html)

Dion Workman: [www.sigmaeditions.com/sigma\\_dion\\_workman.html](http://www.sigmaeditions.com/sigma_dion_workman.html)

Julien Ottavi: [www.sigmaeditions.com/sigma\\_julien%20ottavi.html](http://www.sigmaeditions.com/sigma_julien%20ottavi.html)

Apo33: [www.apo33.org](http://www.apo33.org)

For a good explanation of PD and the use of free software in music and sound production:

\*Stay Free\* Martin Howse [www.yourmachines.org/stay\\_free.html](http://www.yourmachines.org/stay_free.html)

Pure Data Community Site

[www.pure-data.iem.at/](http://www.pure-data.iem.at/)

Miller Puckette's own page and Pure Data downloads

[www.crca.ucsd.edu/~msp/](http://www.crca.ucsd.edu/~msp/)



## ANTI-COPYRIGHT: TOWARDS A NAKED CULTURE

### NOTE:

March 2006. First published in Spanish in the magazine *SOLILOQUIO* (Basque Country).

These times we are living in, culture is one of the biggest tools of cognitive capitalism.<sup>1</sup>

Is there any possibility of generating a culture antagonistic to the capitalist means of production? A difficult question, since today capital's recovery of culture is surprisingly efficient. What can we do then to attack the basis that sustain today's culture? To do away with intellectual property? It could be a possibility, but how? Creative Commons (CC) aren't the answer.

A free culture, that is what Lawrence Lessig, father of CC, advocates; licenses for every taste and ideology. What is the price of this freedom? Among other things it is a logo, an ideological imprint that, even though apparently open, is still based on copyright, on law. CC are fashionable, a fashion as yet undefined and of which we don't know what direction it will take. The only thing that is clear is that we can see more and more CC logos. And in the context of culture this means free promotion. That's the very answer Lawrence Lessig gave to a musician who asked him why he should use CC. As a concept, I very much agree with Copyleft but it is not enough on culture's terms. Even though it takes advantage of the law strategically, in the end it has to deal with the bureaucratic aspects that juridical language requires. CC make the translations into juridical language for us, but something else is happening at the same time: an attention economy in which you don't have to pay for this

work, but for the attention, hits or logos that you can achieve (examples: Google and Firefox). CC: a new progressive-image-logo within the fucked-up world in which we are living.

Lessig equates CC with Free Software, adapting it to the field of intellectual property. But both the origins and the ends of Free Software and CC are very different. The strategic use of the law which the Free Software Foundation carried out with the GPL (a license that makes possible the development system of free software and the operating system GNU/Linux among other things) is sensible when used in practical and technological terms. But here we are talking about culture, artistic creation, noise making (my case) or whatever you want to call it. It's about using creativity to experiment and try to find new perspectives and alternatives to what this reality offers us. About breaking hierarchies and established power structures. About fucking categorisations and reductionist stances that treat our identity as bargaining chip in political and economic terms. I don't mean to say that Free Software programmers don't share this stance, but whilst Free Software programs have to work in the end, culture doesn't have to fulfil a specific function, it doesn't have to have an end.

What I want to discuss is the problematic whereby creative distribution must always pass through an accreditations and licenses funnel. Are we going to act as policemen and watch what other people do with our work and if they break this or that aspect of the license we are using? Or, what could be worse; let the CC do this policing for us.

Lessig answered the critique about how Creative Commons and the extended use of their copyleft licenses weren't generating a community, but a set of disconnected users. The lawyer said that Creative Commons is working on a new technology that will be put into practice in their popular digital licenses.



With this technology, according to Lessing, the sense of community will be better developed because authors will be able to track the use that others make of their contents and this system will bring about the contact and communication among them, although it would seem to us, at this point, rather than a communitarian tool, a tool for control.<sup>2</sup>

And what can we do if someone violates our rights? A clear example of how big corporations violate the intellectual property laws is what happened to Minor Threat, an emblematic band from the DIY movement. Nike plagiarised the cover of their classic first record (with a classic copyright), and Minor Threat could do nothing against one of the world's best law firms.

Let's remember that this juridical structure is the same one that keeps capitalism existing, reproducing comfortably and, at the same time, gives leeches like the SGAE so much power.<sup>3</sup> What if this happens to you? Maybe some CC activist can help you, especially if he sees that it's possible to win and get publicity. But, what happens if they can't help you? Either you'll have to pay a lawyer with the specific knowledge and experience with CC or, if you don't have money, you'll have to use a state-appointed lawyer that probably won't be informed in the latest issues regarding intellectual property. You'll probably lose.

What to do in terms of explanatory notes that get rid of copyright in a text or record?

A very good one is that which I found on a record from Atenas 1000+1 Tilt label [www.geocities.com/tiltrecordings/home.htm](http://www.geocities.com/tiltrecordings/home.htm)

*COPYING THIS CD BREAKS THE LAW, SO IF YOU DO IT YOU KILL TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE.*

I'm still using the classic Anti-Copyright. It's not that I want to make a fetish out of it and use it like it was another license or logo (like our beloved Xabier Erkizia said, it can become another fashion). Anti-Copyright, besides having

a long history (legendary anarchist publications and the Situationist International), has an attitude of disobedience and antagonism towards intellectual property. All this without entering into details of what it is or isn't possible to do with the material. Also, there's not a corporation (as is the case with CC), company, foundation, or NGO behind it. I think that each person is responsible to decide what s/he does with what is offered to him or her, and if somebody wants to try and make money out of my work, I wish him luck!

Walter Benjamin, in his important essay 'Critique of Violence', states that there are two kinds of violence: mythical violence (that founds and preserves the law) and another naked or divine violence (which neither founds nor preserves law, it simply destroys it). The second one is of revolutionary character because it cannot be assimilated nor used by established structures. This violence is pure 'mediality' in the sense that it's not external to itself and doesn't have an end outside of itself.

*If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood.<sup>4</sup>*

By putting our works in the law's hands we're strengthening the law and it's power at the same time. Relying on the fully hierarchical structures that support it, guaranteeing its continuity. What are laws doing but categorising our lives regarding bad or good behaviour, for the sake of a society that we haven't necessarily chosen?

*Lawmaking is powermaking, and, to that extent, an immediate manifestation of violence. Justice is the principle of all divine end making, power the principle of all mythical lawmaking.<sup>5</sup>*

## NOTES

1 "Cognitive Capitalism" wants to be the political and critical inversion of the sociological labels of "information society" and "society of knowledge". The centrality of knowledge as productive resource, as a strategic zone of any developmental policy, has set aside the conflictive and violent matrix by which knowledge is object of appropriation and plunder. Patents over free software and over life, the reinforcement of the copyright legislation and the ceaseless prosecution of the so called "intellectual piracy", are just the surface marks of a conflict that will accompany us for the next decades. A conflict over the right (and the necessity) for ideas and knowledge to be the admitted product of collective creation, and not the a private object, subject to restriction and exclusive of a handful of corporations and states that operate without political control from populations.' Quotation from *Capitalismo Cognitivo: propiedad intelectual y creación colectiva*. Madrid: Traficantes de sueños, 2004.

2 Platoniq, 'Copyfight or Copyleft? Liberate or lead culture?', *Zehar* #57.

Available: [www.platoniq.net/press/Copyleft.html](http://www.platoniq.net/press/Copyleft.html) (Translation modified).

3 SGAE (Sociedad General de Autores y Editores) is the main collecting society for songwriters, composers and music publishers in Spain.

4 Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', *Selected Writings Vol. 1*, Boston: Belknap/Harvard 1999, p. 297.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 295.

# ANTI-COPYRIGHT: WHY IMPROVISATION AND NOISE RUN AGAINST THE IDEA OF INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

## NOTE:

Previously published in the book *Noise & Capitalism*. Written October 2008.

*Property is theft*  
– Proudhon

*Intellectual property is shit*  
– Billy Bao

No other type of music-making contradicts itself through its recording like improvisation does.

In this essay I intend to explain certain aspects inherent within the practice of improvisation and noise that counter the idea of intellectual property practically and conceptually. While many musicians would probably argue in favour of getting rid of any notion of authorship, and sharing their recordings, there is often a lack of discussion about this aspect of musical practice. Almost all the people that I know are downloading music, but people rarely talk of the consequences. Some people tell me it is very utopian or naïve to think that one can get rid of copyright and intellectual property, but to a certain extent it is already happening in practice. Most of the music that is heard in the world is likely to be from downloads using different peer to peer (P2P) networks such as Soulseek, Amule or Bittorrent, or one-click hosting pay websites such as Rapidshare. Because of its rigid and bureaucratic structure, the law is always left behind by the questions posed by new technologies.

But, apparently, it is only a matter of time before the law catches up. Right now repressive measures aided by technologies of surveillance and control are already being developed without our consent by the most powerful governments under the pressure of corporations (ACTA being a good example).<sup>1</sup> Should we allow them to do this or

should we start to develop our own platforms outside of the ideological framework that lets them behave this way? I will argue that the practice of improvisation in itself questions the foundations upon which intellectual property is based, such as: authorship, rights, restrictions, property, and the division between production and consumption. Improvisation and noise distribution, with their hardcore do it yourself (DIY) aesthetics, indicate alternatives to the mainstream means of production and distribution of music. Both practices are intertwined and share many things in common, but I am taking their obvious characteristics as a way of showing that within these types of music-making, there is already an existing critical attitude towards copyright that should be deepened and developed consciously.

## RECORDING THE MOMENT

In improvisation one always tries to understand and play with the specific characteristics of the situation. The relationship between the instrument, the other players, the space and audience (if there is one) becomes intensified through a mutual understanding that everything is at stake at every moment. Power structures can be changed at any point because the future of this practice is unwritten. The social relations being produced are questioned as the music develops. If successful, improvisation runs against its own dogmatism. This is done through developing agency and responsibility towards the present among the people involved by questioning established norms of behaviour. In this sense we could say that improvisation is the ultimate site-specific form of performance. There is no outside to improvisation, no end, it is akin to what Walter Benjamin calls 'pure mediativity' or 'pure violence' which is human action that neither founds nor conserves the law. 'Pure means' as revolutionary violence. How can we translate this kind of activity into the making of a record, an object? How can a performance that is so specific then be put forward into something that could be heard, read or seen at any time by anybody in the future? How can this activity in time be brought to an end? Made into something that can be consumed again and again?

*The relations between musicians are directly dialogical: i.e. Their music is not mediated through any external mechanism e.g. A score.*<sup>2</sup>

Often in improvisation one finds an attitude towards recording as one of merely documenting the creative process at a specific moment (as for example is often the case with the record label Emanem). Placing a stereo microphone in the room, the players play, the sounds get recorded and then released, with as little intervention in the process as possible. I find this approach problematic. It is a fallacy that one can capture the moment through audio recording – that the recording can really represent that 'creative process'. We all know that the moment is gone forever, that the recording can never reproduce all the specifics of the situation, the room, the feeling of the players, their history and backgrounds, the conditions, reasons and interests for producing such a recording. Peggy Phelan, an important feminist scholar in the field of performance studies, has discussed the problematics of documenting performance through writing. In the last chapter of her book *Unmarked: the politics of performance*, she says:

*Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation or representations of representations: Once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance is enters the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance.*<sup>3</sup>

Phelan argues that writing about performance should be performative. By writing about performance one is transforming the work discursively giving a new perspective which breaks with its previous one. It is important to understand that you can never capture a moment, and therefore must never attempt to make a universal truth that represents the moment. It's only through understanding this disappearance that one can bring to life different qualities that might feel similar but nonetheless raise new perspectives. One should have an active and creative attitude towards documentation; understanding documen-

tation not as merely subordinate to the action of improvisation but instead as a collaborator, applying the same kind of exploratory approach that ones uses in improvisation to all the processes of production (recording, distributing, different ways of networking...). Never taking anything for granted, we should question the laws that try to define notions of authorship, freedoms and the values of what we produce. One brings his or her subjectivity into the material, recreating it and redefining it for one's needs. The division between making and listening to music would disappear if the notion of authorship was not there. But because the author must protect her cultural production, a need arises to make clear cut boundaries between production and consumption. If improvisation is an exploration of freedom and the limitations of that freedom then it should always problematise clear cut notions of producer and consumer, of making and consuming. This would be a situation in which the notion of authorship is constantly put into question as it is these 'authors' who categorise our freedom. The framework of improvisation is wider than just the moment in which the musicians are playing with each other. As the specific conditions of where they are playing such as the room, the type of audience and their expectations, and the way they make money, all effect the amount of time that they practice, obviously all this and more affects their playing. Therefore if we change the conditions of our production we would also change the way we play.

*Warning – Copyright subsists in all Matchless Recordings. All rights of the producer and the owner of the recorded work reserved. Unauthorised copying, public performance, broadcasting, hiring or rental of this recording prohibited. In the UK apply for public performance licences to: PPL, 1 Upper James Street, London W1R 3HG.*<sup>4</sup>

Matchless recordings is the label of Eddie Prévost, member of the radical and innovative improvisation group AMM which started in 1965. All the records of AMM released on Matchless recordings have this or a similar copyright warning. There is a huge contradiction in finding this copyright note on an improvised record, a music that questions so I asked Eddie about his use of copyright, he told me that it was because

of practical reasons. PRS/MCPS Alliance (the home of the world's best song-writers, composers and music publishers!) has a deal with the BBC, so the BBC will always pay a certain amount for copyright.<sup>5</sup> If the BBC would play some uncopyrighted AMM recordings on the radio, then it would be allocated to an unattributable copyright section which will then be shared by percentage with the members of PRS/MCPS. So, the already rich, 'best songwriters and composers', would basically get richer. While this is an understandable and strategic use of copyright from Eddie's side, there is no doubt that this use also implies the same conservative attitude inherent in copyright which the music itself supersedes. By being part of the copyright system, one reinforces the whole structure that underpins the star/celebrity system.<sup>6</sup> How can it be possible for recordings in the so-called 'free' improvisation genre to restrict the possibilities of what you can do with this material? What are the limitations of that word 'free' for the person who is listening to the record? You are free to pay for the record, you are free to listen to it, to enjoy it, but not to be creative with it, to use it to, give it to your friends, to make music out of it, to download it, to copy it, to make money out of something for which you had to pay? I perceive the sounds on records as an extension of the sounds that you put into space, in the concert. The improvisation among the musicians does not happen at that precise place or moment where the record is played, but people can apprehend it as material for thinking or working with. The music is not a pure representation of the individual playing of which the only possessor is the musician. Think of the people that you are playing with, of all your influences and all the comments made by friends. By thinking the situation through in this way we can open up the framework of an improvised concert in both time and space.

## NOISE DISTRIBUTION

While in improvisation there is a sense of craft within one's own instrument and in being able to interact with other musicians, in noise this disappears to the extent of anti-virtuosity becoming a virtue. A nihilist approach to improvisation in which the interaction

is not based upon developing common denominators for some communication to happen among the players, but rather a matter of developing the freedom of individual expression. In this sense I find the noise scene even less academic than the improvisation scene. The noise scene is founded upon people organising concerts in all kinds of places, releasing music in any kind of medium and finding, along the way, different means of distribution. This allows for many collaborations to occur. In this scene the DIY ethos is part of its survival. If nobody gives a fuck, at least you do. People have been self-organising themselves by organising concerts wherever possible and more. This self-organisation, which constantly makes people change roles; from player to organiser, from critic, to distributor, helps people understand each others roles. An example of this is Daniel Lāwenbrück, who for the last 15 years has run the label and mail order outfit Tochnit Aleph. He has just opened the record shop Rumpsty Pumsti (Kreuzberg, Berlin), he performs under the name Raionbashi and he has organised concerts for some of the most radical artists in Berlin. Both in the improvised and noise scene the question of authorship is completely interrelated to that of the producer.

## MEANS OF PRODUCTION

*The best political tendency is wrong if it does not demonstrate the attitude with which it is to be followed.*<sup>7</sup>

Walter Benjamin, in his 1934 text 'The Author as Producer', discusses how the political tendency of the work of art, cannot be justified solely by being just 'politically correct'. Instead, its politics should be demonstrated in its relationship to technique and of equal importance is the matter of how the writer positions himself/herself within the means of production. While the practices of improvisation and noise are often very progressive regarding their content, technique and relationship to the means of production – generating alternative, self-organised, and open structures for music making, presentation and distribution – these days there is little discussion of their politics. People might want to distance themselves from the political discussions characteristic of the '60s

and '70s, in which the politics might be seen today as oppressive and all too clear cut, propagandistic and carrying an overly defined message. What are the elements that constitute the means of production in the specific case of CDs? Authorship, market, distribution... I remember having a conversation about copyright with the experimental electronic musician Dimitris Kariofilis (artist name Ilios, who also runs the label Antifrost focussing on experimental electronic works). Dion Workman and myself released a duo CD on his label in 2004, and we attached an Anti-Copyright statement. When asking me about the reasons behind the copyright note, Dimitris suggested that by not putting any note he himself was more radical than we were, because not even caring about it at all was more of a 'Fuck Off' to the system. But if you do not care, somebody is going to care for you especially if there is some profit involved. By default, thanks to the Berne Convention, whatever you do is copyright, so you will still be under the legal framework.<sup>8</sup> By including an Anti-Copyright statement as part of the release we were purposely not adopting the language of the law (as the Creative Commons licences do) but making obvious the fact that one is, in practice, totally free to use the recording in any way one wants to. This rhetorical gesture – which makes it obvious that we do not support the ideology behind copyright – has a long history, from the Situationist International to Woody Guthrie and many punk and anarchist publications. Taking control over what you have to hand, we and other people are free to do whatever one might imagine with this material.

*An author who has carefully thought about the conditions of production today [...] will never be concerned with the products alone, but always, at the same time, with the means of production. In other words, his products must possess an organising function besides and before their character as finished works.*<sup>9</sup>

More and more we have the possibility to do our distribution without the need of big record companies. A good (or bad example) of this could be MySpace. One can produce a song and upload it to the internet straight away, without the need of a label, then send the information about it to

a great number of people. There is no doubt that the original idea is good and it helps to create many new connections and contacts. But at what cost? First giving publicity to the company itself. Many contemporary artists use the MySpace website as their prime website, even before your name there is already a brand with a very clear ideology behind it. Whatever progressive music you make you will have tattooed upon your forehead the name of a company which has very close alliances with conservative ideology (Rupert Murdoch the owner of MySpace and News Corp., which also contains Fox, and through all his media empire supported the 2003 war in Iraq). In terms of use, at least partly due to the interface of the website, there is rarely anything more than simple self-promotion and a great lack of discussion. The MySpace system also uses proprietary software (as opposed to free software, I will explain later on). MySpace websites are often very heavy for the computer, and they usually use very poor compression of the audio tracks they host. It has some similarities with a big record label but with the difference that the big company is in the end without any need to bother listening to see whether what you are doing is good or bad, it just takes advantage of your need for promotion: your creativity is their publicity with the added possibility of being exposed to their censorship:

*MySpace.com reserves the right, in its sole discretion, to reject, refuse to post or remove any posting (including private messages) by you, or to restrict, suspend, or terminate your access to all or any part of the MySpace Services at any time, for any or no reason, with or without prior notice, and without liability.*

This statement makes very clear the amount of control that you have in using MySpace. You might own the rights of the music that you put on Myspace (this was not the case until 2006), but you do not have any control over the future of the infrastructure that you are promoting yourself on. The statement makes a clear differentiation and division, at the end of the day, the future of your music distribution might be decided by a corporation which behaves according to their interests and not yours.



You surrender control over your future and the future of your music.

*What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able, first, to induce other producers to produce, and, second, to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better, the more consumers it is able to turn into producers – that is, readers or spectators into collaborators.<sup>10</sup>*

Breaking clear cut divisions between producers and consumers, in order not to reproduce the hierarchical structures that puts limitations on our creativity. The underground noise tape circuit in the 1980s is a good example of how people were sharing their music. You would send some tapes to some of the people interested in the same music in other parts of the world, and people would rework the material, and it would be considered more of an honour than a matter to get angry about. What could be a more creative attitude towards somebody's work than making a work out of it? MySpace does not encourage this type of activity, because the latter's collaborative character disturbs the foundations of their ideology which is aligned with simple proprietorship and exploitation.

## AUTHORSHIP

How has the idea of authorship developed through history?

*The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the 'human person'. It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author.<sup>11</sup>*

It is very important to understand that the idea of the author was not always there – think of stories, folk tales, epics and tragedies that were passing through people without the need of pointing out a person responsible as the originator. The idea of authorship has been constructed throughout history, depending among

other things, on philosophical discussions such as the freedom of the individual and the development of new technologies. The invention of the printer was crucial for the developing the idea of the author. Once people could reproduce books, leaflets, images and were able to distribute these in very different places, the connection with the printed commodity's locality was lost. It is at this point that the notion of the author as some sort of genius, who had some transcendental qualities that went beyond the reproducible object that you had in your hands and gave value beyond the reproducibility of the book at hand. This conferred a special value upon the individual as creator, even if culture has been always about reappropriating somebody else ideas and using them in different and playful ways.

In the 1960s with the arrival of post-structuralism, thinkers like Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault began to criticise the notion of the author and its authoritative power. For Foucault, the idea of the author developed as a way of controlling the press through censorship and it was a way of finding out who did what in order to then punish them. As one cannot punish ideas or texts, the (often nominal) author became responsible for his/her ideas and text, by which in this process they became his/her property. By establishing legal structures like Copyright, the classification of transgressive work and its authors was made easier, the works themselves became part of the canon of our culture. Through its institutionalisation the transgression was no longer in need of being prohibited but instead became accepted.

*But it was at the moment when a system of ownership and strict copyright rules were established (toward the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century) that the transgressive properties always intrinsic to the act of writing became the forceful imperative of literature. It is as if the author, at the moment he was accepted into the social order of property which governs our culture, was compensating for his new status by reviving the older bipolar field of discourse in a systematic practice of transgression and by restoring the danger of writing which, on another side, had been conferred the benefits of property.<sup>12</sup>*

Could we see this as an act of progress or of recuperation? The law is always behind with peoples' activities, and what once might have been seen dangerous for society later on becomes perceived as an enrichment of the general culture. The transgressive character of a work gets assigned to an 'author' then classified, categorised and marketed.

*Writing is not the vehicle for the author's expression of his/her emotions or ideas, since writing isn't meant to communicate from author to reader, but rather writing is the circulation of language itself, regardless of the individual existence of author or reader: 'it is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears.'<sup>13</sup>*

Opening up new ideas and works, is the issue here, not self-promotion and egoistic acceptance by a passive audience. Once you put work out there, it is no longer yours, it should be considered to be in the public domain and people should do with it whatever their imagination drives them to. And that is not some bullshit piracy discourse, this is the way people have behaved throughout history. Once written, the author stops having control over the text. The text has its own discourse and power and we should not limit it to an authoritarian voice. *Language itself has its own potential and to make it solely the property of the author might dilute its power. While many people have argued that responsibility is a very important question with regard to what somebody does, and how he or she must have responsibility to that which what she or he says, that responsibility should be extended to the distribution of what they do.*

## INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

In order to trace the notion of intellectual property historically we have to look at the idea of property propagated by the English philosopher John Locke, a key contributor to liberal theory (a defender of individual freedom, his ideas became very important for the American Constitution). Locke can be identified as the creator or main theorist of the idea of property. He suggests that an individual, by the application of his/her labour, produces private property for their exclusive use. As Sabine Nuss puts it, 'he who plucks the apple shall keep it'. Locke's

premise was that everybody has property in himself or herself, that everything in the state of nature is still held in common and was given by god in order to be made into property. If you add your own labour to something that is in the commons then you make it your property, since otherwise if it remains in the commons it will be neglected, it will be left to rot. Marx criticised Locke's notion that one could have exclusive control over the goods originated through his/her labour as part of bourgeois ideology. Marx maintains that the social relations of production are what produces the goods. It seems that Locke had in mind rival goods when he developed his theory (if one consumes it, others can't). What happens to non-rival goods like ideas? George Bernard Shaw famously said that if you and I have an apple and we exchange apples, you would only have one apple but if you and I have an idea and we exchanged them, we will each have two ideas. So, how is it possible to treat ideas as if they were apples i.e. to make them into commodities? It is only through copyright that it is possible to produce scarcity out of ideas and this of course can produce serious benefits for some but not all:

*The core copyright industries are serious business: the top three exports of the US for instance are movies music and software. In 2001 the value of the Copyright industries stood at \$535 billion and exports form the same accounted for \$88-97 billion, while that of chemicals were \$74.6 and automobiles were \$56.52. It is only within this context of the global political economy of the media industry that we can even begin to understand the ramifications of licensing in copyright law.<sup>14</sup>*

## ALTERNATIVES

Again technology is posing interesting questions regarding intellectual property. Today with the help of the internet, audio-visual material can be reproduced at no cost except for that of a internet connection and hard drive space. There are licences that try to adapt copyright or at least play with it in order to make legal the new possibilities for reproduction. Many of these licences come out of the Copyleft movement. The concept of Copyleft comes from a play of words of Richard Stallman as a way of opening

up the notion of Free Software and his GPL licence (General Public Licence) to a broader cultural spectrum. Richard Stallman started the Free Software Movement and created the GPL licence as a way of countering proprietary software. While proprietary softwares were about restricting your use, the GPL licences gives you four freedoms:

0--Users should be allowed to run the software for any purpose.

1--Users should be able to closely examine and study the software and should be able to freely modify and improve it to fill their needs better.

2--Users should be able to give copies of the software to other people to whom the software will be useful.

3--Users should be able to improve the software and freely distribute their improvements to the broader public so that they, as a whole, benefit.

In the GPL licence you always need to reproduce the GPL, so one cannot close the code. Thanks to this licence Linux, was developed. Many people tend to confuse 'Free Software' with 'Open Source' but they each contain different ideological positions. Open source was a term developed by Bruce Perens and Eric Raymond at a Netscape navigator conference in 1998 as a strategic term to appear more attractive to the market – the word Free, unless as in 'free market', is not such a cool thing for the development of capitalism. The word free contains two meanings: 'free as in speech' and 'free as in beer'. Richard Stallman only refers free software to 'free as in speech'. So a politically correct term to gather the whole movement has become FLOSS (Free, Libre, Open, Source, Software-Libre in Spanish meaning only 'free as in speech'). One of the main alternative licence systems to follow the Copyleft movement, developed by the lawyer Lawrence Lessig, are the Creative Commons licences (CC). These licences give you the opportunity to decide what kind of licence you want to apply to your work. The diversity of CC licences is very wide, from the very restrictive (close to copyright) to the public domain (not owned or controlled by anybody, public property for anybody to use). While Copyleft functions more like a concept, backed by a whole movement, CC are trying to take advantage of that movement in order to get users to use their licences. Lawrence Liang founder of

the Alternative Law Forum in Bangalore suggests that the CC are the gentrification of copyright, making it look nice and trendy but operating according to the same principals (in fact Lawrence Lessig is a great defender of Copyright, and also of the free market, so the notion of freedom gets a bit confused here). As with gentrification what the CC has done is to appropriate a movement that was posing interesting and cutting edge questions reforming its content until no rough elements remain. Looking back it seems rather like a trend where many people got interested and put so many CC logos on their work and media output, but now one questions the ideology behind those logos. This might be one of the reasons why the discussion around Copyleft has decreased (three years ago in Spain and Italy it briefly became very popular to have alternative symposiums about copyleft and this brief moment even produced certain celebrities).

As copyleft does not allow the extraction of rent for the right to copy, and what owners of property want is not something that will challenge the property regime, but rather to create more categories and subcategories so that practices like filesharing and remixing can exist with the property regime. In other words, copyjustright. A more flexible version of copyright that can adapt to modern uses but still ultimately embody and protect the logic of control. The most prominent example of this is the so-called Creative Commons and its myriad of 'just right' licenses. 'Some rights reserved', the motto of the site says it all.<sup>15</sup>

Dmytri Kleiner, in his text 'Copyfarleft and Copyjustright', suggests a new method for distribution which would help artists to make a living from their work. His argument is based on making a distinction between those who own the means of production, make profit out of the use and distribution of the material and on the other hand those who are not making any profit out of the use and distribution of their own material. Those who make profit should pay for using this material. The rest should be able to use it for free. To defend his argument he cites David Ricardo's 'The Iron Law of Wages', which states that the workers can only earn from their wages enough money to survive and reproduce themselves 'to perpetuate their race'.

Just enough to live but not enough to acquire the means of production. As we have seen before, in the improvised and noise scene, people create means of production within minimum possibilities. Exceeding the just subsistence, making a living in any way we can – creative survival.

*The purpose of property is to ensure a propertyless class exists to produce the wealth enjoyed by a propertied class. Property is no friend of labour. This is not to say that individual workers cannot become property owners, but rather that to do so means to escape their class. Individual success stories do not change the general case. As Gerald Cohen quipped, 'I want to rise with my class, not above my class!'*<sup>16</sup>

Do people in experimental scenes these days identify themselves within this class division? With precarious jobs in different kinds of conditions one constantly has to negotiate one's relationship to capitalism and having enough time to express oneself. This does not mean that class division has disappeared by any means, but I would think that most of the musicians are in situations where the class division is blurry and problematic, probably earning money somewhere else and then making their music in their free time. People might also be dubious about class identification, as previous generations have suffered from clear cut and crude class categorisation (again see Eddie Prévost text in this volume). A question arises? Should we see what we do as work? I would suggest that the making of improvised music has more to do with situationist notions of play (ludic desire and instability) than work (more fixed in its productivity). In conversations with Keith Rowe (ex-AMM) and Philip Best (ex-Whitehouse, Consumer Electronics), two of the most innovative bands to come out of England, they agree that one should not make a living out of making this kind of music because the music is compromised. Another question would be how they and other musicians earn their living. Kleiner's argument does not work for the kind of music that we are talking about it. This music has only very small repercussions in the mainstream media and few companies or corporations are making any profit out of it. And even if they do, would it be better to be protected by a legal system

or some bureaucratic organisation that divides people according to class relation?

How would this division take place? Would this not mean to fix people according to their own situation which in many cases might already be precarious? The distribution of this kind of music is not based in getting profit out it. Whilst there might be few people making some money out it, I would say that most of the musicians, labels and concert organisers interest behind what they do is to get the work across in small, self-organised and informal networks. Two important aspects that can characterise the practice of noise and improvisation are its anti-academicism and its DIY aesthetics (if you do not care about what you do nobody else will). Improvisation and noise usually try to question the parameters in which one can act, using instruments in unconventional ways, finding venues for playing in strange and difficult spaces adapting to these particularities and finding different methods of distribution. We could say that this is an enclosed way of working, without much relevance outside its context. One could criticise its lack of mobilisation towards something bigger, but on the other hand it creates exactly the kind of network that Kleiner's critique does not apply to, it is just too small. Improvisation and noise are informal in their operation, they are practices that adapt, play against or at least take into account the specific conditions of their own production. The question remains, how to earn a living doing what one wants to do? This problem actually opens up many questions, such as why this music does not produce enough value for me to make a living? Should it? But we should be careful not to fall into a similar situation to the one that produces Prévost's argument for using copyright, namely a pragmatic attitude towards an economic and legal system which could easily compromise questions posed by music production itself. This would cut the potential effect of the discursive radicality of the music, which would mean to see this type of music-making in formal terms rather than as a progressive and experimental mode of production that could be extended to different areas (distribution, recording, social relations...). Please do not get me wrong, I do not want to appear as a liberal communist. Even if Olivier Malnuit's first of the 10 command-



ments for liberal communists is 'to give everything away for free (free access, no copyright...) just charge for the additional services, which will make you rich', the liberal communists still believe that it's possible to make a more just world out of capitalism, which frankly I do not believe. The acceptance of the capitalist basis (our creativity as work) and the legal framework means the perpetuation of our constant desire to find a nice niche in this fucked up world. We should be working to enable (which to a certain extent is already happening through the filesharing and free software movement) the foundations of the capitalist system to be questioned and at some points bypassed. This does not mean that capitalism is going to be easily abolished, but it shows different alternatives and different ways of thinking that could quickly be recuperated by capitalism if we do not develop a sense of our own agency.

## BEYOND THE LAW: PURE MEDIALITY

*We are above all obligated to note that a totally non-violent resolution of conflicts can never lead to a legal contract. For the latter, however peacefully it may have been entered into by the parties, leads finally to possible violence. It confers on both parties the right to take recourse to violence in some form against the other, should he break the agreement. Not only that; like the outcome, the origin of every contract also points towards violence. It need not be directly present in it as law-making violence, but is represented in it insofar as the power that guarantees a legal contract is in turn of violent origin even if violence is not introduced into the contract itself. When the consciousness of the latent presence of violence in a legal institution disappears, the institution falls into decay. In our time, parliaments provide an example of this. They offer the familiar, woeful spectacle because they have not remained conscious of the revolutionary forces to which they owe their existence.<sup>17</sup>*

Walter Benjamin, in his famous essay 'Critique of Violence', talks of a revolutionary violence that does not have an outside to itself. Divine or pure violence is revolutionary because it

cannot be fixed into definitions or categorisations that fall into the bureaucratic apparatus of the law and this is precisely because it does not produce an end. Benjamin explains at length how in order to perpetuate itself the law needs violence. If violence is not constantly performed, law would cease to exist. In this sense the law produces what Benjamin calls mythical violence, which is law and power making – a violence that strengthens the state. I find very interesting the last line of the Benjamin quote above in which he mentions how parliaments had degraded into a 'woeful spectacle'. The intentions behind forming them might have been revolutionary, but the establishment of bureaucratic functions over time lets them and the people using them 'fall into decay'. Relying purely on parliamentary structures to base their arguments, the politicians stop developing a sense for responsibility and urgency, instead reducing any revolutionary power through the constant creation of boundaries and limits to popular power.

*If mythical violence is law-making, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood.<sup>18</sup>*

The clear separation of ideas as property cannot but only develop this type of mythical violence, in which one is always protective about the fictitious boundaries established by the law, of what is one's idea and what is not. This type of thinking benefits only capitalists and people in power. If you protest using their tools, such as their legal system, they know what you want and it becomes easy for them to give it to you and to shut you up. A quick and superficial fix that momentarily makes happy the people underneath. But fundamentally nothing has really changed and of course this system will continue to produce misery and frustration. Pure means, another term by which Benjamin names revolutionary violence, is about pure mediality, in the sense that we are responsible for what we are doing without having a structure outside of what we do (such as the law) that defines whether what we are doing is right or wrong.

It is possible to connect Benjamin's notion of pure means and Guy Debord's unitary revolutionary praxis, a theory and practice which attempted to abolish all separations (between art and politics, leisure and work...), in the sense that it is not a matter of consolidating structures (then it would produce an end), but instead a total intensification of life where everything is at stake at this revolutionary moment without the desire to look anywhere else or to achieve something concrete. There is no doubt that liberation hurts, it cannot be a smooth process, breaking stereotypes is difficult and disturbing especially if you are alone, and you might have the feeling that what you are doing is ridiculous – or even senseless? But there is no deviancy in the use of other peoples' material, ideas are not people, you cannot hurt ideas and knowledge, you can only discuss and work with them. People are scared, they are so protective about their individual work, but this is only because they have internalised the logic of authorship. Now we take it as natural the idea that whatever we could possess already has a value, and we do not want to diminish this value or question the foundations on which this value is based. I recently heard a story about the contemporary artist Paul Chan giving a lecture to MA art students at Columbia University. When one student asked him about a case in which Chan was accused of plagiarising the work of a student of his, he admitted that when he was under pressure for a deadline and he did not have ideas, he just took the idea of one of his students. Later, some of the students refused to have a one-to-one tutorials with him because of his plagiarism. For me, the problem is not his pragmatic and uncritical use of somebody else's idea, but the way these MA artists think about themselves, the distribution of their ideas, what they think art production is, and how they are so market-oriented. I use the anti-copyright term when I make records as rhetorical statement that does not refer to the language of copyright to let people know that to copy is not only fine, but encouraged. But what we really need to do is to use our creativity in order to find different ways of distribution. We have to change the signification of copying, or as Stewart Hall might put it, a class struggle of signification over the term 'copy' – copying not as piracy or stealing, but

as sharing with good intentions and distribution of knowledge. Records stored in private houses are not doing much for the rest of the world apart from giving the person who owns them a good feeling. Instead, a file on the internet can be listened to and/or downloaded by different people at the same time in many parts of the world. Isn't the process of misusing also a creative process which poses new questions that were not there before? In improvisation we constantly make errors, we use them and in fact we learn from them. The radical character of the work itself which might be difficult, its recuperation, or its content might exceed the limitations of the decontextualisation. Ready to destroy whatever parameters that comes in its way in a similar vein to the intensity in which it was produced. No half licences which try to help people not to make profit, we are aware that we are in capitalism, but we do not want to make it more nice and soft, we want to abolish it. That this might be difficult, or we might not actually be able to do it, does not mean we do not want a better life under this system.

*Is any non-violent resolution of conflict possible? Without doubt. The relationships of private persons are full of examples of this. Non-violent agreement is possible wherever a civilized outlook allows the use of unalloyed means of agreement. Legal and illegal means of every kind that are all the same violent may be confronted with non-violent ones as unalloyed means. Courtesy, sympathy, peaceableness, trust, and whatever else might here be mentioned are their subjective preconditions.<sup>19</sup>*

As Richard Prelinger (from the Prelinger Archives and archive.org) said to me in conversation: artist, writers, filmmakers, musicians, academics and the type of people who are producing stuff have not sat down to think all together what kind of conditions we want for our work. Surely discussions would arise. I get the impression that the discussion on intellectual property is based on a certain philosophy and abstract notions about the individual and its relation to cultural production. Thanks to the law these notions become solidified as universal truths (at least for the time being especially if profit can be produced out of it). But how will people look at this type of production in the future? Of course, we do not know. However,

what we can do is to develop platforms for discussion. If we do not, somebody is going to take advantage of us. In a conference in Berlin, held as part of the project 'Oil of the 21st Century', Lawrence Liang gave an interesting example regarding intellectual property. Imagine you have three things: my pen, my poem, my friend.

While Copyright makes you think of your poem as if it was your pen (something you use and then throw away), Liang suggested that we should instead think of the poem as a friend, to whom you have responsibility and you care about it. This is a lovely metaphor that takes on intellectual property in an affective way rather than as a cold legal system.

But we should not forget that to make a poem one needs passion and must struggle with language to come up with something special. There is violence in the making of a poem, a creative violence that tries to break away from stereotypes and dead forms, which wants to open up a different way of understanding language, a torturing of language that cuts both ways, you try to torture it while in turn it tortures you. Let's think through Benjamin's notion of 'The Author as Producer': if we can extend this creative violence to change the conditions of production and issues of intellectual property in ways which neither founds nor preserves the law, then we would be talking about what Benjamin calls pure means or revolutionary violence. Notions of intellectual property are going to be the issue of the future, and if we do not find ways of challenging the structures that are being developed we are going to be pretty fucked.

I don't think that to put the anti-copyright mark in whatever you produce is by any means enough. As I have tried to explain; the radical and exploratory character of improvisation should be directed not only to the making of music but in changing the conditions in which the music is produced.

Today these conditions are at least partially set by the discourses of intellectual property, copyright and authorship. These notions should be challenged and perverted the same way improvisers pervert their instruments to create new sounds, so we can create new conditions that suit our necessities, interests and desires.

*I do not want to compromise nor police what is no longer 'my' music.* – Billy Bao

## NOTES

1 The Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) is a proposed plurilateral trade agreement that would impose strict enforcement of intellectual property rights related to Internet activity and trade in information-based goods.

See [www.jamie.com/2008/05/23/we-must-act-now-against-acta/](http://www.jamie.com/2008/05/23/we-must-act-now-against-acta/)

2 Eddie Prévost, 'Free Improvisation in Music and Capitalism: resisting authority and the cults of scientism and celebrity' in Anthony Iles & Mattin (eds.) *Noise & Capitalism*, San Sebastian: Arteleku, 2009 and James Saunders (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009.

3 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the politics of performance*, London: Routledge, 1993. p.146.

4 Copyright Warning, printed on the back of most Matchless Recordings releases. This one is taken from Eddie Prévost solo CD *entelechy*.

5 Statement found on their website: [www.mcps-prs-alliance.co.uk](http://www.mcps-prs-alliance.co.uk)

6 See Eddie Prévost's essay 'Free Improvisation in Music and Capitalism: resisting authority and the cults of scientism and celebrity'.

7 Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer' in trans. Edmund Jephcott, *Reflections*, New York: Schocken Books, 2007. p.223.

8 From Wikipedia.org: 'Under the Convention, copyrights for creative works are automatically in force upon their creation without being asserted or declared. An author need not "register" or "apply for" a copyright in countries adhering to the Convention. As soon as a work is "fixed", that is, written or recorded on some physical medium, its author is automatically entitled to all copyrights in the work and to any derivative works, unless and until the author explicitly disclaims them or until the copyright expires. Foreign authors are given the same rights and privileges to copyrighted material as domestic authors in any country that signed the Convention.'

9 Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer' in trans. Anna Bostock, *Understanding Brecht*, London: Verso, 1983, written as a lecture for the Institute for the Study of Fascism, in Paris, April 1934. p.98. This quote is taken from the website: [www.kurator.org/wiki/main/read/Introduction](http://www.kurator.org/wiki/main/read/Introduction)

10 Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer' in *Reflections*. p. 233.

11 Sabine Nuss, 'Digital Property', [www.osdir.com/ml/culture.internet.rekombinant/2005-08/msg00012.html](http://www.osdir.com/ml/culture.internet.rekombinant/2005-08/msg00012.html)

12 Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author', in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900 – 2000 An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, London: Blackwell, 2007.

13 Roland Barthes, 'Death of the Author', in *Ibid.*, p.139.

14 Lawrence Liang, *Copyright, Cultural Production and Open Content Licensing*, [www.pzwart.wdka.hro.nl/mdr/pubsfolder/liangessay/view](http://www.pzwart.wdka.hro.nl/mdr/pubsfolder/liangessay/view)

15 Dmytri Kleiner, 'Copyfarleft and Copyjustright' available at: [www.metamute.org/en/Copyfarleft-and-Copyjustright](http://www.metamute.org/en/Copyfarleft-and-Copyjustright)

16 *Ibid.*

17 Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence' in *Reflections*. pp.287–288.

18 *Ibid.*, p.297.

19 *Ibid.*, p.289.

# DEVOUR YOUR LIMITATIONS!

## NOTE:

First published accompanying my track contribution to the Below The Radar Series II, *The Wire* website 2009 ([www.thewire.co.uk](http://www.thewire.co.uk)).

In any given situation your scope of action is determined by specific contextual restrictions. These restrictions are very likely to be historically produced, serving certain interests. As somebody who works with noise and improvisation and often makes records (more often than not collectively) I find myself wondering what are the conceptual and ideological limitations regarding making records?

This can not be answered without dealing with issues of intellectual property and what this implies: authorship, clear delimitation of what is the work and what is not, and the separation between producer and consumer.

Intellectual property has grown hand in hand with capitalism as a way of commodifying the intangible, the indefinable, the elusive... as a way of taming culture in order to frame it, make it stable and to be able to give it a value. Any classification or categorisation works as a way of achieving mastery and social control. But when I think of improvisation I think of it as elusive liquidity; in both Marcel Duchamp and Henri Bergson's lingo, as a matter of 'passages' rather than

'stoppages'. In an improvised concert situation, one throws a sound without knowing what other people will do with it. One of course is aware of the people that one is playing with but basically one is open to anything. Why should it be different when one makes a record?

Somebody mentioned the word plagiarism but this is nothing but a capitalist fallacy. As the Comte de Lautréamont said, plagiarism is necessary. Whenever one person takes something and uses it in another context, there is always a level of creativity going on. I do not want to make hierarchies between different levels of creativity. I have invented nothing. All I have done is take from somewhere else, and to think of this as theft is simply police-logic, which basically is what the notion of authorship does.

Noise is the asshole of culture where everything is possible, it is about lack of respect, not only of previous ways of music making, but also lack of respect regarding the context that you are working with and the different ways that this context might try to normalise or tame the potential of this practice.



# MANAGERIAL AUTHORSHIP: APPROPRIATING LIVING LABOUR

## NOTE:

Commissioned by Binna Choi and Axel Wieder for *Casco Issues* 12, Utrecht, June 2011.

When working with noise and improvisation in the context of concert and performance situations, I am interested in the division of labour between performer and audience. Historically, this division presupposed a relation between these two positions in terms of active and passive. In contemporary capitalism, this division is problematised through the recuperation of leisure time and the valorisation of what seems to be unproductive labour. Mirroring this expansive tendency in capitalism, more and more artists are using audience interaction as material for their work, blurring the boundaries between producer and consumer. This way of working, where the artist appropriates intellectual contributions made by others but where the interaction is still framed under the artist's own name, has a strong relationship to the logic of management, as it has developed from the division of labour into an organisational theory of business. In this text I will explore, through an examination of Karl Marx's concepts of living labour and the general intellect, a way of working used by artists that I propose is a form of managerial authorship.

## MANAGERIAL LOGIC, LIVING LABOUR AND THE GENERAL INTELLECT

Management guru Peter Drucker identified two characteristics of management: innovation and marketing. Innovation does not necessarily need to come from the manager, but he or she is the one who must make sure that it can be marketed. As we can see with intellectual property, an innovation needs to be framed in order to be marketed and given a value. In capitalism, value can only be assigned to that which is measurable or countable. As Alain Badiou has said of today's configuration of the world as a global market:

*Everything that circulates falls under the unity of the count, while inversely, only what lets itself be counted in this way can circulate. Moreover, this is the norm that illuminates a paradox few have pointed out: in the hour of generalized circulation and the phantasm of instantaneous cultural communication, laws and regulations forbidding the circulation of persons are being multiplied everywhere.<sup>1</sup>*

Marx's concept of living labour goes against the idea of countability and generalised circulation. By living labour, Marx meant our potential for creativity, that labour capacity which is not yet tamed, measured and framed by capitalism. Living labour is that subjective 'flame' which capital, in order to accumulate surplus labour, seeks to objectify through exchange. However, from today's perspective it has become clear that capitalism's ever expanding drive has found multiple ways of framing what Marx understood as living labour. Within the post-Fordist condition, centered around a regime of creativity and flexibility, this expansion can be better understood in relation to another Marxist concept: the general intellect.

In his *Fragment on machines* Marx discusses how, with the development of technology, workers would increasingly have access to more time to develop and educate themselves through expanded leisure time. Since machines would produce the work that was previously done by the workers, the workers would gain the time to generate social knowledge, referred to by Marx as the 'general intellect'. This general intellect becomes sedimented in the machines owned by capitalists as fixed capital. By fixed capital Marx meant the capital that is not in circulation, that which is constantly present in the form of means of production such as tools, land, buildings and vehicles. There has been a lot of discussion around the notion of the general intellect, mostly coming from the so called autonomism or post-autonomism thinkers like Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, Christian Marazzi, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi and Maurizio Lazzarato. For the autonomist, the general intellect has some of the qualities of living labour, it is self-reflexive, affective, cooperative, communicative and creative. For them, these qualities can also be applied to politics, and can therefore produce self-organisation antagonistic to capital. Responding to this line of thought in her text, 'Living Labour, Form-Giving Fire',

Katja Diefenbach points out some of the problems of romanticising living labour by incorporating not only our creative capacity but by also making it intrinsically political. Thus, an effect of the political can dangerously consist of subordinating revolt and dream to the economic primacy of effective doing. The organisation which we are able to give to ourselves would have to do both: coordinate and keep a distance to the process of a radical break, it would have to reject the romantic tradition, by not equating the political with the living and a common to be produced.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless we can agree with Paulo Virno when he argues that Marx was wrong to see the general intellect as fixed capital, since now increasingly humans are becoming the machines themselves, the general intellect is not fixed capital but living labour before it is objectified. The general intellect is not value itself but the potential to produce value:

They are not units of measure, they constitute the immeasurable presupposition of heterogeneous effective possibilities.<sup>3</sup> As human creativity is more variable and heterogeneous than a machine, the framing of it and the production of value through it is more complex. The manager appropriates life processes that he or she might not be able to evaluate immediately, but when the potential of our living labour is realised he or she knows how to define, measure and market it.

## THE MANAGERIAL ARTIST

I have absolutely nothing against appropriation or plagiarism, especially if it helps us to counter notions of authorship, copyright and individual creativity. As the Comte de Lautréamont wrote: 'Plagiarism is necessary. Progress demands it.'<sup>4</sup> But there are different types of appropriation. Appropriation of works of art and music can help to transgress established notions of originality, ontological conceptions of the artwork and what it means to be an artist. In other words, it can help to challenge notions of quality, taste, craft and individualised production. Nonetheless, the key form of appropriation is that which the capitalist exacts upon the worker by appropriating his or her labour capacity. In some instances, the two forms of appropriation are combined: in the name of the critique of authorship, and as a way of questioning the passive condition of the

audience, the managerial artist appropriates the audiences' general intellect by giving them the feeling of possessing a certain subjective agency (living labour that is yet to be objectified). However, beyond this appearance of agency, the artist's framing of the situation generates surplus value for his/herself - in the form of cultural capital etc. - which far exceeds the benefit to the audience.

In an early proto-example of this managerial authorship, when David Tudor performed John Cage's '4'33'' for the first time on the 29 August 1952 at a concert recital in Woodstock, New York, all the sounds produced in the room were proclaimed equally valid as music. Nevertheless, most of the audience did not realise they were making music. By having control over the conceptual discourse underpinning the project, the managerial artist can make sure that everything can be incorporated into their work, in a manner that can only be valuable in such a specific way under the banner of his or her own artistic career. This does not mean that the audience gets nothing out of it, of course one can learn a lot through participating in these types of situations but contrary to the liberating appearance of these events the division of labour between artist and audience remains unchanged.

Today we see artists like Anton Vidokle and Tino Sehgal working according to a managerial logic, albeit in very different ways from each other. During 2008-2009, Vidokle produced *Night School*, a temporary school at The New Museum in New York. The project involved artists, writers, curators and diverse audiences. Presentations, lectures and workshops were held by people like Martha Rosler, Maria Lind, Liam Gillick, Tirdad Zolghadr, Paul Chan, Natasha Sadr Haghghian and Raqs Media Collective. Later on in *Museum as Hub: Six Degrees* a group show at the New Museum, Vidokle presented an installation called *Night School*, 2008-09.<sup>5</sup> The installation included a monitor, a DVD player, and a book case with DVDs documenting lectures and workshops that had happened at the night school. Suddenly, through its documentation, all the content produced by the various presenters and audiences during the presentations and workshops held in the name of education became Anton Vidokle's artwork. To what extent can one appropriate someone else's activities? For what reasons? What does it produce?

In the work *This Progress* by Tino Sehgal, staged at the ICA in London in 2006, one entered the gallery to be confronted by a little girl asking you to reply to the question 'what do you think is progress?'. Related questions were then put to you by different people of increasing age as you walked through a succession of exhibition rooms. Placing the spectator in a tightly constructed situation in which little room was left for transformative interaction, Sehgal instead gave you the feeling of being part of an assembly line of knowledge production. Contrary to Vidokle's practice, Sehgal does not allow his work to be documented, placing the emphasis instead on the moment of experience. This means that unique and individual experiences are not only produced by the work but, more importantly, they *produce* the work. Taking Comte de Lautrémont's quote about plagiarism to a new level. *This Progress* shows us how the general intellect can be used artistically: real life process as constituent content of the artwork.

This management of peoples' creativity, ideas, personal tastes and lives, is similar to the operations we see happening within social networks, where people express themselves through the use of tools like Facebook, Twitter and MySpace, creating hits for network sites. Guy Debord's dream and worst nightmare has become true: spectators are emancipating themselves from their passive condition, but at the price of feeling empowered by a system that produces, on the one hand, the feeling of self-agency and on the other hand that productive power which appears to be living labour: as if one were in a hamster wheel which is just pushing capitalism forward. At some point, under all the layers of different networks, somebody is converting these activities into exchange value. In a brilliant paper titled 'Forking Free Software', delivered at the Make Art Festival in Poitiers last December, Simon Yuill explained how the free software community was being recuperated by a neoliberal logic. Yuill quoted Charles Leadbeater, British futurologist, management consultant, and one-time adviser to the Tony Blair government:

*The avant-garde imagined that spectatorship would give way to participation permitting people to become more social and collaborative, egalitarian and engaged with one another, to borrow and share ideas ... Mass participation, Debord's antidote to the*

*society of the spectacle, has turned into YouTube and social-networking sites on which we can all make a spectacle of ourselves.*<sup>6</sup>

We have to be clear about the relations put to work within the production of the managerial artwork, as well as on the social networks. What for us, as audiences, seems to be the expression of living labour becomes, for the managerial artist productive labour. The conceptual framing works as the means of production: the audience/worker is distanced from the bigger picture - the knowledge, connections and conditions that allow the work to happen and the distribution of its effects. The maintenance of this distance reproduces relations as they stand, the audience is reproduced as audience at one remove from the means of the artwork's production.

While it is true that as an audience we may be able to express our living labour capacity (not yet objectified and certainly not remunerated), at the same time we are also productive labour. We are producing the work of another artist and we are producing ourselves - depending on living labour capacity - as an innovative audience, which also means achieving the valorisation of the artist and the institution in which the artwork is taking place and the funding behind it. Marx explains what he means by 'productive labour':

*a relation that has sprung up historically and stamps the labourer as the direct means of creating surplus-value. To be a productive labourer is, therefore, not a piece of luck, but a misfortune.*<sup>7</sup>

In order for this to occur, a division of labour is necessary. By being productive labour we are also producing surplus labour. In the *Grundrisse* Marx explained how this surplus labour under capitalism is constantly split in two<sup>8</sup>:

1 - The objective conditions that can allow for a new realisation of labour for its own self-preservation and self-reproduction.

2 - Living labour in the realisation process is estranged from itself as it is reproducing the conditions that makes it alien. Surplus labour reproduces the conditions for the future extraction of surplus labour. By constantly recreating the conditions for the accumulation of surplus labour we not only recreate the conditions of our self-preservation but also the self-preservation of capital.

The 'flame of living labour' necessitates the capitalist material conditions for its realisation (technological, artistic context, musical context), but by reproducing capital in the act of reproducing itself, this living labour alienates itself from its product. As long as we persist in our condition as audience, we will reproduce the division of labour in which it is the artist and not us, in the last instance, who has the final decision of how the overall activity might be represented.

This instrumentalisation is produced by the artist applying the managerial logic of framing.

What is left of our own subjective agency if our experiences have been appropriated by capitalism at the most sophisticated level? Where are the capacities of our living labour today? What creative act can exceed this commodification of experience? It seems too optimistic to invest faith in living labour, while the current flow of capital is creating already new flexible regimes of subjectivation and an accumulative future for those who are able to invest in these new kinds of creative capital, while the rest are sinking into oblivion. What for one feels like a unique moment is, for another, a link in the chain of a speculative post-Fordist assembly line, where every little interaction can add 'something'. Whatever this something might be will be decoded in the future and if more value can be extracted all the better, but it already has fulfilled the first purpose: to keep the ball of innovation and activity rolling through exchanging ideas, knowledge and experiences.

Unless this accumulative chain is disrupted, the surplus labour will be continuously reproduced, and in doing so also our own constant penury. Experience has been commodified, and it seems impossible to combat this fact with ideology, not with discourse, nor by self-aggrandising our potential living labour. Instead what seems more urgent is to create situations for ourselves that challenge the very notion of production, and the way our subjectivities are produced. There is no return to a generic essence of self or a pure subjectivity. We seem to be in irreversible times, disturbed and damaged forever, pushing ourselves further in our own alienation, as if we were walking blindly within the conceptual parameters of the managerial logic, thinking that we are going towards our own individual liberation, but we are,

instead, constantly reproducing the distance between our actions and our control over the conditions of the context that we inhabit. Liberation does not come from this type of realisation process, but from a distorted self-realisation process that goes against our own conditions and even our subjectivity itself, producing instead an anti-self. The anti-self destroys its own position by nullifying the attributes of accumulation that shape our subjectivity today, such as confidence, contacts, recognition, and attention. Being no one, being nowhere, being nobody, definitely not an artist, certainly not an audience, producing nothing that separates us from our objective conditions, having nothing to exchange because there is nothing to count that someone else can frame.

## NOISE AND THE DESTRUCTION OF MANAGERIAL LOGIC

*Noise exacerbates the rift between knowing and feeling by splitting experience, forcing conception against sensation. Some recent philosophers have evinced an interest in subjectless experiences; I am rather more interested in experience-less subjects. Another name for this would be 'nemocentrism' (a term coined by neurophilosopher Thomas Metzinger): the objectification of experience would generate self-less subjects that understand themselves to be no-one and no-where. This casts an interesting new light on the possibility of a 'communist' subjectivity.*<sup>9</sup>

There is a growing emphasis in contemporary capitalism on individual experiences in production and consumption. In a given context, when we experience our living labour being realised, the potential of our subjectivity, of our intellectual and affective capacity, we feel empowered, we feel that we can and that we are a constituent part of the context that we are in. We don't have an overview from outside, we are inside.

As we said before, this feeling of self-empowerment is used by capitalism in its creation of a framework where a valorisation of whatever activity that occurs within can be realised at different points and moments. While we gain unique experiences, momentarily feeling happy about ourselves, a capitalist logic expands deeper and deeper into our subjectivity. In his text, 'Genre is Obsolete',



Ray Brassier has pointed out how the commodification of experience has not only happened at the ideological level but at the neurophysiological level.<sup>10</sup> Therefore the production of aesthetic experiences does not seem to be enough for us to challenge and understand our contemporary condition. Noise does not work well at the level of either aesthetics or experience, in fact its qualities radically challenge both of these notions. Rather than trying to reconcile knowing and feeling, noise can help us to dissociate the notion of living labour from subjectivity in a way that exceeds the logic of framing, by either being too much, too complex, too dense and difficult to decode or too chaotic to be measured. One cannot have mastery over it, it is a kind of useless general intellect that suspends values of judgement such as good or bad or right or wrong. To think of it in moral or ethical terms seems ridiculous. Noise with its epistemic violence, counters the division between activity and passivity. By making us aware of our impossibility to decipher it, noise alienates us. We all are no-one in front of it. We cannot find reaffirmation of our accepted positions (either as audience or performer).

Unfortunately in practice, noise has become just another musical genre and many people could predict what a noise concert might be like. In noise concerts the performer/audience division is reproduced as it is elsewhere and players rarely deal with it. Rather than trying to perpetuate noise as musical genre, I would like to think through how noise as it carries qualities such as chaos, density, saturation, precision, intelligibility ... can be executed in order to dismantle the frameworks that so often shape the way we behave and how we relate to each other. Perhaps by putting ourselves through the grinder of noise we may destroy our internalised managerial logic.

## NOTES

1 Alain Badiou, Ray Brassier (Trans). *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. p.10.

2 Katja Diefenbach, 'Living Labour, Form-Giving Fire', in Gal Kim (Ed). *Post-Fordism and its Discontents*, Berlin: B\_books, b\_books, Maastricht: JVE, Ljubljana: Peace Institut, 2011.

3 Paolo Virno, *The General Intellect*,

[www.generation-online.org/p/fpvirno10.htm](http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpvirno10.htm)

4 It is interesting to note that even if Guy Debord used to cite this quote, he terminated his relationship with Henri Lefebvre and accused him of plagiarising the text 'Thesis on the Paris Commune' which Debord co-wrote with Attila Kotanyi and Raoul Vaneigem.

5 [www.museumashub.org/node/48](http://www.museumashub.org/node/48)

6 From Simon Yuill's public talk at the Festival.

7 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, London: Penguin Classics, p.644.

8 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, translated Martin Nicolaus, London: Penguin Books, 1973, p.454.

9 Ray Brassier, *Against Aesthetics of Noise*, [www.ny-web.be/transitzone/against-aesthetics-noise.html](http://www.ny-web.be/transitzone/against-aesthetics-noise.html)

10 Ray Brassier, 'Genre is Obsolete' in Anthony Iles & Mattin (eds.), *Noise & Capitalism*, Donostia/San Sebastián: Audiolab-Arteleku, 2009: [www.arteleku.net/audiolab/noise\\_capitalism.pdf](http://www.arteleku.net/audiolab/noise_capitalism.pdf)

# THESES ON NOISE

## NOTE:

First published in the catalogue of the exhibition Arsenal: artists exploring the potential of sound as a weapon curated by Ellen Mara De Wachter, Alma Enterprises, London.

It was later published as part of my CD Proletarian of Noise, hibari music November 2006 Tokyo.

1. What the fuck is Noise?

Precisely because of its indeterminacy noise is the most sensuous human activity / practice. To try to fix it or to make it a genre is as fucked up as believing in democracy.

2. If you make noise it is likely that somebody else is going to hear you, this means Noise is a social activity.

3. The capacity to make Noise is available to all, but its revolutionary potential comes from those who want to disturb the commodification of Noise – as M.A.N point out in their website: [www.mothersagainstone.us](http://www.mothersagainstone.us).

4. To say 'this is good Noise' or 'that is bad Noise' is to miss the point.

5. Noise without meaning nor finality is revolutionary as long as it does not support anything or anybody.

6. This is not to say that Noise under capitalism can be an autonomous activity. But if neither language nor bombs help you to destroy our reality, Noise helps us to get rid of our anxiety.

7. It is more important to fuck the minds of the audience than to fuck your ears – and vice versa.

8. The identity process that occurs as people are making Noise must be constantly rejected. To be a 'Noisician' is even more pathetic than to be a 'musician'.

9. Factory workers in the previous centuries have indirectly been the most sustained and brutal players of Noise. Recognition of our past should always be present.

10. Economic exploitation still occurs, even if now the production of Noise does not produce an object. The process of Noise making has in itself become the object of financial and symbolic market value.

11. The old conception of noise was to believe in freedom, the new conception of Noise is to achieve freedom.

# NOISE VERSUS CONCEPTUAL ART

## NOTE:

An earlier version of this text is available: [www.thewatchful.com/?p=3642](http://www.thewatchful.com/?p=3642)  
A version of this text was published in Spanish in *URSONATE* #0 Madrid, April 2010.

# NOISE VERSUS CONCEPTUAL ART

1. If conceptual art is clean, noise is dirty. If conceptual art is subjective, noise is asubjective. Of course, it is the artist who produces his or her conceptual artwork. By contrast, noise is everywhere.

2. Anybody can make noise. One does not need to be an artist, or go to art school, or understand the specifics trends of art-making such as conceptual art, institutional critique or relational aesthetics. The everyday qualities of noise have been with us for a long time.

3. Semantic jailers may complain about my different usages of the noun noise in this text. If there is a term that one needs not to be puritanical about, it might well be noise. I would rather play with its different meanings, than perpetuate noise as a musical genre.

4. 'Capital does not like noise' – Miguel Ángel Fernández Ordóñez, Governor of the Bank of Spain. Countability, separability, measurability are intrinsic qualities of capital. For a commodity to achieve its value and therefore become a commodity, it needs to be counted as one

Rumour is elusive and unstable, impossible to count, it can be defined as noise. Noise exceeds the logic of calculability.

5. If we take on Theodor Adorno's claim that there is a strong connection between the forces of production and art, we can see how conceptual art and the dematerialisation of the art object coincides with the end of gold as the standard equivalent form of value. Lack of control, pollution and intelligibility:

all attributes of noise, connect today to a level of abstraction that capitalism has reached with its credit booms, toxic assets and high-frequency trading. Inevitably, fictitious capital brought us into a state of crisis. Capital reconfigures itself in order to give us the appearance that we are done with the crisis – nevertheless producing more crisis. Noise never hides itself, it is permanent crisis pushing constantly all its elements to their extremes.

6. To perceive 'noise in-One' (François Laruelle)<sup>1</sup>, without applying capitalist logic, understanding its elements in their specificity without making formal hierarchies over whether one sound is more valuable than another, knowing that we are always going to miss something, makes demands upon us to be as perceptive as possible.

7. Common denominators, totally predictable improvisations, vulgar ways of responding to one another, average volumes or brutal noises. How many noise concerts that sound like noise concerts do you want to attend? Anything (such as an idea, a concept or any other element)

can be used if it helps us to stop reproducing the stereotypes that we constantly make when we improvise or when we make noise. These elements might help you to go further from what you would do with your own intuitions, repetitive intentions and emotions. The incorporation of concepts in noise and improvisation might help us to develop unexpected ways of playing that can challenge the situation that we are in. Ways of playing that we might not dare try out otherwise.

8. 'I have found that the limitations imposed by decisions based on my personal "tastes" are absolutely stifling. Choices made through the criteria of subjective likes and dislikes are to me nothing more than a kind of therapeutic ego titillation that only inhibit further the possibility of sharing an artistic vision (as if it weren't difficult enough a thing to do as it is). Besides, I really believe that truly good art is always made of broader stuff than the personality of the artist.' – Adrian Piper, 'A defence of the "conceptual" process in art'.

9. It is precisely in the limits, in the borders, in the beginnings and ends where one can find the hidden ideological contradictions and interests that rest on the constructions of the situations that we are in. We have more tools for expressing ourselves but also there are more laws that try to regulate our creativity. It is precisely that which frames the context in which we operate which must be severely questioned. These are the limitations that are constantly producing our subjectivity.

10. In conceptual art the artist frames all the activity that occurs in the moment of the artwork's presentation. The concept of 'piece' is antagonistic to noise, as one cannot totalise all the noise and say, 'this is mine'. Even when we make very loud noise, there are always elements escaping us. When we speak of John Cage's 4'33", we are not listening to the specific noises of each situation. We are talking about a specific piece by a specific composer.

11. One can introduce concepts, ideas and decisions within the context of an improvised concert, or use them while making them into noise. But as opposed to conceptual art, where the idea is what matters (cf. Sol LeWitt), in noise, it is the noise itself in its totality that matters. Noise is ultra-specific. Noise cannot be represented, as there are those residual elements, that disinformation – that which cannot be counted or defined – that makes noise noisy.

12. The nihilist character of noise makes it antagonistic to democracy, and it is absolutely realist in its given understanding that we are never going to be in a state of equality; even less so under capitalism. This does not mean that we should not try to understand each other as much as possible from our different positions and create democratic process, based upon a present, and not a future position (planning what we can gain at a later date).

13. There is more noise in language that we might think. One cannot grasp totally what somebody

else says, to try to grasp the totality of meaning in a given communication/sentence is, according to Luce Irigaray, something characteristically masculine. Learning from Irigaray, we need to understand each other from the perspective of noise, an anarchic perspective without foundations, without structuring or categorising constantly what somebody else is saying, (in doing this we would reduce expectations and projections over what the other person is saying). We think we understand what is going on; at the same time we know that this is never totally true. Everything could explode any second. We better listen as much as possible now. There is no reason for us to be here. We are in/on the/a 'groundless ground' (Luce Irigaray). This does not mean the negation of thinking. The contrary is true. The established structures of thought need to be radically reconsidered, without justifying our reason to be here, our existence.

14. Even if noise is at the heart of progress, it is also that which progress cannot control: irrationality, distraction, the unconscious, the emotionally disparate... Noise is the spectacle eating itself in an act of self-cannibalism.

15. It's interesting to see the connections between noise and the origins of conceptual art. John Cage 4'33" (1952), La Monte Young, *Composition # 2* (1960) (start a fire and let it be consumed), Henry Flynt, *Concept Art* (1962), Isidore Isou, *Art esthapériste*. All these examples, in one way or

another contain elements of noise.

16. Two of the most interesting conceptual art pieces in my opinion, contain a great deal of noise while they also question the limits of art.

a) Graciela Carnvale, *Lock Piece* (1968) 'I have taken a group of people prisoners. The piece starts here and they are the actors' (Graciela Carnevale, 7, October 1968).

As part of *Círculo de Arte Experimental Rosario*, Argentina, Graciela Carnevale at the opening of her exhibition locked the audience in the gallery from outside.

They did not get out until somebody broke the front glass window.

b) Christopher D'Arcangelo in collaboration with Peter Nadin and Nick Lawson produced *Thirty Days Work* in November 1978. The work was accompanied by a statement: 'We have joined together to execute functional constructions and to alter or refurbish existing structures as a means of surviving in a capitalist economy.'

The collaboration, the initial stage in a series of evolving and interactive exhibitions at Peter Nadin's loft on 84 West Broadway, was the culmination of a project D'Arcangelo and Nadin had begun in 1977 in which the two artists questioned the status of their day jobs as manual labourers, refurbishing loft and gallery spaces, by drawing up contracts and sending out flyers that detailed a description of their labour, the materials used and the time invested.

17. An epic moment in my noise career: No Trend festival, London, 2006. After 13 concerts of intense and loud noise,



I stood up on stage holding a microphone and wearing mirror sunglasses, looking like something in between a 'Ramblas' human sculpture, and Lou Reed in the *Metal Machine Music* cover. I stayed there holding the microphone without moving for 10 minutes. The microphone was recording all the stupid comments, all the heckling, the insults, and spit that the audience threw at me. After ten minutes I played the recorded file at ear splitting volume. When I explained this to Andrea Fraser in a tutorial at the Whitney Independent Study Programme, she told me: 'ah, I get it John Cage meets Dan Graham'. Here there is a big difference of understanding when we talk about conceptual art and when we talk about noise. If we talk about Conceptual Art we talk about a piece, if we talk about noise we have to make a fictitious framework to set up its limits.

I was able to say to Andrea what the ideas that I brought to the concert were, but she understood this as another conceptual piece. Under this perspective I frame all the activity happening from the audience as if I was a managerial artist. This is something we can see more and more in contemporary art. With the excuse of making a critique of authorship artists use more and more the logic of management in order to appropriate the contributions and the general intellect produced by the supposedly 'activated audience'. Coming back to the concert, if I would do anything with the recording, the resultant documentation would not be a representation of what happened, but a thing of pure opportunism

from my side. As we know there is nothing pure in noise. It would be impossible to represent the atmosphere, the smell of alcohol, the feeling of being an arsehole that a member of the audience said he felt. Noise only exists in the present.

18. Chaos goes against representation. Noise goes against habit. The unreason of being here and its break with correlationism is closer to noise than conceptual art.

19. We could understand noise as a form of hyperchaos:

*We must grasp how the ultimate absence of reason which we will refer to as "unreason", is an absolute ontological property, and not the mark of the finitude of our knowledge. From this perspective, the failure of the principle of reason follows, quite simply, from the falsity (and even from the absolute falsity) of such a principle – for the truth is that there is no reason for everything to be or to remain thus and so rather than otherwise, and this implies much to the laws that govern the world as to the things of the world. Everything could actually collapse: from trees to stars, from stars to laws, from physical laws to logical laws; and this not by virtue of some superior law capable of preserving anything, not matter what, from perishing. Our absolute, in effect is nothing other than an extreme form of chaos, a hyper-Chaos, for which nothing is or would seem to be impossible, not even the unthinkable.* – Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, (2006).

20. The absolute of unreason destroys both postmodern relativism and

the Kantian correlationism that binds thinking with being. We only have nihilism as a conceptual tool to understand better where we live.

21. 'This is not terrible, nothing terrible is happening' Emma Hedditch said at KYTN 2010 festival in Dundee, in a concert where our only instruments were our sensibility and our speech. Even though, it created a charged atmosphere full of projections and expectations. Only silence and words. Silences full with emotions. An inverted form of punk, where the audience got angry with us (the supposed musicians: Emma Hedditch, Howard Slater, Anthony Iles, Mattin) because we were too sensitive to each other. Because we were trying to understand each other. This was a noise concert.

22. What conceptual tools can the nihilist use without falling into either correlationism, or relativist postmodernism?

*Determination-in-the-last-instance involves an asceticism of thought whereby the latter abjures the trappings of intellectual intuitionist as well as of objectifying representation. By submitting to the logic of determination-in-the-last-instance, thought ceases to intend, apprehend, or reflect the object; it becomes non-thetic and is thereby turned into a vehicle of what is unobjectionable in the object itself.*

*The object becomes at once the patient and the agent of its own cognitive determination. Rather than looking to intellectual intuition to provide an exit from the correlation circle – a move which threatens to reinvoke some short of pre-established harmony between*

*thinking and being – determination-in-the-last-instance unbinds correlation synthesis in order to effectuate (rather than represent) an identity without unity and a duality without distinction between subject and object. It effectuates a non-correlational disjunction between unobjectionable reality and ideal objectification by instantiating the identity-of-the-last-instance between the being-foreclosed of the object and that of the real qua being-nothing. Identity without unity and duality without distinction are the hallmarks of determination-in-the-last-instance insofar as its structure is that of what Laruelle calls a 'unilateral duality'. By effectuating a unilateral duality between thought and thing, determination-in-the-last-instance manifests a non-correlational adequation between the real and the ideal without re-incorporating the former within the latter, whether thought the machinery of symbolic inscription or the faculty of intellectual intuition.* – Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 2007

In the extremes we meet!

1 Ray Brassier, in private conversation explains the connection between non-idiomatic improvisation and Laruelle's vision-in-One:

*Above all, it's not really 'vision' in the scopical sense. It's a kind of blindness to the light of objectivating transcendence that manifests things in their pre-objective immanence. By 'objectivating transcendence', I mean the phenomenological notion that intentional consciousness is a kind of transcendence 'exploding' towards the world and*

*revealing an infinite variety of meaningful objects... The vision-in-One manifests things in the element of radical immanence, which is to say: without an intentional horizon of meaning. To 'see' things within the medium of radical immanence is to shear away all intentional transcendence whereby phenomena are revealed as something recognizable, meaningful, or useful, i.e. as objects correlated with a conscious subject. So the vision-in-One is a kind of seeing without seeing as. This is part of what's involved in Laruelle's idea of 'non-thetic' objectivation. When things are 'thetically' intended they are posited as given, which is to give according to a transcendent structure of objectivation which bestows form and content upon appearances. Non-thetic manifestation implies a givenness of phenomena minus the superimposition of transcendent objective forms and categories. However, this is not some return to mythical originary pre-conceptual layer of immediate experience: what's interesting is that this is still a theoretical vision, but one that is so radically theoretical that it has been purged of the hybrids of categorical form and practical concern; i.e. where theoretical reflection and pre-reflexive practice are habitually mixed together in philosophical conceptualizations of experience, the vision-in-One is supposed to separate them in such a way to release their non-synthetic identity, i.e. a theory whose objectivation of phenomena is now free of all practical prejudice (in terms of how to use things for this or that purpose) and a*

*practice whose irreflexive immersion in phenomena is no longer prejudiced or governed by latent theoretical forms and categories. In other words, the true unity of theory and practice does not consist in fusing a theory limited by practical concerns to a practice subordinated to theoretical prejudices, but rather in discovering the identity of a theory unconstrained by any pragmatic horizon and a practice no longer governed by pre-existing formal/a priori categories. I think this is what the vision-in-One is supposed to be: rigorous theorizing in an axiomatic deductive register, but using an empirical material ('philosophy') whose objective form is no longer pre-given or ready-made but rather immanently generated by the structure of immanence itself: which is that of the 'unilateral duality'. Obviously this is extremely abstract and only Laruelle's work is supposed to exemplify what this procedure consists in, but if you wanted to expropriate this model for your own uses, I think the key thing to emphasize would be the potential consonance between vision-in-One and non-idiomatic improvisation, as a fusion of theory that abjures ready-made theoretical forms borrowed from philosophy and/or the social sciences (theoretical-aesthetic bricolage indulged in by artists shopping for a handy theory), and a practice that abjures generic aesthetic idioms, not only those pertaining to musical genre, but also those have accreted around the practice of free improvisation and turned it into another genre...*

# AGAINST REPRESENTATION: A REVOLUTION IN FRONT OF YOU

## NOTE:

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*The representation of the working class radically opposes itself to the working class.*

- Guy Debord, 'Thesis 100', *Society of the Spectacle*

# REPRESENTATION AS A FORM OF MEDIATION: FRAGMENTATION/ SEPARATION

Representation in politics can be seen as a form of delegation. One ceases to take responsibility for certain acts and thoughts, relegating it to somebody else who will speak for you. In representative democracy an ordinary person does not have the possibility of developing the specific language needed to speak to power or authority. A separation is created between everyday life and the moments when political decisions are made in society or the community. As Guy Debord pointed out, 'representation separates life from experience', similar to the separation of disciplines, the division of labour, and the distinction between work and leisure. However, as Jean-Luc Guionnet remarked to me, Debord criticised representation without criticising the language that he himself was using. As representation is the typical medium of artistic practice, it is no wonder Debord and other Situationists wanted to supersede art. They desired life without separation.

As long as we accept art as a separate discipline it will be more difficult to produce concrete and direct political change through artistic practice. Similarly, to think that political action can only happen in the realm of politics or in the streets would also be a way of accepting that separation.

Some questions emerged during a discussion: who is the political subject today? Where is the political struggle today? Surely many years have passed since the concise criticism of the spectacle by Debord. Capitalism has continued to develop powerful and complex forms of alienation, the most recent of which surely include forms of biopower and social networking. People are no longer simply spectators of their own lives through representation, as Debord argued, but create their reality through the representations available on MySpace and Facebook. Profit flows from people's sharing of creativity, emotions and intimate information - all of which is surely very helpful for market researchers, and the police. We're no longer contemplating our life through certain forms of representation. We've internalised the spectacle to such an extent that the way we relate to each other, our interactivity in everyday life and experience, is reproducing it, not with a feeling of passivity or distance, but with an intense desire to enjoy ourselves, be ourselves and be connected. Have your say, produce, write, listen, start your own blog, comment in online forums, express yourself. Never before have we had so much access to self-representation, and never before has our subjectivity been such a product of representation. All is not that bad on the internet. New realities and ways of working together are being built thanks to the Free Software movement, a very interesting example of how to counter the division between the realms of production and consumption. But for the spectacle, consuming is also no longer enough; being connected is now required. Could this be a more intimate form of separation? What about all those iPhoneers who are half here, half there? Separation before being connected, separation from oneself? Now let's imagine we are in the same room with Gregg Bordowitz. At his talk at the Whitney Independent Study Program, we were impressed by his attentiveness to what was happening in the room. What type of relations were being built there and then? What type of environments were being created? He managed to create a different type of atmosphere in the space where so many discussions had already taken place. He created perplexity, and he inspired us, making us aware of the politics in the room and certain repressive relations taking place there. Sometimes a revolution is needed in the room.

How much are you willing to engage with the situation that you are in?

The possibilities of a revolutionary practice are already in front of us. It is a matter of penetrating the surface of our reality which appears to be so neutral and free of interest. At the same time, we can feel a spectral hand making us behave in a certain way. The hand of the normalisation process that does not let things get disrupted. The means to disturb this neutrality might be extremely simple; from talking to making noise, from acting different than usual to being utterly honest, from saying the most intimate things in public to being totally quiet when you should be having fun. To stop being so self-conscious about your reputation could also help. Surely it would mean to give up, at least momentarily, the restrictions of being the 'yourself' of MySpace and Facebook. Why not become someone else? Fuck knows who, perhaps the Stranger.

# IMPROVISATION: ELUSIVE AND UNSTABLE

*Sabotage all representation!*

- The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*

In speaking of improvisation we not only discuss the production of particular sounds or events but the production of social spaces as well. We invoke this as both a strategic term and a conceptual tool. Improvisation can therefore refer both to experimental music making as well as everyday and mundane practices. Improvisation, by having a long historical use outside the realm of contemporary art, cannot be identified with an origin nor as a term coined by a group of artists or musicians (as opposed to Conceptual Art, Institutional Critique, Etc...). Obviously anybody can do it without having to understand the complex issues related to a specific discourse. Improvisation as opposed to other kinds of music making or practices has no fidelity to any roots or origins. It is by default heretical. Where applied, improvisation brings about glimpses of instability. If it is working, its elusive qualities evade solidification and commodification - at least in the moment.

# TOWARDS A DENSE ATMOSPHERE: RADICAL PERFORMATIVITY AND SITE-SPECIFICITY

Within the context of art, is it possible to have a non-representational relationship to reality? If yes, this is surely done by acknowledging all the specificities of the room. One should try to activate the room as much as possible and disrupt previous habits and behaviours to create different ones. In other words, to go against the normalisation process. I have found improvisation to be a practice which takes into account everything happening in the room. Not to create something new that later could be used elsewhere, but as a way of intensifying the moment through changing social relations.

Improvisation can be an extreme form of site-specificity as well as a radical, intimate and immanent self-criticality. As there is no need to defend or build a position for future situations, improvisation always points towards self-destruction.

We could see improvisation as pure mediality with no outside to itself, as pure means without end, countering any form of separation, fragmentation or individuality. When can one feel this activation of the space taking effect? When there is a dense atmosphere which makes you aware that something important is at stake. As there are no predetermined categories or words to describe this experience, what is at stake is very difficult to articulate. Because of the difficulties of assimilating it or immediately understanding it, this affective strangeness counters the normalisation process. When this dense atmosphere is produced, the people involved become painfully aware of their social position and usual behaviour. If the density of the atmosphere is sufficient it can become physical, disturbing our senses and producing strange feelings in our bodies. Through such a multi-sensorial disruption in the appearance of neutrality, one gets the sense of being in a strange place - not really knowing where to stand. We become vulnerable. Every movement or word becomes significant. Once you are there, there is no way back. What is created is not a unified sense of space or time, but a heterotopia where one location contains different spaces



and temporalities. Previous hierarchies and established organisations of space are exposed.

The traditional time of the performance and distribution of attention (the audience's respectful behaviour towards the performers etc.) are left behind. If one goes far enough, actively distributing one's vulnerability, these hierarchies could be diffused, not to give a false sense of equality, but to produce alternative social relations of time and space. The creation of an affective class?

Don't get me wrong, I am not talking about 'relational aesthetics' where some audience interactivity adds cultural capital to some bland art works done by very concrete artists with dubious ideologies.

## ESTRANGEMENT

Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (poorly translated as 'estrangement effect') tries to get rid of the fourth wall in the theatre by distancing and disrupting the illusion separating the audience from the stage/performer, making evident their 'passive' and 'alienated' condition. This in turn makes them understand how constructed the situation is.

In improvisation the estrangement effect is doubled, as the condition of the actor or performer is also disrupted. As both the performers and the audience find themselves in a condition that they could not have anticipated before, the separation between them is no longer so clear.

Right now, in whatever situation you are in, how much are you willing to give up?

A dense atmosphere in improvisation reveals the conservative construction of the situation (audience, performance, manager, curator). It produces the desire for a new set of conditions. There are no prescriptions for improvisation. The goal is to create an unprecedented situation – strange for everybody, without a didactic or presupposed agenda. In his text 'The Emancipated Spectator', Jacques Rancière uses the example of Joseph Jacotot, a French professor in the 19th century who tried to teach his students what he himself did not know. In doing so, he took as his starting point the equality of intelligence, negating claims to mastery of knowledge. In Rancière's words, Jacotot was 'calling for intellectual emancipation against the standard idea of the instruction of the people'. Performing the authority of knowledge (like Debord's criticism or Brecht's didactics) reproduces

the logic of mastery, even when its deconstruction is intended. Brecht plays certain strategies against each other (i.e. introducing social realism into an epic or romantic scenario) in order for their techniques and effects to become evident.

However his didactics continually distance the viewer from what they do not know, from what they still 'have to learn'. Rancière advocates thinking differently about seeing and hearing – not as acts of passivity but as 'ways of interpreting the world', as ways of transforming and reconfiguring it. He is against this pedagogical distance as well as any idea of genre or discipline, but he doesn't go far enough in explaining how this oppositionality could be enacted. Rejection of these inequalities is not enough.

We need an alternative way to experience life which is indifferent to the claims of hierarchical knowledge. Again, interpretation would require mediation, as one would be reflecting on the situation, rather than *being* in the situation.

The question is how to be 'in' the situation as much as possible, with minimum reflection in order to explore, live and experience the precise moment. Here I am not aligned with Feuerbach's romantic idea of truth as unseparateness, but claim that the Real itself does not contain these separations. These separations can be understood as ideologically and historically constructed truths which are used to mediate our experience of the Real.

However, the closer we get to the Real, the less these ready-made truths help us to live it or experience it. If we are 'in' enough, we might be able to leave behind our previous preconceptions, prescriptions, and ideologies.

'Real' here is to be understood quite straightforwardly, as what happens 'for real' simply because it's happening here and now. It's connected to the sense in which one can have a real pain, and behave as though that pain were real: indeed, this is an interesting characteristic of children's playing, when they encounter pain, they express it.

This is not to say that 'real' in its everyday adjectival sense doesn't harbour a powerful but complicated connection with the Real as noun, whether François Laruelle's or Jacques Lacan's. Only the production of new and radical concepts in a language indifferent to the dominant structures would help us to understand the particularities of the situation in the dense atmosphere that we have created.

## THE STRANGER

*The Stranger or the identity of the real is non-reflected, lived, experienced, consumed while remaining in itself without the need to alienate itself through representation.* – François Laruelle

To what extent would you *détourn* yourself in the situation you are in?

When improvisation is successful, it puts everybody in a strange situation; it makes us strangers. In his non-Marxism, François Laruelle uses the concept of The Stranger to describe a more radical and universal concept of the proletariat. The Stranger is a radically immanent and performative, non-representational, non-normative thinking subject. It is a force (of) thought and a heretic in the sense of refusing authority and tradition. As Ray Brassier puts it:

*The Stranger: is the name for the Subject of practice-of-theory, modelled ('cloned') on given material (philosophical, but in this instance sonic/music/aesthetic/cultural etc.), but determined by [the?] real of the last instance (=One etc.), whose immanence it effectuates. The Stranger-subject is what you become when you think-practice-perform in radical immanence.* – Ray Brassier, Private correspondence with the author.

For the sake of space let me butcher Laruelle's complex system of non-philosophy. Laruelle is trying to explore the Real through radical immanence without adding layers of either reflection or representation, through which we otherwise mediate our experiences. In order to understand the concept of The Stranger we have to understand 'Determination-in-the-Last-Instance' (DLI). Originally the term was invented by Marx-Engels within historical materialism, and developed by Althusser for his analysis of infrastructure/superstructure (which in the last instance remains reciprocally co-constituted by what it determines). For Laruelle, the DLI is simultaneously real, universal, immanent, heterogeneous, and irreversible.

The DLI is not simply an immanent causality but radical immanence itself. A syntax without synthesis which excludes reciprocity, convertibility, systematicity, finality, formalism, materialism and technologism. Laruelle is not trying to empirically prove his concepts but instead use them as self-evident thoughts which correlate to the Real. The DLI does not escape from itself or alienate itself. The DLI is the causality of

unforeseeable (non-definable and non-demonstrable) theoretical and pragmatic emergence – if we look at the etymology of improvisation we find that its Latin root '*improvisus*' means 'unforeseen'. It is practice-of-theory which is an event in itself. The DLI invalidates or suspends theoretical authority and any claims to knowledge of the Real. The Real cannot correspond to a doctrine or a discipline, however it can be 'cloned' into a concept and from there you try to deal with the immanence of the concept itself, taking it as an axiom rather than using it to understand or determine the Real. You cannot get yourself into the Real, but you can clone it into a concept, and then remain as close as possible by dealing performatively with the concept, with the minimum reflection possible.

Following Laruelle we can take improvisation as an axiom, in the sense that one cannot really define when one is or is not improvising (since so many questions arise around individual free will, subjectivity, and ideology; questions which I don't think can ever be satisfactorily resolved). By adopting this axiomatic approach to improvisation as a domain to which one can bring ideas, decisions, and concepts as ways of narrowing down or focusing where the improvisation is going to happen, one can look closely into a specific area. Everything can be a tool for improvisation and we can learn a lot from feminist thinkers such as Judith Butler and Peggy Phelan about how to bring the notion of performativity down from its conceptual use (as in Laruelle's work) in order to intensify an encounter with the concept that the 'personal is political'. Radical concepts can enable a radical critique from within, without respect to the master terms such as capital and heteronormalism. J.K. Gibson-Graham says in *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*,

*Capitalism is the phallus or 'master term' within a system of social differentiation. Capitalist industrialization grounds the distinction between core (the developed world) and periphery (the so-called Third World).*

If we understand capitalism as the 'master term', then the 'Stranger-in-the-last-instance' is the most particular and vulnerable subject and it cannot be represented by either the dominant hegemonic order or the working class. The Stranger is too particular and site-specific to be subsumed by other universalised concepts. The Stranger is the ultimate impossible subject and only respects the authority of radical performativity rather than the Represented.

# IDIOMS AND IDIOTS

## NOTE:

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11 Paragraphs on an improvised concert

By Ray Brassier, Jean-Luc Guionnet, Seijiro Murayama and Mattin

*Improvisation: 1786, 'act of improvising musically' from Fr. improvisation, from improviser 'compose or say extemporaneously', from It. improvvisare, from improvviso 'unforeseen, unprepared', from L. improvisus, from in- 'not' + provisus 'foreseen', also 'provided', pp. of providere 'foresee, provide' (see provide).<sup>1</sup>*

## 0 - WHAT HAPPENED?

We did something together: a concert. We want to try to explain it to ourselves: what happened exactly? How did it happen? And why? ... We want to recount the story of the process, but not only that; we also want to recapitulate all the discussions that took place before and afterwards (right up to the present), articulating the questions posed by the concert – questions that are both abstractly theoretical and very concrete. Our hope is that in doing so, the experience of the concert will allow us to attain a better understanding of the representation of art in art.

## 1 - BEFORE THE CONCERT

We are all interested in philosophy. One of us is a professional philosopher interested in music. The others invited him to collaborate on a project. The precise nature of this collaboration is to be determined: he is not a musician and has never participated in any sort of musical performance. He agrees to collaborate but neither he nor the others have any idea what form the collaboration will take.

There is something interesting about the sound of words in a musical context – even though most of the time the results are terrible. The sought-after emotion often results from the contrast between two, three, or more simultaneous levels of logic, or levels of thought. Thus for example, the commentary which actors provide about their own acting within a film can be powerfully moving: consider Ingmar Bergman's *A Passion*, or the way in which Chris Marker provides a commentary upon his own film in *Level 5*, or the way in which Sarahang, the Afghan singer, commentates upon his own song within the song (even if one doesn't understand a word he is saying).

The first difficulty arises over the role of words. Although unsure about how to proceed, the philosopher is sure about what he does *not* want to do: he does not want to perform the role of academic theoretician commentating on a musical performance by the others. And he fears that if his participation takes the form of him speaking about the music in his capacity as a philosopher, the result will only be a banal and stilted academic exercise that remains beholden to certain dubious assumptions about the relation between sounds and concepts. Principal among these is the notion that the thinking embodied in music is some form of *sub-conceptual* content that must be given explicit conceptual expression through an act of theoretical reflection on the music. This schema is unacceptable on three counts: first, the resort to speech threatens to re-envelop sound in signifying tropes that cannot but attenuate the latter's material opacity; second, it assumes that music *means* in a way amenable to subsumption by ready-made conceptual forms and theoretical categories; third, it implies a division of labour between verbal conceptualisation and sonic production that seems to reiterate the ideological distinction between theoretical-cognitive reflection and practical-aesthetic production. Improvising musicians who really *think* about what they are doing are far better qualified theoreticians of their own musical-artistic practice than any philosopher could ever be. Professional accreditation as an 'academic philosopher' does not automatically entitle one to the role of 'designated theorist'.

This presents an immediate dilemma: three of us are experienced performers-improvisers; but if the other is unwilling to perform as an academic theorist – reflecting upon, commentating on, or otherwise providing a second-order accompaniment to the performance – then what exactly is he going to do? Given that he has abjured all recourse to commentary or speech, there seems to be no other option but for him to somehow perform alongside the others. Mime and tap-dancing having been ruled out; it becomes difficult to avoid the resort to

an instrument. But which instrument? After some hesitation, the choice of electric guitar presents itself for purely practical reasons: there is the dim memory of having been taught the rudiments of guitar playing long ago at school, and even though he has not picked up the instrument since, there is the feeling that he has at least a vague idea of how to coax sounds from the guitar. No such modicum of confidence is possible concerning any other instrument. However, the choice of guitar is problematic. We have agreed that we want to do something unfamiliar not only for ourselves but also for any audience that might be present. Yet the presence of an electric guitar immediately threatens to undermine this imperative. On one hand, the instrument brings with it a whole host of associations with the rock idiom – associations we would rather avoid. On the other hand, the use of electric guitar in free improvisation is associated with renowned players like Derek Bailey or Keijo Haino, whose distinctive styles might be caricatured through incompetence rather than design. Inability risks resulting in an inept pastiche of 'free improvisation': incompetence can breed familiarity as surely as a surplus of competence. The potency and impotency concomitant with incapacity will prove to be a decisive factor in the concert. It is not just that one of us does not know how to play according to the technical conventions governing recognisable musical idioms; he does not know how to 'free improvise' either. The question is whether this double incapacity can nevertheless yield something besides banality.

## 2 - Don't Start Improvising for God's Sake

We take improvisation as an axiom, in the sense that one cannot really define when one is, or is not, improvising (since so many questions arise around individual free will, subjectivity, and ideology; questions which we do not think can ever be satisfactorily resolved). By adopting this axiomatic approach to improvisation as a domain to which one can bring ideas, decisions, and concepts as ways of narrowing down or focussing where the improvisation is going to happen, one can look closely into a specific area.

In speaking of improvisation, we're not just talking about the production of particular sounds or events but the production of social spaces as well. We invoke this as both a strategic term and a conceptual tool. Improvisation can therefore refer both to experimental music making as well as mundane everyday practices. But wherever it is applied, improvisation should bring about glimpses of instability. If it works, its elusive qualities should evade solidification and commodification – at least in the moment. The goal would be to apply to whatever discourse one is in the process of articulating those quibbles developed with regard to the world so as to always understand discourse in the exteriority of the world – though 'world' is not the right word here; perhaps it would be better to say 'what one "is" not'?

Is it possible to have a non-representational relationship to reality in the context of art? If so, this would surely be achieved by acknowledging all the specificities of the room. One should try to activate the room as much as possible and disrupt previous habits and behaviours in order to create different ones. In other words, one should strive to work against the normalisation process.

We have found improvisation to be a practice that requires taking into account everything happening in the room. It is not just the creation of something new that could be used later elsewhere, but a way of intensifying the moment by transforming social relations. Improvisation can be an extreme form of site-specificity as well as a radical, intimate and immanent self-criticality. Moreover, since there is no need to defend or construct a position for future situations, improvisation always tends towards self-destruction.

Thus, improvisation could be seen as a pure mediality with no outside; as a pure means with no end or *telos*, countering every form of separation, fragmentation, or even individuality. When does this activation of the space take effect? When one has succeeded in generating an atmosphere of sufficient density as to be capable of engendering the awareness that something significant is at stake. Since there are no predetermined categories or words to describe this experience, precisely what is at stake is always difficult to articulate. Yet because of the difficulties in assimilating or immediately understanding it, this strangeness counters the normalisation process. When an atmosphere of sufficient density is generated, all those involved become painfully aware of their social position and standardised behaviours. And when the density of the atmosphere reaches a certain threshold, it can become physical, generating sensory disturbances and unfamiliar corporeal sensations. Through a disruption in the appearance of neutrality, one gets the sense of being in a strange place – of not really knowing where to stand. Every movement or word becomes significant. What is then created is not a unified sense of space or time, but rather a *heterotopia* where one's location contains different spaces and temporalities. Previous hierarchies and established organisations of space are exposed. The traditional time



of the performance and distribution of attention (the audience's respectful behaviour towards the performers, etc.) are left behind. If one goes far enough, these hierarchies may even be diffused, not to provide a false sense of equality, but to produce alternative social relations of time and space. We do not want to be misunderstood. We are not talking about any variant of 'relational aesthetics' where a little injection of audience interactivity adds cultural capital to bland artworks executed by very specific artists with dubious ideologies. Rather, we want to interrogate the limitations of performing on stage: To what extent is it possible to use the parameters that define the spectacle (i.e. the divisions between audience, performer, stage, expectations) as material for improvisation? The issue about expectations in this concert is important because many people were expecting a philosopher: what would a philosopher do in an improvised music concert? Something involving speech... But he played guitar instead – badly! To what extent did the tension produced by these expectations influence and intensify our playing?

In the conversations leading up to the concert we talked a lot about trying to be 'in' the performance as much as possible. Lately, we have discovered that the way to do this is by pushing towards the borders or limits of the framework that one is working with. These borders, which are often simply accepted without question, actually contain all the problems, contradictions, and conditions that determine the concert situation, but not in any obvious way. One has to deal with them very carefully if one is to be able to identify how they constrain us to behave in certain ways, and the extent to which they affect us. Here we are not just talking about whether or not the room is hot or cold, etc., but about those unwritten yet binding conventions that we comply with out of habit: those rules which are not supposed to be challenged. The simple question often overlooked in improvisatory practice is: How does the social context of the concert frame and delimit our scope of action?

What is required to go beyond such limitations? The refusal to fall back into a practice that reproduces established conventions or reiterates stereotyped ways of music making, even those accepted as part of what one is supposed to do in order to be recognised as an 'experimental musician'. Take for example the convention governing the acceptable distance between performing and being in the audience (this relates to the allocation of passive and active roles among performers and audience). If one is performing or has made the commitment to perform a concert, it means that s/he has a proposition, something to offer. But if one's proposition consists of *being the audience*, then the risk is that such a proposition will just become an everyday, casual situation. Yet what is arguably most interesting about the concert situation is that it provides an opportunity to create a different social space: people who attend a concert want to be affected, touched; they want to receive something – or perhaps they don't? In which case the performer's decision *not to offer* would frustrate the audience's desire *not to receive*... Although it is very problematic to accept this passive role, it also provides the performer with the opportunity to do something 'extraordinary'; to create a situation that goes against the grain of our everyday social interactions. The most interesting concerts any of us have played or witnessed were those where this position and these accepted roles, which both audience and performer inherit from the conventions of the concert situation, become twisted or developed into something else as a result of the audience assuming a more responsible and active role, such that they come to believe that they could do anything.

We appreciate the problematic nature of terms such as 'activity' and 'passivity'; we are also aware of how easy it is to lapse into a patronising stance.

But we have observed that concerts which do not challenge or affect anyone just leave everything as it is, failing to generate anything with which anyone might actively engage: in such cases, it is as though nothing had happened.

Other concerts – and Niort was one of them – might provide food for thought long afterwards (a year and a half in this particular case), precisely because it remains difficult to judge whether or not it was a 'good' or a 'bad' concert in any musical sense. This is what spurs us to try to think 'in between' these terms: in this context, a 'good' concert would be one wherein any judgement executed in conformity with established dichotomies between 'good' or 'bad', 'success' or failure', would be absurd. In such cases, extant standards of judgement are suspended and we are forced to question the basis of the parameters by which we judge – previous standards and values collapse.

It is not just a matter of dissolving judgement and of liquidating those constraints that allow one to distinguish artistic success from artistic failure, but of ratcheting up the challenge inherent in the ideal of 'free improvisation' to the point where it is the very nature of the concert situation that is at stake in the performance. Plinky-plonking is not enough. The plinky-plonk mode of reacting to one another in improvisation is long gone; our goal is to try to problematise what 'reacting to one another' might mean by exploring different

ways of almost *not reacting* as a way of reacting. But the point is not to substitute a 'non-reaction' for a 'reaction'; it is to seek out a mode of reaction or non-reaction that would overtake any kind of latent or 'hidden' imitation; precisely the kind of imitation that doesn't reveal itself as an imitation – the latter applies to most of what gets called 'reacting' in music, whether composed or improvised.

We each bring our own tools to the concert situation: instruments, ideas, timing, craft, knowledge... To believe that one could break with all this all at once is unrealistic to say the least. So what does it mean to react to one another? We think it has to do with striving not to do so in any obvious way; with forcing oneself to attempt something that has not been attempted before; something that incurs some fragility, some anxiety, some tension that might feed the other players; in the hope that everyone might thereby be rendered maximally alert. The goal would be to attain a mode of interaction that would allow each player to appropriate a personalised sense of time: there is a very specific way in which the passing of time is experienced in special concerts, and there was definitely something like this going on in Niort.

### 3 - DURING THE CONCERT

Just before the concert, while doing the sound-check, there was a realisation that we needed to do something about our mode of interaction, since the way we were engaging with each other was too obvious. So we conceived a structure that would impose constraints on our interaction. The concert was going to be 45 minutes long. We divided these 45 minutes into 3 parts, each of them lasting 15 minutes. Each of us could decide to play in one or two parts, but not in all three. But we also allowed ourselves the decision not to play in any of the three parts. So not only was there the possibility of 15 minutes of silence occurring during the concert; there was also the possibility of 45 minutes of silence should all four of us coincidentally decide not to play in any of the three sections... Of course, for one reason or another we broke the rules, but still this structure generated unusual ways of reacting to one another.

One of our principal aims in approaching this concert was to try to render the atmosphere as 'dense' as possible. In Niort, each of us strove individually to realise this quest for density. Yet in doing so separately, we managed to achieve a collective mode of intensification that could never have been realised had we resorted to stereotyped modes of interpersonal communication.

For instance, one of us chose to use nothing but a very reduced electronic device and his voice, neither of which he usually uses; playing alone during the second third of the concert's duration was a very powerful experience. This density was experienced by another in the form of a gamble, not only about when to play, but also about whether to play at all. The possibility of not playing was envisaged as a powerful temptation, since it provided an easy way of avoiding the risk of ridicule that inevitably accompanied the decision to play. This decision assumed the form of a challenge, like the decision to leap from a great height without knowing what lies below.

### 4 - Clinical Violence

When we began discussing what we wanted to achieve during the concert, we talked about trying to attain a cold or *clinical* violence. We set ourselves what is, on the face of it, an absurd (not to say dishonourable) goal: we wanted to make people cry. And in fact one member of the audience – unprompted – did cry. It might be that this is what happens when the density of the atmosphere becomes too much and is rendered oppressively physical. Why did we want to achieve this? Because we wanted to do something that would go beyond the production of more or less aesthetically pleasing abstract sounds, the 'liking' or 'disliking' of which is concomitant with the reaffirmation of one's musical taste.

Of course, we do not believe that music harbours some sort of intrinsic affective dimension and we fully embrace the Modernist critique of sentimentalist Romanticism. But this critique on its own is insufficient; it has too often encouraged a sort of aestheticised formalism. We wanted to cut through the paralysing double bind: either emotional impact via rhetorical expressionism or reflexive lucidity via safely disengaged formalism. We wanted to achieve something that would be at once theoretically and viscerally exacting. The problem is one of forging modes of musical expression that incur some sort of psychic as well as cognitive challenge while abjuring affective stereotypy and the recourse to facile emotional gratification, whether the performer's or the audience's. What passes for violence in music too often consists of a series of shock gestures: dissonance, volume, noisiness; theatrical threats and imprecations...

We wanted to try something else: to subject ourselves and the audience to an obscurely unsettling test; to force them and ourselves out of any recognisable comfort zone by withholding displays of improvisatory craft as well as of musical technique. 'Violence', but of a peculiarly studied kind. Obviously, it need not be physical (though this is not to say that it cannot or should not be physical). Often it is psychological and deals with expectations and projections. It is born of the refusal to satisfy the former while interrogating the motives of every-one involved until the level of self-reflexivity is pushed to the point of positive feedback.

Thus the type of violence we are interested in is not spontaneous. It is disciplined and calculated. It is purposefully motivated. In this sense, it bears a certain affinity to what people refer to as 'political violence'. It comes from the core of our subjective engagement in our practice and when it hits home, it touches something very deep. It falls outside the reproduction of stereotypes or ready-made categorisations of expression. Who carries it out? It might well be the idiot trying to express him/herself, coming from a totally different angle, cutting through the warm shit, the familiar comfort zone. The idiot feels cornered by the non-idiot; there is an elastic band tying them to him/herself. This elastic band is the pressure exerted upon his/her self by all the conservative properties of the context with which s/he is engaging. At some point, this elastic band is slightly too tight and there is always the risk it might snap but the idiot has a lot of time to reflect upon the nature of this pressure, and why s/he feels this way. In the middle, there are the accepted norms; anything that represents the status quo proper to the context one is working with. In the context of free improvisation these might include: craft; aesthetics; taste; certain preconceptions about what it means for performers to react to one another or to the audience; the habits that condition and reproduce the concert situation, etc.

After one has been thinking through these issues for a long time; when at last what one wishes to cut or break with has become very clear; when one is no longer prepared to wait; one becomes a slingshot. Of course, this might entail shattering some of the foundations supporting the values that are taken to be constitutive of an improvised music concert. An incalculable risk has occurred and while this description might sound desperate, there is no desperation involved in such violence. Even when the pressure in question is that of the status quo, once this violence occurs it becomes indifferent to it; it super-sedes it in the simplest way imaginable, as though nothing extraordinary were happening. One might feel as though one were in the dark, but when people are comfortable with the light and someone questions that light, then people become fearful and they perceive the threat of enforced obscurity as violence. This is the sense in which it is a clinical violence. The precision involved is that of the sniper or surgeon cutting through the veneer of normality; some may experience this as an act of violence but for the idiot it is simply necessary. The scalpel cuts through the foundations that provide the unquestioned or unstated rules of improvisation holding the concert situation together. Unlike the surgeon however, the idiot has no clear goal, nor an identifiable cyst to excise. The importance is in the cut. From there we can all draw our own conclusions. The idiot looks upon reality from an unstructured or uncategorised point of view. His or her intervention is without a foundation: an-archic. There is no general consensus or general understanding; this is the sense in which we are idiots.

## 5 - eleven ways of SAYING NOTHING

1. From 'having nothing to say' to 'finding something to say' by shifting one's position with regard to that movement.
2. Around the question of the concert, music and philosophy met, without knowing why. In any case, we wanted to change something about it.
3. We exchanged ideas about 'what a concert is' in order to find an efficient practice, mainly by defining what we would *not* like to do in any given concert.
4. The conventional frame of the concert was thereby displaced (which would have created possibilities for the opening of vision and for a renewed listening). Nevertheless, we did not know what we might do.
5. By putting this in parenthesis, we performed a kind of concert, a non-concert. But in any case, what is the relation between A and non-A?
6. The decision taken by thought and psychological tension were our sources of energy. This project also undermined the identity that makes of us musicians

or philosophers. One is a musician only when one succeeds in giving a presence, a life to music. The same holds for a philosopher. Let us be musical, philosophical, etc., at the same time... (In the word 'collaboration' one finds the word 'labor'. It usually means a collaboration in which each finds him or herself in his or her habitual position, as a musician, philosopher, etc., without any subversion of identity or attempt to slip towards other identities, towards X).

7. By putting philosophy and music in parenthesis, by separating our profession from ourselves, we simply felt ourselves to be human beings who feel, react, and reflect: the experience of not feeling 'ourselves' anymore (don't we feel too tied and sometimes even imprisoned by our professions?).

8. The profound silence within us, filled with the immense energy that threatens to explode when blocked: this unnameable zone would be the basis of our experience with language. There we were.

9. The audience was thereby invited to share this experience and some of them seemed to feel the direct impact of the tension that was flowing from us, forgetting their own expectations of the concert set-up

10. Once the non-concert was finished, our work began again, and we had to try to put this unsayable experience into words. This text is part of that attempt.

11. To dare to *do* each time without falling into routine, in order to renew, to stimulate, to *dynamise* the everyday.

## 6 - Non

We think there is a particular relationship between the NON of Derek Bailey's 'NON-idiomatic' and the NON of François Laruelle's 'NON-philosophy'. NON-philosophy is the theory or science of philosophy, treating philosophy as a material. NON-idiomatic playing is supposed to be able to treat all music as a material.

Derek Bailey:

*[T]he main difference I think between freely improvised music and [other musics] is that they are idiomatic and freely improvised music isn't. They are formed by an idiom, they are not formed by improvisation. They are formed the same way that speech vernacular, a verbal accent, is formed. In freely improvised music, its roots are in occasion rather than place. Maybe improvisation takes the place of the idiom. But it doesn't have the grounding, the roots if you like, of those other musics. Its strengths lie elsewhere. There are plenty of styles – group styles and individual styles – found in free playing but they don't coalesce into an idiom. They just don't have that kind of social or regional purchase or allegiance.*

*They are idiosyncratic.*

Of course, one could understand Bailey's statement as one strategy among others to affirm an individual position in the music world. But although these kinds of strategies are usually simple (and sometimes stupid), the non-idiomatic one seems to us to be very dynamic and full of interesting questions and problems – even if Derek Bailey is not necessarily the best exemplar of his own idea (but isn't that the sign of a good idea? When one's idea or theory completely overtakes one's practice or subjectivity?).

There is a similarity between the trajectories of Laruelle and Bailey: both seem to be engaged in trying to free philosophical and musical practice respectively from their institutionalised idioms. Both have very similar relationships to their own historical background. 'NON' as a prefix means that you are not part of something but dealing with it from some kind of exteriority – yet one which involves the immanence of practice rather than the transcendence of reflection. As a negative prefix, 'NON' also means that you are supposed to have some kind of immanent general point of view: not from above but from within the practice of music itself – the most immanent point of view possible. It entails that you add a layer of representation such that it either subtracts the previous layer or even unifies all the layers.

Laruelle: 'Philosophy is always at least philosophy of philosophy'; 'non-philosophy is the science of philosophy'. Why is non-philosophy as the science of philosophy not a metaphilosophy? Laruelle claims that philosophy is constitutively reflexive: every philosophical claim about X (whether X is an artwork, a scientific theory, or a historical event) is always at the same time a reflection on philosophy's relation to X. In other words, the philosopher is never just talking about *this object*, but also about how every other philosophy mediates his or her relationship to this object. Non-philosophy represents an attempt to ascend *beyond* this level of reflexive mediation while simultaneously descending *beneath* the

level of irreflexive immediacy. It does this by operating in the medium of what Laruelle calls 'real immanence': this is an immediacy that is radically irreflexive, but one that generates a kind of pure practical transcendence (mediation through practice rather than theory). 'Real' as opposed to wholly idealised or conceptualised immanence boils down to the question of the *use* of theory: the real immanence evoked by Laruelle entails a strictly disciplined *practice* of philosophy. Instead of exacerbating reflexivity by ascending to a meta-metalevel, non-philosophy adds a third layer of auto-reflexivity that is also a minus (an + a that is - a) - a subtraction that allows us to view all philosophy from a vantage point that is at once singular and universal. Mediating abstraction is concretised and unified through a practice that, as Laruelle puts it, allows it to be 'seen in-One'. This is not some mystical rapture but a practical immersion in abstraction; a concretisation of theory that precludes the sort of play 'with' different philosophical idioms indulged in by postmodern ironists.

We brandish the NON as the marker for an incapacity that adds a layer of knowing and subtracts a layer of self-consciousness from reflection in such a way as to eliminate complacent gestures of reflexivity: the player's knowing wink to the audience ('you know that I know that you know...'). NON rescinds the complacent reassurances of such ironic distancing by driving an inalienable wedge between the player's intellectual and affective capacities and his technical craft: it pits practice against craft in a gesture of *uncrafting*.

Non-idiomatic music exemplifies a similar agenda: it is informed by knowledge of music and musics, but adds a layer of non-knowledge that would allow the music to be taken 'in-One' (something like a phenomenological *époque* applied to the whole of music), thereby forestalling the typically postmodern gesture of 'playing with' idioms. NON supposes the impossibility of any second-order discourse 'on' music; it indexes the impossibility of interpretation: one may view all the music of the moment through the filter of electroacoustic music; one may also view the viewing through the window of improvisation.

We postulate an equivalence between NON ('non-philosophy'/'non-idiomatic') and UN ('un-conscious'/'un-craft'). Both are about releasing the potency proper to impotence, the capacity proper to incapacity. The practice of uncrafting does not just imply the negation of technique, but the unleashing of a generic potency proper to incapacity, of which technical/practical capacity would be merely a restrictive instance.

Our performance in Niort pitted uncrafting against the aestheticisation of improvisatory technique. The latter results from the tendency to abstract the sonic or auditory dimension of performance from its non-aesthetic envelope, exemplified by the social framework and the concert set-up, and to grant pride of place to sound according to the aestheticism of the 'pure' listening experience. In doing so, free improvisation risks degenerating into an aestheticism of technique in which the skill exhibited by the free-improvisation virtuoso is fetishised just like that of the idiomatic virtuoso. The immanent critique of aestheticism will not be accomplished by collapsing music into ideology or injecting it with an extra layer of self-consciousness. It is rather a question of levelling the hierarchical difference between immanent practice and transcendent theory by re-implicating theory into practice but in such a way as to precipitate a crisis wherein convulsive conception interrupts complacent sensation.

The goal would be to effectuate a critique that would no longer depend upon the security of critical distance; a critique that would remain inside. This would no longer really be a critique but rather the discovery of an outside *through* the inside.

## 7 - REPRESENTATION

*Represent*: late 14c., 'to bring to mind by description,' also 'to symbolise, to be the embodiment of; from *Ū*Fr. *representer* (12c.), from *L. repræsentare*, from *re-*, intensive prefix, + *præsentare* 'to present', lit. 'to place before' (see *present* (2)). *Legislative sense* is attested from 1650s. *Representation* 'image, likeness' is from c.1425; *legislative sense* first attested 1769.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1980s, Claude Levi-Strauss, voicing his strong objection to what was then contemporary art, exclaimed: 'They think they can paint like birds sing'. As so often happens when thinkers criticise art, the sharpness of their thoughts points to something that is supposed to be negative, but which from another point of view can be seen as a potentially positive dynamic. We can connect Levi-Strauss' remark to the non-idiomatic. If I simply know, I am in 'pure presence' (animality); if I know that I know, I am in representation (double layer/idiom). The human is supposed to be *sapiens-sapiens*, the animal that *knows that he knows*; this means that human beings can never exit representation; in other words that 'we' will never be able to paint or sing like birds because we'll always be bound by our cultural constructions and background. But adding a layer to

the two previous ones (I know that I know that I know), especially if this layer is nominated as *not-something* (knowledge), can mean attempting to return artificially to the first layer: the non-idiomatic would be the (long and subjective) process of constructing an 'artificial bird'. The sequence would be the following:

1 - First layer: bird song

2 - Second layer: vernacular accent

3 - Third layer: either the super-idiomatic (playing with the multiplicity of idioms); or the non-idiomatic: taking the music 'in-One' (= *aproblematic* layer).

Representation can be envisaged as a thousand-layered cake (*mille-feuille*), each layer being re-injected into itself and more or less into the others (there being a more or less powerful filter between the output of one layer and the input of all the others). To be able to situate oneself relative to an idiom is to take up a position within the thousand-layer cake; to work through the question is to operate upon the thousand-layer cake while forcibly subjecting it to an irremediable modification: here, the interaction with the object is particularly dynamic (even requiring some security measures) - whether to lose or not to lose one's accent (but what is the absence of accent)?

NON is a layer added to the thousand layers, but one imparted from the vantage of a practical 'vision in One': it is the thousand and *oneth*. This is a new layer that is a function of unknown knowledge: the immanence of practice as an addition that is also a subtraction; a plus that is also a minus. So long as one thinks that to know always already implies a power of knowledge and that knowledge is a regression in those powers that bring us back hypothetically to mere knowing, without knowing that one knows - then one will continue to insist that it is not possible simply to know (=knowing) - yet it is precisely to this condition that we accede to through the NON...

The question is whether representation is a flattening out from below or levelling out from above; which is to say, an elevation... The 'reality' of influence in an improvisatory context consists in acceding to one *less* level of representation (this is the reality of synchronicity). Things happen when they are as little represented as possible.

Why not then consider the rumour around, within, or outside the work as constituting its real matter? What do we mean by rumour? The flux/afflux/influx of data and signs generated by the form of the work; since the latter is itself a particular point within a huge flux of data and signs. Rumour is the claim that a piece of art cannot resist the flux it generates, and of which it is made.

The problem then would be to bend a previous flux towards another one in such a way as to prevent the piece from being rendered transparent to the flux: transparency=YES; work=NO. This is not to say that a work should be more conceptual than material: it could still be anything, and even more (or less) than anything... Of course, what we are calling 'rumour' could be designated differently since the word's semantic proximity to 'gossip' could invite misunderstanding. But we think this proximity is or can be important: consider the history of art, or the debates and commentaries surrounding any artistic event, including those promulgated by the so-called artist herself. Nevertheless, according to this logic, every work of art would be a way of saying NO to rumour, all the while knowing that rumour makes its living from every such NO. This would mean that the shape and the process of the music have something to do with the shape and process of the rumour surrounding the music itself - even if rumour is also a way of resisting. In the context of composed music, the influence (among other factors) is often represented as something that happens to sound as something subsisting in itself.

To say that improvisation always has at least one less layer of representation is to say that it is the deployment of influence in the real - this is where the immanence of music resides, rather than in the immanence of the performance or the immanence of the context to or with the music. And to say that the influence happens 'for real' just means that it is not represented as an influence. 'Real' here is to be understood quite straightforwardly, as what happens 'for real' simply because it's happening here and now. It's connected to the sense in which one can have a real pain, and behave as though that pain were real: indeed, this is an interesting characteristic of children's playing. This is not to say that 'real' in its everyday adjectival sense doesn't harbour a powerful but complicated connection with the real as noun, whether Laruelle's or Lacan's. Criticism, in art, or of art, invariably consist in superimposing a layer. This layer could be described as follows: it transforms everything into the theatre of its own representation, even in those cases where everything is already theatre. In other words, the indication of representation has always already been accomplished and yes, it is always being forgotten. To indicate representation is to frame the frame: a doubly redundant gesture. Ultimately, critical distance ends



up converting everything into fodder for sociological analysis and an object of the human sciences (the latter amounting to a grotesque caricature of what is most distinctive about the scientific stance). Being aware of the fact that you represent the art you are supposed to create is simply the engine that drives any historical process in art.

NON: the trap consists in believing that the contemporary is always the ultimate; that it is contemporary with us; that it is our contemporary: that we are contemporary! To break history in two, to want to do so, to declare it by doing it, is already a sign that it is not being broken, that one is just praying... The impossibility of a discourse 'on' ultimately entails that of a discourse 'with' or even 'in': all that remains is discourse's feedback, re-injected into itself (and what this cry renders possible relative to cry/non/...): a discourse re-injecting itself into itself on the pretext of having to integrate its own conditions of possibility.

In this sense, NON would be a tabula rasa: the degree zero of cognition. It presumes knowing and at the same time the non-use of what is known as an object, as a material. Art is a school that teaches you about what a 'material' is, but it tends to repeat the same lesson over and over again: 'Either there's no material, or one must redefine it to obtain a radically new sense of what it is'. But we are always already implicated in the material because there is no possible position from which we could obtain an 'objective' vision of it as a whole. The latter is of course precisely what the concept of 'material' presupposes; but it does so because it assumes the transcendence of vision (and hence a veritable exit from the blind immanence of the real). Of course, non-philosophy's claims with regard to its material is that such an immanent posture can be realised without exiting from the element of radical immanence that is constitutive for its thinking. Nevertheless – and it is our conviction that this is what art teaches us – the taking up of the material in immanence entails the end of the material: we exit from the semantic field concomitant with the name 'material'. There is something incompatible between the NON and the material.

## 8 - EVERY MUSIC IS IDIOMATIC

The proposition 'Every music is idiomatic' is the affirmation of a point of view rather than an affirmation about the music itself. It says a lot about who is saying it and nearly nothing about the music itself. By way of contrast, the proposition 'It is possible for music to tend towards the non-idiomatic' says a lot about what music's inner dynamic might be. To believe that, regardless of all your efforts, whatever music you produce will always be idiomatic is to assume that you have a point of view from above, an aerial perspective or a kind of general map of all existing and possible musics. It is to assume that your playing or composing or performing is unfolding on the basis of that map, as an immediate part of it – that you are playing with or on that map. To integrate one's self into the idea of a non-idiomatic music doesn't mean that one is without such a map; it means simply that one's self is not located in the same place in your intellectual activity and in your artistic practice.

On another level, this can also mean that what one considers to be an idiom is simply the set of influences, imitations, or authorities from which it is possible to generate any musical proposition. This is an all too historical point of view, in the most impoverished sense that history can assume. The human being does indeed seem to be the greatest imitator among all the animals we know. To then go on to claim that 'all music is nevertheless idiomatic' is to point out this imitative skill. But to say 'music can tend towards the non-idiomatic' is not to assert that one can, as a musician, operate apart from any imitation or influence; it is merely to point out that it is possible for music to occur independently of any play upon those relations; or that music itself provides a powerful vehicle from which one can attain a critical point of view upon what could be called the prison-house of self-referential imitation. Quite apart from anything else, the impetus towards the non-idiomatic prevents improvisation from lapsing into a series of private jokes and the citation of musical references only a select few could properly appreciate.

In some ways, the concept of the non-idiomatic is connected to the Deleuzian notion of 'becomings' (*devenir*). Consider in this regard the link between the idea of 'minority' and that of 'idiom' (there is the example of creoles, where the non-idiomatic is not necessarily where one might have intuitively supposed to it to be). If genre is truly obsolete, then 'we' are faced with a huge potential disjunction between that which would separate the play on or with genres (which assumes a private joke aimed at those 'in the know' about genres, just as it assumes that universality is not truly universal), from that which manages

to play without worrying about any idiom. It is the idea of universality as a genre itself that the non-idiomatic must avoid. This is not to suggest that non-idiomatic musicians think of their own music as universal; rather, it means that even if it is impossible to ensure that a non-idiomatic musician isn't surreptitiously trafficking in hidden messages about genre, and thereby exercising some sort of judgment about what music should or should not be, such judgments should be pushed to the paroxysmic point at which they usurp their own parameters, exposing them as invisible operators that have become illegitimately naturalised through custom, habit, or convention, whether what music *should be* doesn't cancel all critical interdictions about what it *should not be allowed to remain*: a spiritual balm, a token of good taste, a lifestyle accessory, a luxury good... .

Derek Bailey:

*Freely improvised music is different to musics that include improvisation. When I put the book Improvisation together, I found it useful to consider these things in terms developed in the study of language. And the main difference I think between freely improvised music and the musics you quoted is, that they are idiomatic and freely improvised music isn't. They are formed by an idiom, they are not formed by improvisation. They are formed the same way that vernacular speech, a verbal accent, is formed. They are the product of a locality and society, by characteristics shared by that society. Improvisation exists in their music in order to serve this central identity, reflecting a particular region and people. And improvisation is a tool – it might be the main tool in the music, but it is a tool. In freely improvised music, its roots are in occasion rather than place. Maybe improvisation takes the place of the idiom. But it doesn't have the grounding, the roots if you like, of those other musics. Its strengths lie elsewhere. There are plenty of styles – group styles and individual styles – found in free playing but they don't coalesce into an idiom. They just don't have that kind of social or regional purchase or allegiance. They are idiosyncratic. In fact you can see freely improvised music as being made up of an apparently endless variety of idiosyncratic players and groups. So many in fact, that its simpler to think of the whole thing as non-idiomatic.*

Question: How can someone imagine that their own speech is unaccented? Even a non-idiom is idiomatic! But the tendency towards it (or the *vis à vis*) is a very specific energy that provides a powerful source for the music, as for example, in most of those cases that prevent one from playing on or with genre as established forms, through the affirmation of a total incorporation of the musical experience into the interiority of each musician. What is culture? Something like a very resistant core of knowledge that one can't help having anyway, and that one has to deal with in every day life (without having to know about this knowledge). But music is never completely idiomatic: non-idiomatic playing is playing that does not seek to represent what one thinks music should be or how music should work. In this regard, idiom itself is radically a-subjective. It becomes subjective when it becomes the representation of a particular idiom: this is music as idiocy...

It's a question of inserting the idiocy of the real (Clément Rosset) into human being: you don't choose to have the accent you have but you can work with or against it. A non-idiom is an ingenious way of separating music from linguistic metaphors and of insisting that 'No, music is not a language'. One never notices one's own accent in one's own language.

There is something programmatic about the very idea of the non-idiomatic: to impose a name on a practice is not necessarily to describe what it is in the name of some (short-sighted) pragmatics; it can also serve to name the dynamics of this practice – partly no doubt in the name of some sort of vitalism, but also, quite possibly, of a profound dialectic, inaugurated by the nomenclature itself, between that which is the result of a given practice and that which is its motor (where practice and theory are one and the same). NON is what gives force to this dialectic. There is on one hand the decision to do this rather than that (knowing why one is doing so); but there is also the inability to do otherwise (and even to regret it).

What assumptions are implicit in the idea of being an idiomatic musician? That to 'inhabit' an idiom is to play in that idiom without questioning it; that to be bound by an idiom is to have failed to attain an aerial point of view upon one's playing: one is inside, there is no possible outside; much as one is only able to speak in one's mother-tongue. In this regard, there is a connection between an idiom and a popular culture or knowledge. An idiotic form is a specific form that one can find only here and there: language is such a form; accent is an idiotic form included within another idiotic form. Consequently, the idea of the non-idiomatic would seem to entail the obligation to reflect on one's own idiom(s) ... . Nevertheless, non-idiomatic means quite the opposite. Non-idiomatic presumes that in a modern or post-modern culture one can't inhabit an idiom without



having a strong representation of it. This means: one can't play in an idiom without (somehow) having the feeling that one is representing that idiom (showing an image of it). Furthermore, one can never really inhabit a single idiom; one also has to know more or less about many other idioms.... This means that one has the possibility of an aerial point of view. An idiom presumes a simple knowledge that may be as profound as possible, but which is not supposed to engender knowledge of this knowledge. To have a representation of the idiom is to presume that one possesses knowledge of its knowledge (that one knows that one knows it). Popular culture is supposed to 'be', without representing itself (that's why, at the simplest level, pop-art is not popular). But 'non-idiomatic' means: to play *minus* this second-order knowledge about what one is playing. Thus, since all idioms are representations of themselves, the task of the non-idiomatic musician would be to escape from the representation of music in music.

In a way, non-idiomatic supposes both that one can be devoid of any accent and that one can have an accent such that no one knows where it is from. In this regard, non-idiomatic music would be a way of producing what should be popular music; which means that it's not popular music. There's an 'as if' at work here, but one that is not of representation: 'I play what I play, where and when I play it, knowing what I know, as if I were a real popular (i.e. ethnic which is not to say 'popular') musician'. Thus the non-idiom supposes an 'as if' that is close to the one scientists use with regard to their own work: 'Every thing happens as if...'. It's strange that popular means 'well known' rather than 'ethnic' (rumour again). The only way to produce something like a 'popular music' would be by being a non-idiomatic musician. Non-idiomatic = popularity against the popular (idiom against fame). Yet doesn't the fact that improvising musicians are supposed to be able to play with any musician in any context mean that their non-idiom is in fact a 'super-idiom' that includes all others? No: by adding a layer that is a 'minus one', NON precludes the idea of a super idiom. The immanent 'One' indexed by Laruelle's NON is precisely *not-All*. In the last instance, to be a non-idiomatic musician is actually to be a contemporary idiomatic musician.

## 9 - THE Politics of estrangement

Why does society need free improvisers? We are little *entrepreneuriats*; very good at managing ourselves and acting as our own little bosses and workers, producers and consumers. There is a sense in which the improvised music context provides a little laboratory prefiguring capitalism's future development, since being an improviser requires many of the characteristics prized by the capitalist economy: self-motivation; strong individuality; hyper flexibility and adaptability; the ability to adapt quickly to different circumstances; the ability to perform in public (for customers); constant self-promotion ('look at my individual qualities, my very particular way of playing my instrument: what I provide is something you cannot get elsewhere').

For all these reasons, we think it important to try to reconnect free improvisation to the politically engaged atmosphere from which it emerged in the 1960s. This is necessary in order to understand the connection between the development of capitalism and the ideological shifts from the historical moment of free improvisation's original inception to its current status in contemporary capitalist culture. We need to grasp why previous leftist perspectives on improvisation failed to recognise the problems that this practice harboured (such as the fact that the free improviser provides a model of the ultimate capitalist); we need to expose the Romantic idealisations that generated this political myopia; and we need to understand why improvisers often promulgated such excessively crude and over-simplificatory accounts of the political potential of improvisation as a form of praxis (assuming of course that free improvisation does in fact harbour a progressive aspect, which we think it does).

Let us consider the political subtext implicit in the concert set-up in relation to the theatrical machinery of representation. Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (poorly translated as 'estrangement effect') tries to eliminate the fourth wall in the theatre by distancing and disrupting the illusion separating the audience from the stage and performer, rendering evident the audience's 'passive' and 'alienated' condition. This in turn is supposed to make the audience understand how artificial the situation actually is. In improvisation, the estrangement effect is doubled, for the condition of the performer is also disrupted. Since both the performer and audience find themselves in a condition that they could not have previously anticipated, the separation between them is no longer so clear.

Question: Right now, whatever situation you find yourself in, how much would you be willing to give up?

The point of triggering a dense atmosphere in improvisation is to reveal the conservative construction of the situation (one that involves the audience, the performance, the manager, the curator) and to generate the desire for a new

set of conditions. There are no prescriptions for improvisation. The goal is to create an unprecedented situation; one that is strange for everybody; without a didactic or prefabricated agenda. In his text *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière uses the example of Joseph Jacotot, a 19th Century French professor who tried to teach his students what he himself did not know. In doing so, Jacotot took as his starting point the equality of intelligence, negating claims to epistemic mastery. In Rancière's words, Jacotot was 'calling for intellectual emancipation against the standard idea of the instruction of the people'. Performing the authority of knowledge (like Debord's criticism or Brecht's didactics) reproduces the logic of mastery, even as its deconstruction is intended.

Brecht plays certain strategies against each other (i.e. introducing social realism into an epic or romantic scenario) in order for their specific techniques and effects to become apparent. However, his didactics continually distance the viewer from what they do not know, from what they still 'have to have learn'. Rancière advocates thinking differently about seeing and hearing – not as acts of passivity but 'ways of interpreting the world', of transforming and reconfiguring it. He is against this pedagogical distance as well as any idea of genre or discipline, but doesn't go far enough in explaining how this opposition could be enacted. Rejecting these inequalities is not sufficient. We need an alternative model of experience; one which would be indifferent to hierarchical knowledge claims insofar as it fuses a deficiency as well as a surplus in what counts as relevant knowledge within a situation. It is not a matter of interpretation – as when cognitive authority is supposedly contested by interpretation: interpretation requires mediation, through which one reflects upon the situation as a way of consciously mitigating one's own immersion in it. The goal would be not so much to oppose performative immediacy to interpretative mediation, but to identify the point of indifference between knowledge and ignorance, capacity and incapacity, and to occupy it in such a way as to convert their indistinction into a focal point concentrating the most explosive contradictions of the situation. Estrangement and idiocy.

## 10 - Stranger and idiot

If one becomes (or comes to be) a non-idiomatic musician by being aware of the fact that idioms are a representation of idioms, then to become a non-idiomatic musician would be to become a (super)stranger (in the same sense as Whitehead's subject is a 'super-jet').

If one becomes (comes to be) a non-idiomatic musician by pushing one's own accent to an extreme, then to become a non-idiomatic musician would be to become a (super)idiot (in the same sense as Whitehead's subject is a 'super-jet'). Basically, the stranger is s/he who has 'another' idiom, while the idiot is s/he who has no idiom or an exclusively idiosyncratic one: if the idiot has an idiom, that idiom will be used only by him/herself.

Consequently, if we define background noise as everything in sound that is unrecognisable and/or undefined as a form, and/or uninteresting (for the listener); and if we define rumour as noise composed of signs (forms and/or informations and/or influences); then the stranger is s/he for whom the border between rumour and background noise is 'different', while the idiot is s/he for whom the border doesn't exist: background noise and rumour are a whole that is manifested in-One to 'him/her'; a whole that can also be an information and/or a form, and/or a sound, and/or etc. ... . Undifferentiating the sonic world as one sound and/or the sonic world as one information.

The 'super-stranger' = the 'solar stranger' in the sense that this stranger casts light upon idioms (sun).

The 'super-idiot' = the 'nyctalopic idiot' (nyctalope = one who sees in the dark), in the sense that this idiot has his/her very own idiom, and can speak in a non-speaking environment (s/he creates light for her own sake in total obscurity): s/he speaks with a non-linguistic instrument.

The non-idiom is idiotic! But the tendency towards it (or the vis-à-vis) produces (non idiotic) music. Audience and performer becoming strangers together...

## 11 - Text-language, non-language

I, the origins of music according to Curt Sachs:

*music has two sources of origin: the vocal and the instrumental.*

*The vocal seems to us to possess a vector heading towards language, whereas instrumental music in its origins pertains to non-language.*

*We are now talking about the concert, and the concert was conditioned by some conversations that we had before it took place.*

*We are more interested in bringing language and music together rather than separating them.*

The fact that one of us was presented as a philosopher on the programme, the fact that he refused to say a word in the concert, all the words surrounding the concert (the discussion before, the discussion after, this booklet). All these facts point to a lack of words in the concert itself, and a strong expectation of language from the audience (and also from the three of us)...

II, non-language = the pre-linguistic state, historical yet always actual within us, rooted in solitude, silence, and depth; under the sway of the interminable and the incessant (Maurice Blanchot): the background noise: Emmanuel Levinas' 'there is'; non-language possesses the force and potential to overcome the impossible (bringing about the creation of language).

III, an inconceivable impetus from non-language to language. Man's creation of language was driven by his need to socialise himself, to communicate with himself, and to live communally.

IV, language: segment; formulate; organise.

A saturation of language results in its dysfunctioning, its death: if everything was formalised, it would be too much. Language requires an injection of non-language in order to open up, to breathe, and to maintain its equilibrium.

V, the two structures of man's linguistic activity are:

the supra: language  
the infra: non-language

VI, the non-idiomatic according to Derek Bailey: to distinguish oneself from those instances of idiomatic improvisation encountered in the history of music.

VII, actual situations around music:

The domination of music insofar as language, which brings about the alienation of music, and consequently the alienation of men, with forces that are difficult to distinguish, to expel non-language.

A music industry and concert-system based on capitalism, a culture for the masses.

The cerebral acceptance of music, various virtual modes of access to music (the personal stereo phenomenon, hi-fi, etc.)  
They dissimulate reality.

VIII, first-generation improvisers:

More concerned with musical games and with action than with listening, they revealed to us the importance of non-linguistic force (particularly change and speed), but ultimately they have a noticeable tendency to become captivated by this force (once one gets caught up in it, one no longer knows how to stop).

IX, the subsequent or contemporary generation as antithetical tendency:

The musical exhaustion, the boredom that crept up little by little from the first generation, on account of our evolving ears, created a motive force for a radical change from one music to another.

Now, in place of speed, slowness.

In place of change, the quest for depth.

The question of listening is more focused than that of musical games, or perhaps the former is determined by the latter: feedback.

A particular attentiveness to a non-linguistic aspect, in a way that differs from that of the previous generation: silence.

Varied and subtle strategies are required in order to tame language and non-language, while at the same time evading their captivity: it is a matter of delicate balance: not too close, not too far.

One must await the arrival of a sound by plunging into sound or silence, by hearing the interminable and the incessant.

There is no longer an author.

For this generation, non-idiomatic could take on a new meaning: non-idiomatic music frees the listener's hearing because it does not oblige him/her to acquire any musical idiom or syntax in order to understand it.

Non-idiomatic music is addressed to personal listening rather than to a collective listening rooted in the notions of categories and idioms.

X, our strategy straddles two paths (language and non-language): it is important not only to question the actual system surrounding music from a political, social, cultural etc., viewpoint, but also to propose a radical music capable of unmasking the hegemony of music as language; it is from non-language that music derives its essential force, which renders it capable of overcoming difficulties and of going beyond itself.



# The Velvet Spectacle: Interview with Roman Pishchalov and Andrij Orel

This interview was conducted via email with Roman Pishchalov and Andrij Orel for the experimental music magazine *Autsaider* (issue 6), based in Kiev, Ukraine. The interview was published in March 2006 in printed format in both English and Ukrainian with a CD of my *Songbook vol.2*.

## INTERVIEW

Mattin is an improvising musician from Bilbao, the Basque country, currently residing in London. He plays computer and guitar, and runs the label w.m.o/r and the web label Desetxea ([www.mattin.org](http://www.mattin.org)), which releases non-trivial music with thought-provoking artworks and texts. In addition to solo works, he performs actively with both electronic musicians and players of acoustic instruments.

The list of his collaborators includes Lucio Capeco, Margarida Garcia, Tim Goldie, Radu Malfatti, Eddie Prévost and Taku Unami.

*Autsaider*, Roman Pishchalov (RP): Is there any concept or philosophy behind improvising on a computer whereby audio-in is connected to audio-out, a hermetic instrument closed to input from outside?

M (Mattin): Actually, it is the opposite of a hermetic instrument. I use the internal

microphone of the computer to generate feedback. The mic picks up sounds from the room or from other musicians, from the audience or my movements on the keyboard. The space where the performance takes place effects the sound. Often digital sounds can be as you said hermetic, then it is just a matter of how the amplification delivers the sounds from the computer. So I try to play with different possibilities of how to deliver the sounds. Or actually let the sound that is already there be more present. In the trio DC *Training Thoughts* (recorded live at Embar, Tokyo) with Taku Sugimoto and Yasuo Totsuka, what you can hear mostly is the sound of trains passing by and very subtle infiltrations of our sounds. Often improvisers try to generate an autonomous situation, in which musicians are in the foreground. *Training Thoughts* does the opposite, by being quiet the sounds that are already there come to the foreground. Our playing becomes completely subjected by soundscapes that we can hear from outside.

It's funny that reviewers talked about the sounds of the trains as though they were pre-recorded.

RP: I thought computer feedback was rather about processing interferences and errors in music software that would generate a sort of chain reaction, noise, feedback. I can see now that it's somewhat different from what I previously thought. How did you come to playing the computer? Did you play any other instruments before?

M: I used to play the guitar and bass back in Bilbao, and I still do in Billy Bao, La Grieta ([www.mattin.org/desetxea.html](http://www.mattin.org/desetxea.html)) and Deflag Haemorrhage / Haien Kontra (with Goldie) but what I like about the

computer is that it does not carry much historical luggage as a music instrument. It is also a very pragmatic choice. With the computer I can do a lot of different things, in fact with the computer you can make music, edit it, master it, make copies, graphic design, press releases, e-mails for distribution... and you can do all this using a free operating system like GNU/Linux. In the last year I became very interested in GNU/Linux thanks to the Metabolik Hack-Lab in Bilbao, a great bunch of people working in the squat of Leioa. They organise talks, courses, actions... all around the use of Free Software. They also made their own GNU/Linux distribution for media-hacktivism, it's called X-evian and you can download it from [www.x-evian.org](http://www.x-evian.org). Before, in order to get music software, you would have to crack it, but with GNU/Linux you just download it. And there are great audio applications in Free Software.

For me it has been a very important change. I am not a very technical kind of person, in fact a bit the opposite, but with GNU/Linux you get activated as a user, and it is often very community based.

RP: Billy Bao's music sounds to be influenced by the Stooges. Do you draw inspiration from them or, perhaps, other American underground bands? Proto-punk, garage bands from the 1960's?

M: Yeah, sure. *Funhouse* is my favourite record: raw and brutal and at the same time so sophisticated and delicate ('Dirt'). Punk rock was very big in Bilbao throughout the 1980's and 1990's. There were some great bands like Eskorbuto, MCD, and then later on, Pop Crash Colapso (Mikel Biffs recorded Billy Bao) and

La Secta (which the drummer of Billy Bao was in). It was very inspiring to know that great music was being generated in your city. Also the Velvet were a big influence on me, and I still do the cheap Lou Reed with the guitar, a first volume representing this side will come on Japanese label Hibari ([www.hibarimusic.com](http://www.hibarimusic.com)), the second volume comes with this magazine.

RP: What is Bilbao for you?

M: It is my hometown, and I feel very much attached to it, but at the same time also very alienated. Bilbao has been going through an amazing regeneration. In the early 1990's, it was a devastated post-industrial city, and by the end of the 1990's it appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. This was mostly achieved by Gehry's grandiose Guggenheim Museum building. Now Hal Folster cites Bilbao as an example of 'the spectacle of society'. The society itself has internalised the spectacle. In Bilbao, you can really feel this process. Nonetheless, there are some interesting things going on like the conceptual Telectreet Amatau TV, MEM festival ([www.musicaexmachina.com](http://www.musicaexmachina.com)), Metabolik Hack Lab, Periferiak ([www.periferike.org](http://www.periferike.org))...

RP: Is there an improv scene in Bilbao? Do you perform in Bilbao?

M: There are some great musicians (Edorta Izarzugaza, Enrike Hurtado who makes [ixi-software.net](http://ixi-software.net)), then in Bera there is the Ertz collective ([www.ertz.net](http://www.ertz.net)), a very active group of musicians who organise a festival every year. A core figure is Xabier Erkizia who is also running the audiolab in Arteleku ([www.arteleku.net](http://www.arteleku.net)). He is an amazing musician and very important in promoting



experimental music in the Basque country, and there are other great musicians such as Alex Mendizabal, Tzesne, Akauzazte, Pier Iruretagoiena, Ministro, Baseline... . Actually the Catalanian/Greek label Antifrost (www.antifrost.gr) has released a compilation of Basque experimental artists.

RP: There are many improvising musicians and new music composers, who have written essays and even books on music. You're also active in belles-lettres of this kind. Why do you write texts about music?

Is it because you feel you fail to be expressive and clear enough with your tone art that you resort to writing to explain your aesthetic approach? (This question concerns you, as well as other improvising musicians Eddie Prévost, Derek Bailey etc. But of course I don't expect you to speak for them. Speak for yourself.)

M: It is not that I want to explain an aesthetic approach with my texts. It is that I am trying to find out what it means to improvise. Language is a very explicit form of communication. I find it very useful to put into words thoughts that are triggered by thinking about improvisation and its consequences in a broader context.

RP: You seem to be critical of capitalism in your texts. What's wrong with capitalism?

M: To simplify a lot: I have neither chosen to live under this system, nor to be educated towards work, money and certain values which praise competition.

Capitalism is very complex. There are good things and bad things within that complexity. So, it's a matter of finding cracks in which you

can produce activities which do not have to be subjected to capitalist interest but your own, not that the division is that clear.

RP: I heard this thing about 'cracks in the system' many times before, but are there cracks? Does 'finding cracks' mean finding a grant to fund your artistic activity and living? Is financial (in)dependence a question for you? Do activities in the cracks have any future if the system remains the same work-money-supply-demand cycle?

M: I think it is very difficult to make a living doing this music, and people who promote this music (organising concerts, running labels...) often do lose money. So everybody has to look for alternatives. At the moment, I am living in London, a very expensive city (especially rent). So many people (including myself) have to squat in order stay here. This is the kind of thing that I have in mind when I talk about 'finding cracks' within the system. Others are organisation of concerts, or workshops like the one Eddie Prévost is running every Friday on improvisation or Antonio's at Rampart social centre on Free Software.

RP: Gilles Deleuze appears to be the name mentioned most frequently in your texts. What's so special about him?

M: Anti-hierarchical, Permissibility, Becoming, Trendy.

RP: Guy Debord seems to be another influence on you. What do you think about his *Society of The Spectacle*? Do you find this book prophetic?

M: Sure! Thesis 44 from the chapter 'The Commodity as Spectacle':

*The spectacle is a permanent opium war which aims to make people identify goods with commodities and satisfaction with survival that increases according to its own laws. But if consumable survival is something which must always increase, this is because it continues to contain privation. If there is nothing beyond increasing survival, if there is no point where it might stop growing, this is not because it is beyond privation, but because it is enriched privation.*

Getting back to the question of what is wrong with capitalism, and the impossibility of being able to distinguish many of its qualities, or being able to divide it, like this is capitalism, this is not, Debord was a crucial figure in analysing the way that commodity-exchange expanded more and more and the alienation that occurs in this process.

There is a lot of discussion going on about 'post-Fordism', and how language, affects and care are the tools of a 'new factory without walls'. This decentralised mode of production forces the classic forms of antagonism to cede power. Now there is the need for new strategies. A good example can be independent media, which before Seattle was not very developed. Détournement is constantly needed. Not just in the media but in our own projections. We should granulate any development of cliché in ourselves, bastardising our ideas as much as possible.

How is it that even if many of us hate capitalism, we are not doing everything necessary to destroy it constantly? That is because we are also part of capitalism, we are reproducing it constantly, and probably we are scared of what could come after we

abolish this system. Not that I see a possible rupture clearly, but hope never ceases.

Again Debord: 'The spectacle is not only the servant of pseudo-use, it is already in itself the pseudo-use of life.'

RP: Do you think it's correct to view improvised music as associated with leftist ideas? Or is it just a false view that comes from the fact that some of the musicians (Cornelius Cardew, Keith Rowe, John Tilbury) were and are communists?

M: I do not think there is a correct view on improvised music. Actually when Cardew and Rowe became Maoists, they stopped improvising and they started playing revolutionary songs.

RP: Do you associate yourself with any particular ideology?

M: Anarchism.

RP: You visited Tokyo in 2004. Tokyo is a base of *onkyo* music. What do you think about *onkyo*? Do you know the musicians?

M: I don't give a fuck about *onkyo*. There are great musicians and a very rich underground culture in Japan. In fact, one of the most underground musicians is Taku Unami, the son of famous philosopher Akira Unami (Japanese translator of Deleuze). He has just released the amazing *Kitsune-hitori* on Taku Sugimoto's label Slub. This music completely avoids categorisations and brings another perspective on music. If there is an avant-garde now in music, that is *Kitsune-hitori*. This music avoids trends and terms.

Andrij Drel (AD): At the present moment, a certain tradition of free improvising

seems to be thriving, associated with Keith Rowe, some European and Japanese musicians, and the Erstwhile label. For better or worse, this music seems to have established a set of more-or-less firm structural patterns of tension/accumulation/release, along which we can expect it to move. Would you agree that this type of post-AMM layered/textural free improv is becoming a traditional music? Do you support or oppose this tradition?

M: I do not think that to think in binary oppositions is that helpful, even if I think of myself as a very binary kind of guy.

In terms of Erstwhile, even if I appreciate Jon Abbey's passion, I find the production and design often sterile. No danger. I'd rather get Corpus Hermeticum stuff in which you find yourself questioning whether what you are listening to is pure genius or pure shit – obviously this situation questions your own values. And this thing of Keith Rowe being on a pedestal, where he can put himself in any combination that he wishes, brings a hierarchical way of working, in which a couple of people (Jon with money and Keith with respect of other musical fellows) invite other musicians to play in the formations they want. In opposition to that, I admire Derek Bailey, who puts himself in any formation to improvise, not in order to make tasteful music but to create conflict within improvisation.

AQ: Regarding 'questioning your own values': do you think of timbral/noise improvisation as the prime way for questioning values in music? Are melody, harmony and meter absent from your music because, being elements of a stable music language,

they do not question values, but assert them? Do you consider the questioning of values as the only form of thinking worth pursuing? If so, why?

M: By questioning values I mean to try to find the inner structuralisation that we have inside in order to destroy it, to not get stagnated. I do not think that improvisation is the only way to do this, but for me it has certain elements that I find very refreshing. Like not having to achieve any coherence, the production of constant contradictions and having to deal with them collaboratively.

AQ: Do you listen to any composed music (avant-garde or other)?

M: Yes I do listen to composed music, avant-garde and other kinds.

AQ: What do you think of field recordings as a 'genre' of recorded sound? Can listening to field recordings be meaningful?

M: Absolutely.

RP: Do you listen to pop music?

M: My attitude to pop music is that of both disgust and pleasure. It can be so fucking vulgar and full of common denominators, as with experimental music, and at the same time it can easily bring affects that change your mood. It is like being cheated, which is great if you do not feel guilty for being a fucking idiot while some people are making a good living out of your idiocy.



# Towards Abject Music: Interview with Michel Henritzi

## NOTE:

Michel Henritzi interviewed me via email during February and March 2007 for the Grenoble based experimental music magazine *Revue & Corrigée*. This interview was first translated and published in French. This is the first time this interview is published in English.

## INTERVIEW BEGINS

Michel Henritzi (MH):

You appeared quite recently on the international improvised music scene, in the early 2000s. You've since played with some of the most radical musicians of this movement of New improvisation, such as Taku Unami, Mark Wastell, Taku Sugimoto, and as well with some of the outstanding personalities of free improvisation such as Eddie Prévost and Radu Malfatti. Your approach to improvisation is marked by a rupture of sense in that you play between extreme noise and silence. To claim the influences of both Radu Malfatti and Whitehouse could be more than a simple provocative

game against the improvised musics establishment and its dogmatism. Why do these two sonic extremes open new playing territories for improvisation? How do you bring these two poles of extreme noise together?

Mattin (M): When I started to improvise I always thought of improvisation as a field of permissibility, being able to do whatever is materially possible and conceptually conceivable. To explore all the possibilities available, to play without having to deal with a narrow spectrum of consensus, taking into account the poles, extremes and opposites. Improvisation is about conflict, different people coming together and doing something. What? Fuck knows. Have fun? Perhaps my understanding of having fun is to not get bored. I've just read a recent interview with Mark Wastell (November issue of *Paris Transatlantic*) in which he was saying that, for a couple of years now, he has not considered himself an improviser. And that in making a group there is a compositional element. This might be true, but why does Mark not want to be associated with the term improvisation? Perhaps because the history and tradition of improvisation might not be

the most attractive. Instead, thinking of composition in a very open way, as Mark does, might bring him some more interesting approaches towards making music. For me this problem of terminology shows that the definitions are no longer clear cut. Players like Radu, Taku Unami and Taku Sugimoto have been incorporating compositions in improvised music contexts, and the opposite also occurs. Personally I still find the term improvisation useful. For me it has an open endedness that can be constantly twisted. I do not think that improvisation is only happening among the musicians, improvisation is always happening in ways that it is impossible to totally predict what happens in the contexts that you are in. Computers and samples have shown us that you can press a button and bring sounds whose original contexts were elsewhere. The file that you play can be as long as you want, and it is possible for you to just be there listening and observing the reaction that this might produce in the audience. As Structuralist filmmakers were discussing in the '70s, the work is not just in the film but the work is happening in the heads of the audience while they are trying to make

sense of it. And in this way everybody is an audience, the filmmaker included. Because the music that we make is often so abstract, this might also be applied to improvised music. This could happen in all kind of musics, but I am not sure how other musics are open to the marginal aspects of sound and performance. Very quiet music has helped us to be appreciative about the sounds that occur during the performance that are not necessarily performed by the musicians. The sounds from outside might be the most dramatic aspect of those kinds of performance or a member of an audience that has bad stomach. It is impossible to try to isolate those sounds produced by the players from the other sounds. I think we can take an improvisation concert as a situation. We just need to be aware that what we are doing is not just music but constructing a social space. As Henri Lefebvre has shown us, space is never neutral and it always contains power relations. While improvising we should deal deliberately with these power relations in order to counter the 'illusion of transparency', the idea that everything that is happening is smooth and free, which I think is never the case.



MH: How did you come to have an interest in improvisation? How did the transition from rock energy to improvisation happen?

M: I remember when I was playing bass in my first band. I was always changing the bass lines, and I do not have a good sense of rhythm, so the other members of the band were getting very annoyed with me, as basically I was making the song sound wrong due to my inability to play properly. But something that I always thought is that if you have inability, or the ability to do things wrong, do it as wrong as possible and you will surely get somewhere. Improvisation was great as it is not about playing properly or improperly, the learning process is constant, and what really matters is the focus at that precise moment, the intensity, to be as one as possible in the situation that you are in, to have the feeling that surely you would not like to be anywhere else because nowhere else is there something as interesting as this happening.

MH: This debate of the last 40 years about what opposes improvisation and composition is still lively. Does this opposition still make sense to you today?

M: No. What really matters to me is to do it, or to use these terms as catapults for possibilities, take whatever you have at hand and do something with it. Lately, I have been bringing concepts to the improvisational context in order to precisely question the core of what is actually improvisation. What is freedom? I still think that there are some traditional aspects in improvisation that should be questioned. Why do we actually need to realise the music ourselves, why can we not bring just ideas that someone else might perform. The musicians are still too attached to the instrument. Here I am not talking about composition. I am talking about bringing different ideas that can challenge established notions of what improvisation is. In this way the art world is ahead of the improv world. The artist does not necessarily need to realise the work, as other people can perform the ideas. Then these ideas can be confronted with other ideas and make something together which does not necessarily mean to make nice improvised music. Still, something is already happening which is that people are changing instruments often, and this is totally fine (in the same way that artists can be

multidisciplinary). Someone like Mark Wastell does not want to be considered a great cellist (which he actually is), probably he would prefer to be considered as an interesting musician.

MH: What entered into the practice of improvisation between the moment this music invents itself, the answers to a political questioning of it and this school of new silence? Aren't we simply repeating the experiences already played during the '60s? Improvisation is still a marginal practice, though it is now greeted in contemporary art galleries and has made its place on the shelves of cultural merchandise like any other idiomatic form. In so far as the performers of this improvisation scene want to break with the existing codes, why look for recognition of what you are questioning? Most of the festivals are subsidised by the state, a lot of musicians deplore the lack of interest their music provokes especially in university, standard accounts of history, research etc.

M: This is an interesting question but also a very difficult one. That we are fucked there is no doubt about it, capitalism makes us as commodities that

need to be brought and sold for survival within this system. This spiral needs to constantly reproduce itself and while it is growing we are being thrown around here and there.

To change it as a whole is not the easiest thing that comes to my mind. But to try to be playful, to realise what are those aspects in your immediate environment that don't let you express yourself or makes you feel constrained, to try to do something with those barriers, might be a good starting point for changing your immediate surroundings. In terms of recognition, I must say that I am interested in the discourse that a work might generate. As I said before I do not think that the work is over once I burn a CD master from my computer. In fact I think that then is when real improvisation happens: what are people going to make out of it? This I find very interesting. Some musician friends often do not appreciate reviews, but for me they are a way of finding out what the work is actually doing. I know it is very different to put an experience into words, but I also think it is important to at least try to say where you are coming from in order for other people to understand you.

MH: About improvisation, you say that it never tries to consolidate structures, as idiomatic music can do. That it's a pure process which doesn't aim towards a finished object, and in that way it is somehow an autonomous situation. Can't we analyse this as a kind of collage process, which no longer starts from an idiom whose constituting elements are organised but from idiosyncrasies inherent in the personality and the background of the improviser? The performer fits together real time elements of the vocabulary he built for himself or herself. Is it only here a difference of scale? Otherwise why did a lot of improvisers feel the need to create systems of restraints?

M: I do not think that improvisation can be an autonomous situation. Where, then, is the point of rupture? When does real freedom happen (if that actually really exists)? What I think is that improvisation as a *modus operandi* is more liberating than other ways of making music. As I said before, a concert is a social space in which people bring their expectations, and these expectations are obviously made through the awareness that they are going to see a

concert. At the end of the day a concert is supposed to be just a concert, a delivery of some kind of music that you might enjoy, and a situation in which musicians enjoy your attention in the best of cases. What can change? There is a very clear hierarchy going on in which the performer is always in a very powerful position and the audience is often very submissive. This music is supposed to break with this hierarchy but still many musicians are just looking for the recognition of the audience, a very simple transaction which can only be cultural prostitution, then you hear people talking about revolution.

MH: Aren't both free improvisation and especially the reductionist school and industrial bands (to quote the old politico-aesthetic terminology) a kind of spectacular meta music? Debord denounced culture as the ideal merchandise, the one which leads to the acceptance of all the others. Cornelius Cardew also criticised 'avant-gardes' as bourgeois cultural moments which separate themselves from social noise. Aren't these two focuses a critical and libertarian illusion?

M: Perhaps in the most positive light we could think of them as a form of hijacking of other aspects of life that are connected with more conservative attitudes, like industrial music-fascism, or reductionism in classical music. I must say that Cardew might have been right in asserting that the avant-garde is a self-enclosed system, one which tries to be autonomous from the fucked-upness of our lives by being in our nest full of safety expressing our 'freedom' while we improvise. Sure we can be as radical as we want by playing this abstract music for four hours on a stage but for sure we are not going to improve the working conditions of the barman. So in terms of direct relations to politics this music does not have much. At the same time getting back to Cornelius Cardew's communist days, I do not believe in getting involved in a party that has all the solutions to your problems and tells you that what we really need right now is propaganda in order to take power. What happens once you get the power? As usual power would be executed in the classical top down way by some bureaucrats who surely would judge whether you are using your creativity in a

good way or a bad way. Representational politics have shown us a good amount of fucked-upness. So it might be more helpful to bring politics into what we are doing or rather to think about the politics involved in what we are doing. By this I mean to understand that what we are doing is saying something to other people, even if this is to a very small number of people. And we should be careful as I think more and more people working in culture are becoming the peons of the capitalist mode of production in the western world. You can see that the quality of wealth of cities more and more is judged by the amount of culture that is going on.

MH: There is a star system in free improvisation which leads festivals to invite one musician rather than another. Doesn't the risk exist for you to be commercially used as the grain of sand that messes up a routine?

M: Sure, but what matters is what you do in the situation. If what I do is reactionary or I leave things just the way they are, I might as well have an ice-cream, but if, on the contrary, I manage to put forward some questions that might

leave the audience (including myself) thinking, well that is something. Once I played in a festival and I did an average gig with some kind of nice music, and I felt shit. I thought never again a middle of the road gig, either something very good or totally shit, but at least taking some risks.

MH: You often evoke Whitehouse. Which aspects of this band are you interested by?

How do you compromise with their political ambiguity?

Particularly with its authoritarian relationship to the scene and audience? They were often aggressive with their audience (with whom they were in a commercial relationship, the public was charged for its ticket) because of its passivity in front of the rock 'n roll show. There was this nihilist attempt to create a destructive collective happening. What does their sound bring for you, this *extreme noise terror*?

M: Whitehouse have changed a lot during the last years and now are much more about parody than transgression. I do not think that if I pay for a concert I should be remunerated in a simple satisfactorily manner. If I pay for a concert I want the musicians to do something with me, to make

me feel that I do not want to be anywhere else, because this is actually the most interesting place that I can be.

Again to be interested does not have much relationship with being pleased.

In Britain people frequently say please and thank you and it's good that sometimes somebody comes and says to you: 'fucking cunt'. Of course in Britain they are also very good at marketing things into popular culture, so it is not that impressive any longer to hear these words. Early records of Whitehouse show many reductionist aspects, long feedbacks and silences, and many aspects of contemporary noise but those times and those guys had a charged attitude, they were disgusted by society and to a certain extent they were also disgusting to society. Now it is very difficult to find this attitude of confrontation, so much frustration that you want to shake your surroundings in any way possible. People like Wolf Eyes or Prurient are not going to make you feel alienated nor depressed nor challenged nor are they going to give a hard time to anybody. In fact this kind of music has become pretty much party music. They play, they tour, they drink a couple of beers and with each

record they sound better and better, just like any other band, nobody gets their brains squeezed while thinking what is going on, but some people are certainly making some money out of it.

MH: Further to Bruce Russell's manifesto you attribute an emancipatory power to noise in the face of academic musical codes - that we'd go beyond music, and particularly it would be a space of freedom. Don't you think that any music played very loud is, in an opposite sense, a form of constraint for the audience, that noise music creates a relationship of submission? To quote Pascal Quignard 'Ears have no eyelids'. Isn't noise the most authoritarian kind of music and paradoxically the least political in the sense that every statement gets confused in it?

M: THIS IS ONE OF THE MOST DISGUSTING ARGUMENTS that I have ever heard, it is like when Eddie Prévoist, says 'oh, my god this is too loud' or 'oh, this is too quiet', for whom are we talking about? For humankind? Should we, as musicians that often play for no more than 20 people, be concerned with the hearing health of the whole of humanity?

I do not think that this kind of music is about consensus but about being able to express your creativity at full volume without anybody telling you that what you are doing is wrong. Usually in this kind of music people explore their instruments in the most disparate ways. It is only normal that you would also use the speakers in all the possible ways. If you come to a noise or improvised concert I presume you want to get a kick, some noise if it is played at the right volume can have a physical intensity which you cannot achieve in any other way. There are always power relations going on, and don't tell me that some fucking musicians playing for a boring hour at an average volume is not giving you hard-core submission? So even if 'Ears have no eyelids' venues usually have doors!

Some people say that if you either play very quiet or very loud you are being authoritarian, but according to what authority? Basically to the way the music has been perceived through history. Usually the first ones get the shit, and do not get me wrong as I think people have been dealing with noise and silences for a very long time, but because they still are not totally recuperated



they can be offensive. By not being recuperated I mean that the audience may still find it outside the established normality. But here we encounter another question: what kind of audience are we talking about? Obviously for a noise audience they might find an aggressive concert by Mark Wastell bland in term of noise, but for an audience who is used to his refined improvisation they might find it noisy.

MH: In an interview you said that you try to play against (at least to contradict the pre-conceptions your partners or the audience could have). Isn't playing against the other, against the audiences' expectations, against the musically acceptable, a questioning of the social body, of the collective work? This way of building oneself against is basically a quite nihilist process. Is it the only way for the collective experience to happen? Should we see these strategies as breaking with improvised musics' dogmatism and their questioning?

M: I do not think of improvised music as making pretty music but as a way of showing contradictions within the process of doing it. Sometimes people

in the experimental music field can actually make the most reactionary music that I have ever heard. It is not a surprise that often they themselves have quite a reactionary way of talking. Surely making improvised music is a collective experience, and I think the more rich the collective is the better, the more differences are in this collective the more that we can learn from each other.

MH: You write a lot about music, especially improvisation. Why this need to comment on your practice? Isn't it a way to reduce and then to confine a practice in a category, to make it respectable through its conceptualisation?

M: The relationship between music and language is a difficult one but it does actually exist. As we have been talking about before, this is not just about music, it is a social construction that has been developed through the years, in very different ways. We are totally immersed within an economic system and I am not sure whether you would be able to get a grip on this relationship by playing 16 hours a day all your life. Through writing I try to understand what I am doing and its

relationship to the world and this economic system which is a relationship that I find very complex.

MH: To say that improvisation isn't a consumer product seems questionable to me.

In the microcosm of improvisation, as for every other musical style, the subject is turned into an object. Besides the economy it generates - and, as you finely say, it's only a matter of scale - through concerts and a more and more plentiful production of records, there is also a commercial relationship between the promoter, the audience and the performer.

A relationship based on the sale of a product, whether it is a time unit or a record. Today records pile up in a movement of production which fulfils the same commercial logics. There is this quote from Derek Bailey I like a lot: 'The problem with recordings is records'. How do you react to Bailey's opinion?

M: I think the idea of the internet really changes this relationship within classical notions of the market, by this I do not mean that it is independent to it but perhaps money is not so visible or it is in the background. Surely it is still based on attention and recognition but

now there are no intermediaries making profit out of you. People can put their music on the internet and everybody who is connected can get it for free.

It is true that the production is really growing but I think this has to do with very positive aspects such as anybody being able to make, record and promote their music by themselves.

MH: Between 2001 and today, you published more than 40 records, while it took musicians such as AMM or Radu Malfatti 40 years to produce such an amount of records. What makes these records necessary and justifies them? Particularly for someone who seems to be very critical towards the merchandising of culture?

M: Making records is a very different process as compared with improvising in a concert. It is another way of working which I really enjoy because it is much more discursive. While making a record, you can take a long time to make it, or very short time. You can think about it, edit, discuss, delete ... and have critical distance (or not). It is more like an operation to create little Franksteins. The more monstrous the better. While making this monster you can shape it the way you want

little by little. You also have to deal with a lot of technology, recording, editing, mastering, pressing machine, promotion, distribution and so on. After having done all this work you have no idea in what kind of conditions your record is going to be played in: people doing the washing up, talking about how well their business is doing, perhaps while they are thinking about holidays, dancing, thinking very carefully about it, loving it as if it was that lover that you would never get because you are so obsessed by this kind of music. On what kind of speakers is your music going to be heard? From a computer? Copied CD-R or the 'real CD', MP3, Ogg, good compression bad compression ... very difficult questions emerge.

MH: Why did you choose the CD-R medium for your label w.m.o/r? It makes me think about the underground economy which appeared with tape in the 80s. A material which announced its disappearance - not only through the turn of fashions and experimental breaks, but also physically because of its instability during conservation.

M: This is a very practical reason, which has to do with what I have at hand and what can I

do with it? If I have a CD burner in my laptop I am going to burn CDs until the burner burns itself. But also it really depends on the project, sometimes we share the cost between different people to get 500 copies, so each musician gets 100 copies each. So each project is different but I think CD-Rs are great as you can burn on demand, just like Toyotism in the '80's.

MH: Why did you create this label? What is the idea of it?

M: To not have to wait for other people's decisions as theirs might be as bad as mine. To have total autonomy over the artwork and distribution. Some of the releases on the label have a conceptual approach that take into account the CD in its relation to the artwork and the booklet.

MH: To remain with the notion of medium, what do you think about MP3? Do we listen to the same music as the one originally played or recorded? Michel Chion would talk of low-definition. Does it seem to you that peer-to-peer questions the system? Or isn't this dematerialisation of records throughout the web a way to sell us the same shit under a strictly virtual shape?

M: To be honest I don't buy records, I get them from the internet. Yes I might not be getting the beautiful and love-caring hand made artwork of the CD-R but I just don't give a fuck about artworks on releases, often they are just bland design to fit the aesthetic of the music. I personally think it is a matter of getting the music heard. And the internet is great for this. On the label that I run (w.m.o/r) all the releases are available for free online, so people can download it in the free Ogg format (as opposed to MP3 which is patented). Certainly it is not the same thing as getting the beautiful object (I also try to do beautiful objects and actually try to sell them which is far from easy). But at least people do not need to work certain hours in order to get these records.

MH: Can you tell us about this Free software/GNU Linux you use and credit in your work?

M: I find it very important to make people aware that you can make music with software that is free and what is more important is *libre* (as opposed to Mac and Windows which both use proprietary software). Many musicians think

that the best computer that you can have to make music with is a Mac. This is not necessarily true. If you know just a bit you can get a cheap machine, install a GNU/Linux system and start to make music (obviously you can also get a couple of stones and still do brilliant music). Thanks to Metabolik (the Hacklab from Bilbao) I started to learn about how important the use of free software is. The software is often made by a community, in which users and producers are in constant dialogue to make it work.

So many people working for free for so many hours, is this advanced capitalism? I do not know but if I am making music with this free software I will also try to give my music away. Thanks to the whole free software movement questions about intellectual property have arisen which are very complex but I think they are going to be the issues of the future. Certainly the free software movement has been very important in developing the legal structure that makes this community able to work. But I think in terms of culture we should be wary of putting our production at the mercy of the law and lawyers (as Creative Commons does) who try to

develop a more liberal idea of copyright. I think we should look for options outside of Copyright and the bureaucrats that deal with it.

MH: Some improvisers explained their choice of an electronic instrumentation - laptop for example - saying it allows getting away from the hand's memory, from the technical restraints bound up with the instrument which are experienced as a limitation to imagination. Do you share this point of view? Seeing you on stage we rather have the feeling that you get frustrated by this direct connection with the instrument, totally used as a media here. There is a radical split between the gesture and the generated sound.

M: I play with the computer in many different ways, sometimes taking the most out of its material possibilities: like typing, playing the hard drive or the fan, or waving it around making feedback as if it was a guitar or in the other ways using it to just record and then play a file.

MH: The whole of electronic culture turns around the idea of re-activating a set of memories or gestures, in order to decontextualise them. Through

this we enter a post-modern fiction which goes against history as Marx conceptualises it. You sometimes reuse sounds produced by other musicians with whom you improvise.

Can we talk about improvisation in this case, or is it rather a recontextualisation? Don't you use the other as an instrument? What do you give in return during this meeting?

M: What I was doing before was simpler than that. I basically turned the volume of the internal microphone of the computer up and it then picks up the sounds of the room and of the other players.

So while some people were thinking that I was doing some kind of sampling I was basically recording with the worst microphone ever. Anyway, I always think of recontextualisation as a creative process. I found the so called reductionist approach very inspiring. Here it is possible to appreciate sounds that are often overlooked like rubbing plastics or other squeaking sounds which can sound very interesting when they get amplified and the attention is there. So what I am trying to do lately is to record the sound of the audience which often makes interesting sounds but without being

aware of it and play it back from the speakers making it obvious that what they are doing is a very important part, if not all of what the concert is. Then who is really playing the concert? Whose sounds are the ones that we are listening to? Then the whole venue is improvising, but even then, nevertheless, my privileged position as the one who decides to play the recorded files gets exposed and made open to questions and criticism.

MH: You've studied at art school. What did it bring to you in your approach to sound?

M: I think that in the art world there is a more sophisticated theoretical discourse than in the experimental music field. It was while I was studying art that I began to develop an interest in theory and also conceptual art and notions around performativity. At the same time the problem with the art world is that it is constantly looking for the new thing, what is the latest cool thing or what are the concepts that people are talking about right now.

MH: About this train we hear on *Training Thoughts* - a live

recording with Taku Sugimoto and Totsuka - it fits with the concrete aspect of the Japanese music. But what does this burst of social space within the ritual framework of the concert bring to us? Isn't it a simple anecdote? In other words, is this 'deterritorialised' sound part of your music (and then in what way) or is it conversely the social space that needs music?

M: I find it very interesting when musicians playing quietly adapt to the sounds of the environment. Then it becomes more apparent that you are part of a situation, and atmosphere, rather than trying to impose your playing.

I remember that the first sound was after the twentieth minute, and the atmosphere in the venue was very focussed, then whatever sound you bring really has to be special. While listening to the recording I remember listening to the second note that Taku Sugimoto played and it completely blew me away. I thought just because of this note that this album should be released. For me, that concert was extremely interesting in the way that we were infiltrating our sounds within a specific context, but then the recording becomes something else like



a field recording with an ultra subtle improvisation in the background. This is another interesting aspect that reductionism gave to me.

MH: How did you come to collaborate with Junko? What was your idea? How did this first gig in Tokyo with her go? Have you got the feeling that you renewed the approach to noise? What do you think about Masami Akita's idea, who said of noise that it was the unconscious of music?

M: Actually the collaboration with Junko happened thanks to you. When I listened to Junko's solo LP *Sleeping Beauty*, that you put out (on your label *Elevage de Poussière*), at Taku Unami's house it completely blew me away. Brutally minimal, raw and direct. Of course I knew Hijokaidan, and actually I had met Jojo a few years before at the Alchemy shop in Osaka, but I was not able to hear how amazing Junko was until I heard her solo. She is such a special person, so humble and with a beautiful way of being, and an amazing artist. Regarding Merzbow's comment: I think to make noise is to be conscious of sound.

MH: To me, one of your most interesting projects is your duet with Taku Unami. Both of you have a very personal approach to the laptop, diverting it from its given use.

Especially in the choice to use only the integrated speakers. Has all this Onkyo movement had an influence on you in the way you think sound and its relation to space? What difference do you see between your approaches to the computer? What do you think about this young Japanese scene?

M: I do not think that Taku Unami would identify himself as Onkyo, but it is true that there is a great bunch of musicians around Taku Unami. He himself is a genius, who would dare to play in an improvised concert situation the sound of the sea cut by the sound of a helicopter all extracted from a sample CD. It is true that there are great things that you can do with a computer, but this is really taking it too far. He is one of the most talented musicians that I have met but also the most perverse (in the most positive way). Playing with him is always a challenge, which often makes me wonder what the fuck I am doing and to be honest I have tried to answer this question for a

couple of years and I can't. I really do not know if we are making such a complex music that for me it is totally impossible to understand or that what we are doing is so senseless that to try to make sense of it is just stupid.

MH: *Going Fragile*, a duet with Radu Malfatti, is a problematic record. What is to be heard in this record? The ambient sounds (outside of the recording) are more present than the sounds you generate. Must we see here a semantic shift of what is musical? A provocation? What does this record bring that the concert circumstances didn't? The hearing situation seems very different to me between a live act in which you play with this relation to silence and a record (as a finished object). I wish to argue with this sentence from John Cage: 'The problem with sounds is music'. Why did you choose to produce this silent music on a record?

M: I do not think that this music is so quiet, in fact I think there is a lot going on. Whether the sounds that you are talking about are produced by us or not does not matter, they are on the CD and you are hearing them together with our sounds. The second

piece which is the noisy one, and not so well recorded perhaps, is the one that you have more problems with. For me it is interesting in the way that I could think some of the recordings of *Corpus Hermeticum*, in which the lo-fi quality of the recording is taken into account by the listener. I wanted to do this but with this kind of very quiet improvised music.

MH: Your *Song Book* series are very punk records, lo-fi played in a very rough way. How do you consider these song records in comparison with your other productions and more precisely with regards to improvisation? What are the texts about?

M: Cheap Lou Reed, that is who I am trying to be in the song-books. They are an exploration of what I can do within the context of a song. There has been a progression within them. I have always written songs, as I find it very interesting the way that text and sounds mix together in them. My literary interest comes mostly from songs, not poems, nor novels. The lyrics and the songs are sketches of thoughts and ideas that I have, some of them might be developed into something else, others just stay like that, as sketches.

MH: I've been to two gigs of you and drummer Tim Goldie: Deflag Haemorrhage / Haien Kontra. If I really enjoyed the first one at Cave 12 in Geneva, especially because of the unbelievable energy you get from noise music and rock in an improvisation concert, the second one left me a bit more doubtful. Especially the spectacular aspect and this aggression played against the audience which seemed gratuitous to me the second time, you seemed simply to repeat what you played the day before. It turned into gimmicks. What concepts inform this project? You play a lot with quotation in this duet, either visual or sonic, quoting as much Whitehouse as The Stooges, Peter Brötzmann or Motörhead. Where does the improvisation take place in this band? This way of deconstructing theatrical codes makes me think of a hardcore version of Fluxus.

M: We describe what we do as ABJECT MUSIC which basically means to produce as much confusion as possible in the head of the spectator. This is done by taking all the props of noise, improvisation and rock and twist them around as much as possible, taking into account that in a concert many things are going on

which are extra musical, but at the same time they really effect the way that you conceive the music. This music is about frustration. In the case of Tim, he is a total virtuoso of drumming, actually the fastest and this is not enough for him, he needs something else. To break down on stage is part of the music, to feel disgusted with your own relationship with the instrument to spit at it and the other player to be aware that things are going wrong, but actually not wrong enough, what do you do then? To keep pushing, pushing into the abyss of logic until you are able to take the attention of the audience with you into the most personal desperation, into the realisation that any of these radical gestures are not enough and they will never be. At the same time we all know about the vulgar stereotypes of this music, and we do not return to them. Sometimes it can be a laugh, sometimes it's not.

MH: What are your plans?

M: I have just released my first solo CD, titled *Proletarian of Noise*. For me it was very important, as I had to work for a long time on it. More thinking about it than actually making it, it was really hard to

get it done. I presume it was a lack of confidence. A friend of mine, Xabier Erkizia, says about *Proletarian of Noise* that it is like a sound essay. When he mentioned that, for me it was a very inspirational moment. It is something that I have been trying to work around, ideas on language and put them on the record. Joachim from iDEAL records is interested in releasing some solo stuff by me, so I hope to have finished another solo CD in some months. Also I just have released on w.m.o/r *Euskal Semea (Basque Son)* a CD from Josetxo Grieta which I am very happy about. Josetxo Grieta is Josetxo Anitua, Iñigo Eguillor and I. *Euskal Semea* consists of two versions of 'European Son' by the Velvet Underground. In the first version we have translated the original lyrics into Euskara (Basque Language), by doing this the song really changes its original meaning, then, second, is a brutally raw improvisation. The other release that should be coming out soon is an LP on Tochnit Aleph of a duo with Junko that we recorded in June 2006 in Tokyo (recorded by Taku Unami). Another one is a duo with Matthew Bower, which we recorded at Mick Flowers in

Leeds, in which I lost quite a lot of my right ear hearing. Actually Matthew had to put up his channel by 80%. I really did not realise how loud I was. This will be coming out on Bottrop-boy. And surely we will do something soon with our dear friend Billy Bao.

# A single decision: Interview with Addlimb

## NOTE:

This interview was made for Addlimb, a collective based in Belgrade, Serbia, interested in exploring the critical and theoretical potentials of contemporary improvisation. Addlimb had a web based project, where they asked different improvisers the same questions. This interview was published in 2007 on their website which is no longer active.

## INTERVIEW BEGINS

Addlimb (A): Have you got any formal musical training, and what do you draw from it now?

Mattin (M): I have a PhD in Lou Reed's solos on 'I Heard Her Call My Name', I learned that sometimes you should watch out for your ego and sometimes you should just let it go.

A: What kind of equipment/instrument do you use, and what is your relationship towards it? What do you think lies behind the choice of your equipment/instrument?

M: I think there is a big problem with the attachment that an improviser has with his/her instrument and the history of the instrument. In other experimental music scenes they laugh at the way that improvisers always put their names and their instruments in the recordings as if it was a brand or a trademark that later on can be used as a way of promoting a certain musician for his/her specific use of the instrument. Improvisation is often discussed as being a kind of

music that is made together in a communal way. At the same time most of the players (including myself) are very conscious of putting their instruments next to their names as a way of making a name for themselves within the history of each instrument. We should get rid of this attachment.

A: What is it that attracts you towards musical experimentation?

M: Trying to achieve freedom whatever the fuck that means.

A: Why are you involved in improvisation, and how do you perceive it?

M: I take improvisation as a problematic term that can never be resolved.

As a matter of doing, a constant work in progress that questions boundaries of sound, time, spaces, people and social situations, and the music and culture industries. At the same time the question of improvisation is a very tricky one if we put it in relationship to capitalism. Capitalism puts higher and higher demands on people to be able to improvise, to adapt to the constant changes of the market, to interact with each other and communicate in an effective way, to be ready at any time for the worst. There is a strong correlation between the importance of constant innovation in capitalism and in improvisation, and we cannot avoid the fact that there is a strong relationship between the two. So my question is: when does capitalism stop producing value out of our own experimentation? Can you make a clear distinction?

I cannot. So who are we really experimenting for? The more open you are to experimentation, the more likely you would be to open up new avenues through which capitalism can produce value.

A: How do you perceive the relation between planning and spontaneity in improvisation?

M: Oh, when I improvise I am so free! Free of what? Certainly not free of falling into the most obvious cliché that improvisation has developed: the idea that while improvising you are free to do whatever you want, and that you create new music all the time. I think we can all pretty much anticipate, to a certain extent, what the music that comes from certain improvisers might sound like. I am very dubious of the idea of spontaneity, as if what we do to be free could ever be without restrictions from ideologies, circumstances, spaces, people in the room, aesthetics and judgements.

I am surprised when (in an Addlimb interview) Christof Kurzmann says with reference to improvisation that he is interested in communication but only between musicians, as he considers playing solo a monologue rather than a dialogue. Where is the improvisation taking place, just among the musicians? I don't think so. I am interested in looking at concerts as situations in which different people are involved, and even if hierarchies are established by default (the performer getting attention and being paid, the audience paying for bringing their 'quality taste' and being quiet and respectful), these aspects should be questioned, dealt with, twisted, deformed and contradicted. This should be done by creating intense atmospheres in which all involved feel strange: in which they do not have clearly defined roles to fall into; where they are part of something which does not necessarily need to be pleasant. A situation created in order to stop the reproduction of stereotypes through amplifying to eleven the alienation that capitalism produces in us. More and more the

notion of spontaneity is questioned in improvisation. Early on in the history of improvisation, to react to each other's sounds in very direct way was a way of expressing freedom. At some point it became clear that this way of interacting was becoming more and more predictable. Other people like AMM (and also thanks to electronics) were able to play longer sounds, so the reaction to each other was not so direct and it was more about sounds being together. Players like Sachiko M, took this drawn out way of working with sounds and minimalism to an extreme by playing just one sinewave in a concert. A single decision could also be a way of improvising:

I play only one sinewave in the whole concert and let's see what happens. Some people might think of this as a composition, and here many interesting questions emerge. Among them: who is performing the sound? Every time the listener moves his/her head the sinewave sounds different to him/her. This kind of playing, is very paradigmatic in the way that it takes into account a more direct relationship with the audience and the space.

Of course this is not an end point and we should keep exploring different possibilities. People like Taku Sugimoto, Taku Unami and Radu Malfatti started to put their own compositions into an improvisation context. These musicians have opened avenues that help us to understand that improvisation happens between all the people that are involved in the room or space. We all know that a higher amount of intensity and concentration on behalf of the audience also makes the atmosphere more interesting. Is the creativity coming only from the performers? I do not think so, I think it is a shared experience. We see that to put ideas into the improvisation



context, for example the use of single decisions (Sachiko M sinewave) or a composition (Radu and the Taku's), can help us precisely question the boundaries of improvisation. These kinds of works are seriously questioning the role of the performer, as anybody would be able to press the 'on' button on the sinewave, or turn on the amplifier and just allow the hum sound. I don't think it's just about making those sounds and pretending they are the only ones that matter in the room, but also taking into account what the people who are present are experiencing, and what feelings and thoughts are being developed. So if we can bring single decisions and compositions into improvisation, I am also interested in using specific concepts as part of my playing in order to question notions of spontaneity, authorship and freedom in improvisation. These concepts are often developed from discussions with other players. I will give an example:

Before playing a concert at the 2006 Erstquake, at Tonic in New York, Radu Malfatti and myself started to talk about what we were going to do for the concert based on what we knew about the space, the context and the possibilities that we had. And this is something that many musicians do. When does the improvisation begin? When we started to play or when we started talking about it? We decided that it would be interesting to play with a composition of his which has a very strict time structure with many silences. During these silences I was to record the sounds of the room with my computer (people moving, rumbling stomachs, glasses, mobile phones ringing, ventilators...), and then I was to play those sounds back at the same time that Radu was playing his composition with the trombone.

I was not producing any sound per se but recontextualising the sounds being produced by the audience in the room. Generally both the audience and the players respect the sounds that come out of the instruments and the speakers more than those produced by the audience. This respect is created by the hierarchical division between performer and audience that makes up the structure of the concert format. But in improvisation you can not separate the sounds made by the audience from those made by the performers, they are existing together and we cannot exclude or forget some and extract out others for our enjoyment. This concert was very intense as it became like a sonic panopticon, in which the movement of the audience was monitored and then heard by all the people in the room. At the same time it became obvious that everyone present was part of the situation, everybody was playing the concert, all of us were audience and performers at the same time and this did not give a sense of freedom but a sense of responsibility. Some people had criticized Radu's concerts because the audience felt like in a church or in school and you would not be able to move. But what happens when your movement actually becomes the music that everybody hears? Then your social behaviour comes into focus, and people have the chance to totally disrupt the concert. In the case of the concert at Tonic, nobody did anything strange, everybody behaved in a very correct way. This says a lot about how audiences feel comfortable behaving in certain ways depending on the context. If we had tried the same concept in a pub or noise festival or in a squat, it is very likely that audience would have been more playful and reactive. But as the audience at Tonic that night had an interest in

very quiet music, people behaved in a very respectful way. But the question of 'respect' is complicated: could such passivity also be read as active participation in the form of 'concentrated listening'?

A: Do you 'practise' for an improvisation, and what are your general thoughts on the idea of 'practising' for improvisation? When you improvise, do you use sounds that you've already 'tried out', and how much room is there for actual sound experimentation?

M: If we are talking about improvisation happening in the concert context taking all the aspects into account (room, people, amplification, lights...) then there is no possibility to practice as the concert is going to be a single special occasion. You just basically have to do it. Of course you can think about it, but what then actually happens and you cannot go back. I use the concert situation as a place for research, like a 'social studio' to try things out. Also the conversations that I might have with the audience and other musicians are very important to me to try to find out what it was that actually happened. For me, to 'practice' is very problematic, especially since I am not so interested in showing off my musical abilities with my instrument. I try to reduce possibilities as much as possible.

A: How do you evaluate an improvisation? What is it, according to you, that makes one improvisation better than another?

M: When I get a head-fuck, when I can feel that something is going on that I cannot fully understand but there is something at stake, it's good. I find it interesting when I cannot work out whether what I hear is good or bad, because it makes me question the foundations of my values and judgements.

A: When you are recording for a release, does the awareness of being recorded influence your playing, and in what way?

M: Of course it does. When you record you do not have a direct relationship with the audience, you have no idea in which circumstances your music is going to be heard, who they are, or how they got the recording (internet, bought in a shop...). There is a temporal quality that makes the CD a totally different thing from the performance. The listener can listen to the CD as many times as she or he wants, on different stereos, rooms and while doing other things. Basically they are improvising with their own listening environment, whether they are aware of it or not.

I think it is important not to make clear cut divisions between the musician as the creator of a recording and the listener as just a consumer. Peter Gidal and the structural materialist filmmakers in the '60s were discussing the idea that the film is not happening just in the film but in the head of the viewer; the viewer had to make sense out of it. I think we could think in similar terms about recordings; the real improvisation is happening when a person is listening and trying to make sense of it. Of course I cannot interfere with this kind of 'improvisation', I can only hope that in the recording there is material for thoughts that are going to inspire the listener for a long time.

# Why do you make records?

## A survey by Jérôme Noetinger

### INTRODUCTION:

This question was posed by Jérôme Noetinger to different musicians. The answers were published in French in the magazine *Revue & Corrigée* in 2008. This is the first time the interview is published in English.

## INTERVIEW BEGINS

Mattin (M): I think of records as material for thoughts that might inspire somebody to do things. The most positive aspect that a record can have for me is to open up possibilities, not only for the musicians but also for the listeners, to make people say: I didn't think that could be possible!

In order to do this I think it is necessary to be slightly disrespectful to the making of a record, not to be so extremely precious about what you are doing. A punk attitude is always needed. Personally in order to achieve this 'disrespect' I needed to release many records. While there is a nihilistic aspect to this attitude, there is also a liberating feeling in thinking that it is not such a big deal to release a record, and if it's shit, oh well another one on the pile of shit! What is there to lose? Reputation? I never had a good one anyway. I am not so interested in affirmative records that are there only to show off musical qualities or some kind of virtuosity, but records that inspire me to do something, even if it is because you hate the record or just because you find it too fucking boring to waste your life listening to it. If you are not able to make the best record in history try to make the worse one!

When you put a record out, you are in the dark, you do not really know what you have done. Then you start to get some feedback about the record and then you start to understand whether it fits your intentions or not. Also, the comments of other people might show you new directions that can take you somewhere else, somewhere you can develop in the future. When I think of making a record I do not think of a final statement. After you make a record there are a whole set of mechanisms, such as distribution, critics, magazines and so on, that generate discourse around what you have done. As somebody who releases many records, and has a couple of labels and a netlabel, I am interested in knowing how they work. I do not think that the record finishes once it is recorded, the meaning produced around the record changes the perception of it. Even the choice of which label you release your record with would change the reception of the record. I am interested in taking improvisation to different levels of musical production, not only in playing with my instrument and other people but to use the exploratory way embedded in improvisation in the making of CDs and the way you run a label; not that the way I run the label is so alternative but there are some elements that are quite suicidal in terms of selling, like making the recordings available online.

But I must say that the aesthetics of certain records (artworks, covers...) can also create certain atmospheres. Through making records I have tried to explore the possibilities that extra musical aspects, such as booklets with text, images and artworks, can add different elements to the work.

Perhaps because I grew up with CDs, vinyl, cassettes and so on, I think that as objects they can have a very strong influence on us, a super-fetishistic direct relationship to its materiality that makes us discover new worlds and find out that there are very interesting people making crazy shit out there.

That records are commodities that can be exchanged for money makes you continuously aware that your creativity is part of the economic system that we are living in. Through making records you have a very direct relationship to the market and the way that it tries to shape up your creativity in its favour, but this can also be applied to the digital medium, for example through the fallacy of intellectual property.

Of course when you make records there are some production costs that need to be covered, but now thanks to the internet we are able to distribute our music without so many production costs. But what happens to that fetishism of the object? I do not know but what I can say now is that my external hard-drive with 300 Gigabytes of music just died and this made me get back into physical records: we are releasing a Billy Bao LP and a 7" this month, and I am dying to get them!



# You Cannot Survive Any of My Desires: Acapulco Rodriguez on Mattin & Billy Bao

## INTRODUCTION/NOTE:

This interview took place in person in New York between the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009. It was published in *ZGUN* #3 (Sacramento) in February 2009.

## INTERVIEW BEGINS

I first met Mattin (Basque for *Martin*, pronounced 'mah-cheen') when he played at some stupid festival or another in 2005. In performance he reminded me of a younger, more caustic Alan Vega, or a Spanish Dave E, or perhaps a clean-cut Jean-Louis Costes. Confrontational *ad absurdum*, he seemed wholly uninterested in rewarding his audience with anything like 'music' or 'pleasure'. Impressed with what I heard I said to him, 'Have you thought about recording your music?'

He had. Even then, Mattin had released more music than fucking Sun Ra. Last I checked, the grand total came to some 183 CDs, CD-Rs, 'vinyls', and internet-only releases, with more-always more-to come.

Two years hence, I've finished mucking my way through the fucker's oeuvre and recording my impressions on the old laptop. In its present form, the document fills my hard drive, which I would happily submit to you were I confident that the postal service will not suddenly go on strike, leave the week's mail sitting in the bin until New Year's Day, and then dump it in the ocean. What I have done instead is to whittle it down to pocket size, discussing just a few recordings which I believe justly summarize or encapsulate the *raison d'être* of this formidable career in noise, and interspersing pertinent remarks by the *auteur* and various associates from his sundry side-projects and gimmick releases.

If there's a common thread coursing through Mattin's work, it's the element of confrontation that pervades his performances, recordings, and writings. Even in his turns as a laptop improviser of the reductionist school, where restraint and impersonality are core principles, his pregnant silences often explode into excruciating feedback, or they're punctuated by moments of subversive humour, sabotage tactics, and queasy real-time commentary on the audience's response.

In the US, he's probably best known as the guitarist in Billy Bao, a punk and noise project named after its lead singer, a Nigerian exile based in the Spanish Basque Country. That group has generated a passel of pretty confusing, noisy concept-records since 2005. The first of those, *Bilbo's Incinerator*, is now a minor collectable thanks to American record dudes' reverence for the Word of 'TJ' Lax. That unpleasant little record (only 300 pressed, foolio) whetted the public's thirst for more, ah, 'Nigerian punk', and so the floodgates were opened to a stream of defiantly ugly agit-prop anti-records on such labels as Parts Unknown and S-S. Needless to say, I'm excited to find Billy Bao sharing labels with bands like Pissed Jeans and Tyvek, 'cos it means he's engaged with an American audience famously averse to thinking critically about itself and allergic to braiding politics into its noise. So, yeah, let's say for the moment that Mattin is the guitar player in Billy Bao and chew on that cud for a moment.

The Basque Country occupies a unique place within Spain's geography, as a nation-within-a-nation, a people ethnically, linguistically, and culturally separate from those of central Spain, the historical seat of that country's political power. As such, the land of *bacalao* and banks was the site of intense governmental repression and cultural resistance throughout the

nationalist, ultraconservative regime of Generalísimo Franco, which ended with a whimper in 1975 when the fair-haired dictator ingested one tainted ham, delivered to his chambers by an inbred courtesan, and croaked. By the mid-eighties, Bilbao, its largest city, was awash in heroin and bad vibes, a perfect storm of unemployment, separatist violence and industrial decay that set the scene for the rawest and most noxious punk-rock scene in all of Spain (if you don't believe me, check out Shit-Fi's unbelievable Basque punk mixtape at [www.shit-fi.com/](http://www.shit-fi.com/)). Amid the squalor, spaces opened up where young people were given free rein to create a culture of their own and give voice to their dissatisfaction, a dissatisfaction voiced in an explicitly radical political register. It was this environment that a young Billy parachuted into around 1986, fleeing sectarian violence and militarism in his native Nigeria.

Acapulco Rodriguez (AR): Billy, how did that early Bilbao punk scene inform what you would go on to do with your band?

Billy Bao (BB): Radical music in the Basque country discussed real social problems in a very specific way, subjects with which you identified in a very immediate way. This had a huge impact on me as a teenager. People sang about what they saw immediately in their own neighbourhoods, in real life. It was as though they said, 'I'm young, I'm X, I don't amount to much. But with a guitar I can talk about what I see, as a teenager'. At the time there were *gaztetxes*, which were basically squats, and this was an example of how you could do something with the reality on the streets. You can make the streets yours, you can *change* the streets. That's what always fascinated me about punk: crude, concrete realities. On the news, etcetera, there was never that crudeness, that bluntness. *This* is real.

AR: Mattin, you weren't yet working in Bilbao at the time, right?

Mattin (M): I began a bit later, in the early '90s, when a smaller scene took root in Getxo, the suburb of Bilbao where I grew up. There was something known as the 'Getxo sound', and we were at the end of it. I was in a band with the drummer from La Grieta when I was fifteen and sixteen years old. It was a rather shitty indie-rock scene. I was a part of it, playing bass in a band called Inte Domine. Later, in London, I started listening to Japanoise and to music like AMM. I saw Masonna and Filament, I started improvising at one of [AMM drummer] Eddie Prévost's workshops. I started on guitar, then sampler. I played in a duo for a while. Eddie and I later performed and recorded together as Sakada.

Mattin spent about seven years in London, where he attended art school, communing with the city's underground radical intellectuals, people like New Zealander Matthew Hyland of the band Mean Streaks, and with its reductionist improv scene, where he practised a sort of radical minimalism that steered clear of tonality, riffs, 'self-expression', all that shit. In 2000, he attended the International Computer Music Conference in Berlin, where laptop music was the order of the day.

M: I decided then and there that I must buy a laptop. But I didn't want to sound like the Mego guys [Pita, Fennesz, et al.]. I wanted to make the laptop sound like Bruce Russell or Keiji Haino playing guitar or the nasty feedback of Whitehouse.

This is roughly where Mattin's prolific recording career begins. Encouraged by his work with Prévost and other big-balls of the London improv scene, Mattin started playing laptop sets with everyone from Radu Malfatti to Tony Conrad and from Campbell Kneale to Junko, always keeping one foot in the lofty improv scenes of Europe and Japan, where he met and collaborated with Taku Unami, and the other firmly inside the world of noise. Mattin never turned down an opportunity to play, and the porous jam session ethos of those two scenes created a perfect environment in which to practice his swinging, unapologetically conceptual approach to silence-and-screech.



Perhaps it's best not to think of Mattin's work as music at all. For Mattin, performance is an opportunity for confrontation and dialogue, and music is 'simply' the pretext and the medium that enables the exchange – the common currency. In some instances the exchange takes the shape of a muted, ultra-minimal dialogue with the elder statesmen of European improv – Radu Malfatti, or Prévost – and that's fine, if you have an ear for extreme minimalism and a lot of room in your life for silence and self-cancellation. Just last month he played a duet with Margarida Garcia in which his only contribution was to sit in the audience, listen, and applaud politely. If you're feeling grouchy, I suppose you could take that as Mattin simply saying, 'Fuck you, I'm not playing.' On the other hand, one could see it as a critique of the way concerts have been historically and socially constructed, and the way in which listeners and performers alike reproduce the norms, habits and stereotypes associated with concert going. It's your choice, really. But chances are if you're coming at Mattin's work from that angle, you will find plenty to dislike.

Listeners approaching him from the world of noise and power electronics might have a higher tolerance for this kinda shit, to their own detriment. It's been a long day at London's No Trend 2 Festival, and the crowd's collective g-spot is bleeding from overexertion, its third eye glazing over from too many pints of warm ale and nearly a dozen sets' worth of aestheticised sonic dystopia. The next set better start soon.

After what feels like a really long time the house lights dim, and Mattin climbs onstage wearing mirrored aviator glasses, a beat-to-shit laptop held open on his forearm. He grabs the mic and leans in, poised to sing. And then...

He just fucking stands there, doing absolutely nothing, frozen in place. The whole thing is rather pathetic and, frankly, kind of eerie, like those wretched living statues you see panhandling in Times Square or Las Ramblas.

For once, the artistic or metaphorical violence suggested by so many noise artists from Throbbing Gristle to Whitehouse to Wolf Eyes, turns into actual, manifest violence. Insults issue from the audience. Gobs of spit smack Mattin in the face. A beer bottle pelts him in the temple. Mattin stands there and doesn't flinch, doesn't crack a smile, doesn't move a muscle.

After ten minutes of this shit, he clicks open a sound file, and an ominous roar takes over the PA. The sound coming over the speakers at earsplitting volume is a playback of those first ten minutes of the set. Every insult, every retarded joke, every drunken, smartass remark is amplified twentyfold and spat back at the audience with unforgiving clarity for a full ten minutes.

M: After the show I spoke to a few members of the audience and it was very uncomfortable. People were uncomfortable hearing their own voices, their own taunts and smartass remarks. One of them came up to me and shouted, in my face, 'Thanks for making me feel like a dickhead.'

Mattin is really into this kind of broad gesture. A sizeable chunk of his repertoire consists of what you might, unkindly but accurately, describe as a bunch of stunts. Some are more successful than others, but the thing about a good stunt is that it involves a significant measure of risk. Sometimes, that risk means the potential for a bottle upside the head. Most of the time, the risk he runs is humiliation – dire, abject, humiliation. If you wind up at one of his performances, you have no choice but to become a participant in the stunt, whether you know it or not. If the stunt succeeds, it transforms you by forcing you to examine your relationship to the performer, to wonder who's really on stage, why they're there, and what you're doing there watching and listening to him.

This dynamic powers a good deal of Mattin's work. It's at the heart of Deflag Haemorrhage/Haien Contra, his collaboration with a London improviser named " " [sic] Tim Goldie, who have a new album coming out soon which you maybe should buy. I'm looking at it now. It comes in a white box with a mirror glued to the lid. Mattin claims it's being released by Tochnit Aleph but I don't see anything on the box to indicate that it's being released at all. There isn't even a CD inside.

AR: Am I supposed to listen to this? It's just a box with a mirror on the lid.

M: Hmm... let me see it. Yes, well, that's a prototype. There's going to be a CD inside, called *Humiliated*.

AR: I've heard of abject art, but what exactly is 'abject music'? Is it worse than that shit you did at the No Trend Festival?

M: Yes, I suppose so. Abject music is about running out of possibilities with your instrument. When you run out of possibilities with your instrument, it turns to pathos. The erect cock of noise becomes a flaccid penis. If Whitehouse eventually turned into a self-parody, we've picked up that torch and become makers of pathetic music. Self-reflexive flaccid cocks that wants to get rid of their own machoness. The music of impotence.

AR: So what happens when you and " " [sic] Tim Goldie perform?

M: We try to get it up, we try to get an erection, and we fail, and we become hermaphrodites. It's about expressing that frustration onstage. Deflag Haemorrhage is a Frankenstein monster that goes nowhere. " " [sic] Tim Goldie holds his arms out like this, like Frankenstein's monster, and he walks around but he just bumps into the wall, going nowhere. Then he does some air quotes, you know, with his fingers, like the quotation marks in his name. And he sticks the air quotes into his mouth to induce vomiting. So he tries to vomit, but the only vomit that comes out is the frustration of the audience having an embarrassed laugh at our expense, and at their expense. Everybody is utterly embarrassed. People feel very happy to go back to normality, but something has happened, they're no longer the same.

As much as I've enjoyed following the dude's career as a fly in the Euro-improv ointment, it's Mattin's punk-rock moves that I find the most satisfying, partly because punk's formal conventions are so familiar and long-overdue for a thorough deconstruction, and bro is just the kind of cheeky wiseass who just might rise to the occasion; also, because punk strongly emphasizes the production of *records*, and I like records. And ultimately because punk rock provides Mattin and company a commercial laboratory for all them hoity-toity, fancy-pants *Wire* magazine ideas, a marketplace of credulous collectors in dire need of a critical suppository to clean out the plumbing.

With Billy's anguished vocals at the forefront, the band became a fleshy, grotesque, punk rock monster with an improvised papier-mâché penis that temperamentally insinuates itself into the picture, squirting jism and pus all over the grooves (another reason why it's important to always hold vinyl records by the edges). The recording process became a central element in Billy Bao's sound as Mattin and Xabier Erkizia's laptops deformed the band's real-time punk-rock jams in the digital mirror. The effect is disorienting: on one hand, you can't help but respond to the music on a visceral level, because, frankly, it rocks. This shit is as smokingly fucked-up and rancid as Drunks with Guns, Brainbombs, or High Rise. But there's always something there – a bizarre jump cut, a wash of too-pure digital distortion – to remind you that the whole venture is artificial, that somebody on the other end is fucking with the recording and very likely fucking with you and your personal enjoyment of the music (or, mostly, non-music).

M: The records are full of deliberate digital cuts. Xabi and I are coming from laptop work, so this came naturally to us. It's a very good way to pervert punk rock through the lens of musique concrète. When we made *Bilbo's Incinerator* I was playing electronic music and I wasn't quite sure I wanted to play punk at that point. Mikel Biffs was playing in Safety Pins, and before that in Pop Crash Colapso, a band that sounded like Tad. He recorded us, we put digital distortion on the guitar, and he was able to get that drum sound. I cut and pasted the record on the laptop in one night. We were going for our version of 'L.A. Blues'. The actual Stooges track was pasted into the noise parts to make it more intense.

A good chunk of Mattin's recent jointz involve creative reimaginings of good ol' rock & roll tropes, borrowings, appropriations, repurposings, exercises in *détournement* in which paleo- and proto-punk collide with Mattin's fucked approach to improvisation. Take his Songbooks, for instance (there's four of them already), wherein he dons the mirrored sunglasses, shoves his hand up a mouldy Lou Reed puppet, and makes ol' monkeyface bawl, caterwaul, and 'sing' a river of crude indictments of (1) capitalism; (2) conventional song forms; (3) his perception of the audience's perception of his set, which is always histrionically negative. How do you like them apples? No? Okay, then, how about his album-length cover of Lou's *Berlin*, cast as a piercing duet with trumpeter Axel Dörner?

Well, what the hell *do* you want, man? The *White Album*? All right, then, dig the forthcoming Billy Bao LP on Parts Unknown, recorded in honour of the fortieth anniversary of May '68.

AR: In the US, 1968 doesn't resonate in the popular imagination as it does in Europe or in Mexico, where it represents the culmination of a powerful, unified youth movement, a moment of rupture and revolutionary possibility. How was May '68 commemorated in Europe?

M: A lot of conferences and talks. There was guilt all around, to the extent that if we commemorate '68, we'll all get depressed. On the other hand, you have the food crisis, the crisis in the rest of the world.

AR: So the Billy Bao record is like a souvenir, huh? The red-on-black type on the cover was a nice touch.

M: The conceptual aspect of the record lies mainly in the accompanying text [the cover just mentioned]. Those are the lyrics of the record. It's almost a Spoken Word record. It's divided into decades – each cut is a different decade

AR: Tell me more.

BB: Okay, there are five cuts, one for each decade: '68, '78, etc. On the 1968 track, we play over a Luigi Nono piece recorded that year, entitled *Non Consumiamo Marx*, using recordings from demonstrations in Paris and Italy. For 1978 we took Fela Kuti's 'Zombie', which is the song Fela was playing in Accra when the riot broke out in the audience.

AR: What's 1988?

M: 'Second Coming' by Brainbombs.

AR: I see.

M: '98 is of course 'A Cunt Like You' by Whitehouse.

BB: And 2008 is me, Billy, feeling so fucking depressed that I could die.

So watch out, recording artists. Mattin is open to strategically taking your stuff and putting it on his own records, 'cos as everyone knows, private property is theft.

BB: Intellectual property is shit.

You can take all of Mattin's music for free at [www.mattin.org](http://www.mattin.org). Take some, maybe leave some too. It's a pretty open place to visit online. While you're there you might, for instance, check out Billy Bao's second single, 'Accumulation', another example of the band hewing to the strictures of a medium and exploiting its potential. It consists of ten one-minute tracks spread evenly across two sides of a 7". Each of the tracks takes the previous track and layers more on top of it, until, at the very end, you have an ur-track that includes, absorbs, subsumes every track before it.

AR: As Billy Childish would say, that's some ambition, there, Billy.

BB: Fuck you, man. Punk rock is shit.

AR: Okay, well, since you brought it up, I want you to talk specifically about how improvisation shapes the way Billy Bao sounds, because that may not be clear to listeners who know the band exclusively through the records.

M: Billy Bao doesn't rehearse. We never play the same track twice. In that sense we're a generative project; we're either playing live or we're recording. If we play one riff, what we're doing is narrowing down the improvisation to one riff, but we're interested in not playing the same riff 'correctly', but rather, working with this sort of micro-improvisation on the riff. We think of the records as a totality; whereas in punk rock you're nailed down to one track. In punk rock you're working with individual tracks, and there's this pathetic downtime between songs. With us you get one riff, then another riff, and it turns into a different song. We play with the format, whatever the format may be, whether it's a record or a live performance. In punk rock, a lot of people think once they've got the song down, they're done. That's wrong. That's why improvisation is interesting – it forces you to explore the format, the performance. We're applying some of these same principles to the medium, the record, and we do this to our relationship with the public.

The *Fuck Separation 10"* is a nice example. The two sides of the record are cross-faded into each other. The record has no proper beginning and end, and you can only properly experience it as a vinyl record with sides.

M: If you do something over and over again, it becomes routine, it becomes a template. The interesting thing is to see what are the limits of the template, seeing how it can be changed. That template also constructs us as subjects. When we go to a show, depending on the environment, the space where a show is held constructs you as a performer and as a listener. The public gives you that power. It's a brutal degree of power the public gives you. It's about exploring that relationship of hierarchies – not in this bullshit hippie sense, but to explore hierarchies in the most brutal form possible. If I try to open up possibilities, the hierarchies won't be broken. If you really want to break them, it requires an extreme commitment on the part of the audience, because the audience creates a group dynamic. You might dare to say something, but you don't want to leave your role as a member of the audience, as part of a mass or a crowd.

AR: There's an unspoken contract between the performer and the audience.

M: Yes. The public is a mass, it pays, it applauds; the performer gives the public something extraordinary, he's the guy who gives you cultural capital, or value in exchange for your money or even simply for your presence.

So what? What's the point of 'subverting' this dynamic, you say, rather than taking it for granted, which is another way of saying, in Billy's words, 'If it isn't broke, please don't fix it.'

For an avowed anarcho-Marxist like Billy (or Mattin) the answer is clear: because there is nothing revolutionary in a performance that reproduces the power structures of capitalism, in a show that casts the performer and his audience in the same power dynamic they would play out at a Christian rock concert or a *Vice* Magazine record-release party, or on MTV 'Total Request Live'. Those are just different flavours of the same rancid cultural product (vanilla-caramel wafer, heroin-vanilla, and vanilla anal-nut, respectively).

In other words, the medium itself is political, and it is constructed ideologically. Mattin takes this one step further with the help of our number-one Frankfurthin' celebrity Hebrew sperm donor, Wally Benjamin, who, in his essay 'The Artist as Producer' posits that art is truly radical if, and only if, its resistance to capitalism is manifest not only in the form and medium, but also in the means of its production and distribution.

BB: This is why MySpace is problematic, and why Billy Bao will never use MySpace. It shapes the way in which one interacts with others. The MySpace brand name appears before the name of the artist. And MySpace is the brand name of a corporation with a brutally conservative ideology.

M: It's proprietary software and the software is very hard on older computers. MySpace reserves the right to censor you whenever they want based on content; they don't have to give you any explanation. Everyone knows at least one band that has been removed arbitrarily from MySpace?

BB: What fucking bothers me the most is that if you're not on MySpace, it's as though you don't exist. That very same creativity that we deploy in making music, we can apply to the process of production and distribution.

AR: This would make for an apt segue into a discussion of anti-copyright.

M: Yes. The idea of authorship has developed hand in hand with capitalism. The law categorizes and places a monetary value upon creative work. Even underground musicians have internalized this logic: this is *my property*. Our creativity has a dollar value, and it's divisible; it exists under the law. In improvisation that logic is completely absurd. When we play our instruments, we play them against the grain, in the most perverse, unconventional way possible. It's a moment of liberation. You might make a fool of yourself because you might be the first to do it. Why is it that we can do that with an instrument but not with what other people produce? If you put music, or records, out in the public, that public should have the absolute right to do whatever they want with them. Creativity has to be free. Wait a minute! This is also what what capitalist would tell you. So something more appropriate for us would be: non-creativity should expose our lack for freedom. This is why noise is interesting as something without any value whatsoever (meaning you can't even make it into property). That very same logic of property also creates the logic of policing. You need a police or government body to enforce the copyright law, to back you up when you say to somebody, 'You're stealing my property.' But these are ideas. The only ones who care about that theft are those who are making money off it.

BB: We competed this year in the annual BilboRock competition, in the 'Pop-Rock' category.

AR: Did you win?

M: No, just the opposite. I set my amp on fire. You remember when Jimi Hendrix burned his amp?

AR: No.

BB: What matters isn't what you play; it's the sound that comes out of the speakers.

M: What matters is setting my amp on fire. They made me pay them 150 euros. So I'm not sure if Billy Bao will ever play at BilboRock again.

## The Records

These are the Billy Bao and Mattin records that I would shove in your stocking if I knew where you lived, bad boy. There's several hundred more where these came from, but these are as good a place as any to start. No, actually, they're the best place to start. So go to.

## Radu Malfatti & Mattin Going Fragile CD (Formed)

A sublime reductionist improvisation session. Malfatti (trombone) is an old-school master of extended technique and improvisation at the threshold of audibility, what you might call gestural improv. Mattin (laptop) is his pupil and antagonist.

## Josetxo Grieta Euskal Semea CD (w.m.o/r)

Wherein Mattin's long-running punk band, La Grieta, backs legendary Bilbao singer Josetxo Anitua, of the pioneering band Cancer Moon, in an improvised treatment of VU's 'European Son'. An uncommonly dark, tortured commentary on the subject of Basque identity, and one of Mattin's most satisfying 'rock' records, to boot. Like most CDs on Mattin's w.m.o/r label released after 2005, it is packaged in a cellophane sleeve with a beautifully printed, oversized colour booklet; this one includes Anitua's original longhand lyrics and a photo-parody of the *Velvet Underground and Nico* cover art.

## Josetxo Grieta Sonrisas Vendo CD (Taumaturgia)

*Smiles for Sale*. An excruciating psychodrama for four-piece band, recorded live in 2007. Anitua committed suicide in April of this year, leaving this record, the LP *The Art of Distraction*, and the DVD of their last concert-up ready for release.

## Mattin Songbook Vol. 4 CD (Azul Discográfica)

Disclosure: I 'brokered' the transaction whereby this disc was released. All profits have disappeared and no books were kept. A cornerstone of the terriblist school of rock & roll, this final entry in the Songbook series finds Mattin 'bridging' the 'gap' between 'improv' and 'songwriting' with an all-star Japanese band. To quote a good friend, this record is beyond good and evil; but mostly it's evil. Not in your wildest dreams.

## Mattin & Axel Dörner Berlin CD (Absurd / Tilt)

## Deflag Haemorrhage / Haien Kontra CD (w.m.o/r; reissue: Tochnit Aleph)

I couldn't begin to explain to you what this record is 'about.' Mattin's first recorded collaboration with " " [sic] Tim Goldie, the founding document of Abject Music.

## Billy Bao Bilbo's Incinerator 7" (w.m.o/r)

Good luck finding it.

## Billy Bao Fuck Separation 10" (S-S)

The band in barnburner Stooge mode. Heavier than Brainbombs and more fucked than anything in the Bad Vugum discography. For real.

## Billy Bao May '08 LP (Parts Unknown)

The ultimate Billy Bao record. The only thing that matches the level of digital mindfuckery at work here is its apocalyptic, anti-capitalist vitriol. The ante is hereby upped.

Now, go make a fudgie.



# Fuck Separation: a conversation between Alessandro Keegan and Mattin

**NOTE:** I spent a year in New York during 2008 and 2009. Just after I arrived I met Alessandro Keegan when he played an amazing concert with his band Twin Stumps in September 2008 in Brooklyn (the line up included also Drunkdriver and Pink Reason whom I have also collaborated with).

We became friends and had long conversations. This was his first ever interview and it was published in the web based magazine *Visitation Rites* on Saturday May 23 May 2009.

Link to *Visitation Rites*:  
[www.visitation-rites.com/](http://www.visitation-rites.com/)

Link to the interview:  
[www.visitation-rites.com/2009/05/fuck-separation-a-conversation-by-alessandro-keeganmattin/](http://www.visitation-rites.com/2009/05/fuck-separation-a-conversation-by-alessandro-keeganmattin/)

## INTERVIEW BEGINS

Mattin is a musician and performance artist from the Basque Country. He has produced a slew of releases under the names of Deflag Haemorrhage/Haien Kontra, Sakada, Billy Bao, and No More Music. He has also collaborated with many artists, including Drunkdriver, Margarita Garcia, Tim Goldie, Taku Unami and Tony Conrad, to name a few. His work mixes laptop electronics with politics and, in the case of Billy Bao, some harsh, deconstructed rock and roll. In the live setting, Mattin is subversive, sometimes abrasive, and always finding ways to undermine audience expectations and break the boundaries inherent to performance.

I began interviewing Mattin by writing back and forth with him via email; finally we sat down to talk further about his work. We decided it would be best to present what we came up with in the spirit of Mattin's work: without categorization or clear authorship. This is not an interview per se, as Mattin's words often become my words and I in turn have re-written and expanded upon some of his.

Alessandro Keegan (AK): Are there lines that should not be crossed or cannot be crossed in a performance?

Mattin (M): Do you mean like killing somebody? Like using somebody's head as a resonance box? I do not mean to sound like a futurist, but machine guns have beautiful sounds!

I am more interested in bringing certain ideas that the situationists used in the urban environment into concert situations. I understand that this is problematic, in the sense that I am still an artist. The situationists did not want to have their personal stamp or the brand of an institution on their documentation.

After a concert in Madrid, somebody took my microphone and told me to stop. I was surprised and I did not know what to do. Somebody else told me that I should hang myself with the cord. I was even more confused. I went up to her and asked her, 'why don't you do it? Here is the cord and here is my head.' She said: 'Fucking shut up.' Afterwards, I was thinking that I should have fought her for the microphone. What she did was fascist in the sense that she was censoring what she did not like. Maybe the fascist was me but I learned a lesson: to always ask myself, before a concert, how far I am willing to go with the situa-

tion, with what I am doing, how much integrity is there in what I am doing, and how much I am willing to give up. My physical health? Prison? Everybody hating me afterwards? Lack of recognition? Violence anyway can be an effective way of breaking certain boundaries and connecting with a sensation of the real. I must say that the only time that I experienced real violence was during a concert with Drunkdriver, when Berdan was swinging the microphone and hit me. I did not faint, so I continued to play. Even if I am interested in getting head-fucked in a concert, I am not sure whether I want to get them literally. I was very confused after that concert; the whole conceptual approach did not work, but there was a very strong atmosphere and it seemed that everybody was feeling very intense.

AK: This 'strong atmosphere' is something difficult to quantify, but I think many performers have sensed it at certain times. Instead of being hypnotized in some orgiastic way, we are forced to reckon with an unexpected situation or to look at the event through a different frame. Something has been transgressed in the social hierarchy of the setting.

M: Violence is a difficult question, I am personally interested in a psychological type of violence, in doing something subtle that can really disturb peoples expectations. The boundaries we create with limited expectations and the categories we ascribe to art are the most oppressive psychological factors, and the most difficult to overcome. They dictate separation and cause alienation. The goal is to identify those moments of separation, because those separations produce power structures and defend ideologies.

I remember seeing concerts where the musicians were very good, and the music was very good, but where what they were doing was something that I could just throw into a category. It would leave me with a feeling of emptiness. When a performance can be easily framed, it risks becoming impotent, no matter what energy or intentions lay at the heart of it. There is always a passive consumer mentality at work, and a market ready to exploit the artist. Even if this market pretends to be alternative, it is still about profiting from people.

A DETOURNEMENT OF ROLES OR IDENTITIES, A MORE PERFORMATIVE UNDERSTANDING OF APPROPRIATION

AK: You have an unusual relationship with your laptop, sometimes using it as a means of physical engagement with the audience.

M: One of the most important things that I get out of improvisation is the opportunity to play instruments against the grain. So if people usually stay in front of the screen, respecting only those little fucking patches that they have in front of them, letting the audience seem like they are just secondary to the situation, I am interested in doing the opposite: in socialising my interaction with the computer. It has cost me many motherboards.

AK: Do your collaborations usually begin with a conversation or with a performance?

M: Either way. A conversation might be a way of putting a process forward, a process that exceeds the framework of the concert. There is no such thing as a neutral audience, or a perfect audience, or an audience where everyone has the same level of awareness about

your work. So, if everybody has a different relation to the performer's work, and to the situation that is at hand, I find it stupid to say that the performance is the only thing that matters, or the only place where things are going on. In terms of improvisation, many concerts start before the actual concert begins, with conversations that influence the playing.

Recently, I played a concert with Margarida Garcia and I said to her that I did not think I had anything interesting to play with my computer. I wanted to just plant myself in the audience and see what would happen if I was announced as a player in the concert but then was discovered just sitting there in the crowd, the only sound I produced being the clapping at the end, along with the rest of the audience. This was probably the concert where the most attention was on the other players as I did not have to worry about my shitty playing. And it was amazing!

AK: Being given the role of performer is a kind of alienation. Being a member of the audience is alienating as well. It's funny how the concert situation falls into a submissive pattern when one would think that it should be a moment of liberation.

M: It can be very lonely on stage because it transforms you into a very particular subject, like a rock star, and this somehow distances you a whole lot from the audience. You are suddenly this gifted artist who commands respect, rather than another pathetic human being. Don't get me wrong: I am saying this about myself. If the danger is gone, that means this desperation has become a commodity. And I am not just talking about physical danger here.

## Take Improvisation to the Streets: Interview with Dan Warburton

### NOTE:

Dan and I meet for a chat in a Parisian bar on the 4th of April 2009. He then transcribed our conversation and then we went through the interview via email during June and July 2009.

This interview was published in the web based magazine *Paris Transatlantic* where Dan Warburton is the editor.

Link to *Paris Transatlantic*:

[www.paristransatlantic.com](http://www.paristransatlantic.com)

Link to interview:

[www.paristransatlantic.com/magazine/interviews/mattin.html](http://www.paristransatlantic.com/magazine/interviews/mattin.html)

### INTERVIEW BEGINS

Dan Warburton (DW): In time-honoured boring PT style, I'll start with the usual question about your origins and background, so

*I don't think things should be boring for routine reasons, SO LET'S TRY SOMETHING OUT: I'm interested in extending the exploratory aspect of improvisation to other areas that might seem to be at the periphery of music production such as interviews and the way I present myself in the context of music. I think that our knowledge about a certain player influences our appreciation of her or his music. So I don't make a clear distinction between the production of sounds and the way one presents oneself. A musician giving an interview should be honest: you should be the same person you are at home and the same when you're playing.*

*One coherent subject. But I can see from the way you've asked me certain questions and the way you've edited my answers you want to portray me in a certain way, as someone I don't think I am.*

*Then again, I'M NOT A SINGULAR COHERENT SUBJECT and even if I might have done*

*things to feed stereotypes of this persona called Mattin, that doesn't mean I agree with all of them.*

*So I'll try at times to follow your game, and at other times to disrupt it understanding that we might fail miserably but at least we'll have countered the normative qualities of the interview.*

*I'll try to go against the stereotypical persona that I and others have created against the mediation of my self-presentation.*

*Against the idea of neutrality in this interview, probably in order to feed another stereotype... will this ever end? THAT'S THE BEAUTY OF IMPROVISTATION, IT NEVER ENDS.*

*When I say neutrality I'm thinking of the way people used to record improvisation sessions trying to achieve as much fidelity to the event, creating the feeling that by listening to the recordings you're almost there with the players.*

*We all know that this is absolutely impossible, that there are always decisions that mediate your relationship with the recording.*

*For example, Dan gives the impression that this interview took place in a café in Paris in April, which it originally did, but we are now typing at our computers and it's early July.*

Did you have a musical childhood?

Mattin (M): No, not particularly, but my mother had lots of tapes. Bands like MCD and Eskorbuto. I discovered punk rock at the same as the Velvet Underground and the Stooges. Punk in the Basque country was very political. Bilbao was totally economically fucked in terms of industrial decline in about 1983. It used to be very important for shipbuilding, and when that stopped in the '80s, there were riots. There was a lot of unemployment, and a lot of drugs. Heroin. Middle class kids weren't interested in following their parents, so they started taking heroin. A whole generation, a lot of my mother's friends just... died. It was really something. Heroin started in the middle class milieu but the Spanish police used it to infiltrate the lower classes in order to depoliticise the Basque radical left. There were demonstrations every weekend, and

for fun we used to go and pick up the rubber balls the police used to fire at the protesters. It was intense. And the punk rockers were talking about this – some of them were very political, some were pretty nihilistic, but they all made something out of it. There were social centres, squats or *gaztetxes* (young people's centres) – it was a very politicised scene. It's great that there's a very strong tradition of squatted social centres in the Basque country. The squat scene was very connected to punk. Now with some friends we're trying to reconnect squatting with improvisation, trying to see what the connections between the two practices are, in the sense that both try to produce a more autonomous social space. Trying to produce your own subjectivity within the situation you find yourself in, either by inhabiting a squatted space or by dealing with your instruments.

*IF I'M ALIENATED WHY DON'T I SQUAT MYSELF?*

DW: Were you playing anything yourself back then?

M: No, I didn't start until the early '90s, when there was another small scene that sprang up, more influenced by Sonic Youth, the American indie thing. Quite noisy. It was called Getxo Sound. But the politics had changed by then. People had started singing in English, to distance themselves from their immediate environment. I guess it was a direct response to the populist approach of Rock Radical Vasco (Basque Radical Rock). It was also a class thing. I played bass in an indie band called Inte Domine, and sang on one song. The rest of the band were pretty pissed off at me, because I didn't have a good sense of time and used to change the bass lines. The drummer [Iñigo Eguillor] was always getting mad at me. I still play with him in La Grieta, and he's still mad at me (laughs) – actually that's not true: he's one of the sweetest people I know. Iñigo and I played with Josetxo Anitua as Josetxo Grieta until last year when Josetxo died. Josetxo used to play in a amazing band called Cancer Moon. Iñigo and the other guys from Inte-Domine now play in a band called Gringo.

*BILBAO, MIERDA, ROCK'N'ROLL*

DW: What other music were you listening to at the time? Jazz? Contemporary?

M: No, not until I got to London. We were always listening to things from a kind of rock perspective. Maybe I still am, but I also understand more the problems involved with rock, how closed-minded it sometimes is, how male. I had a Japanese friend, Natsuki Uruma, who took me to see Masonna, and that was amazing. And then later on I saw Filament – those high sinewaves created such a different perception of space!

*WHY DO WE CONSTANTLY NEED TO MAP OUT OUR INFLUENCES?*

DW: Bilbao must have changed a lot since they built the Guggenheim Museum. What do you feel when you go back today?

M: Before, you could feel that there was something going on in the streets. In one high school I went to there were sit-ins and they squatted the building, because they wanted people to speak Basque. There was a constant political tension that was very rich. Now it's more diluted, not as present. Having said that, the other day I was walking where I used to live in Algorta and found this anarchist/autonomist bookshop called Eztabaida, and thought, great. Something is going on. We can sell our records there, and they seem to be interested. And it's just five minutes from where I used to live. But in general, Bilbao got very gentrified. How gentrified did I get myself?

DW: Do you have any sense of national identity yourself? Do you think of yourself as Spanish, or Basque, or what?

M: In Bilbao there has never been an strong tradition of speaking Basque so I don't speak it, but I did grow up in that environment. At school there were Spanish history books and Basque history books. I still feel very connected to a certain Basqueness, but not to the kind of politics the Basque separatists want. I'm interested in the idea of resistance, of people refusing passports and living

underground, not the ideological aspect that they are fighting for. I'm not interested in the construction of a Basque nation, or any other nation (is there a nation without police?). It's like what Jean Genet said about the PLD, I'm interested in the rebels, they look so beautiful etc., but once they get a nation, count me out. For me this is easy to say: Genet actually lived with the PLD for several years.

DW: You've moved around a bit – you lived in Berlin for two years, and before that seven years in London. You're based in New York at the moment, right?

M: Yes, but only until the 5th of June, when I'm going to Gotland in Sweden, where my girlfriend lives. That's where Ingmar Bergman lived the last 40 years of his life, and where Pippi Longstocking was filmed. At the moment I am doing the Whitney Independent Study Program and living one block away from Ground Zero, in a room that belongs to Jeff Perkins. He's a really interesting artist who used to do light shows for the Velvet Underground, Cream, and later The Germs, when he was living in LA. He's also very good friends with Henry Flynt. This year we've been organising four-hour lecture sessions in our kitchen with Henry Flynt talking about the economic crisis and communism.

*HOW MUCH DISTANCE IS THERE BETWEEN OUR POLITICAL CLAIMS AND OUR EVERYDAY ACTIONS?*

DW: When and why did you move to London?

M: I was a very bad student, probably the worst. So in 1995 I went to London to learn English. And clean dishes. I worked in a hotel in Harrow, cleaning dishes. A few years later, I was working in a factory in Poole, Dorset, making and packing pies, and I said to myself, I'd better do something with my life. So next year I enrolled in art school. I did a Foundation in Camberwell [College of Arts], a BA in Central Saint Martins (apart from

Anne Tallentire the college was fucked), and then an MA in Art Theory at Goldsmiths, which was great.

DW: Who was on the faculty at the time?

M: Irit Rogoff was quite impressive. Everything was interesting and experimental. You could try things out. Things were pretty eye-opening. Later on we could see that it was quite problematic in political terms. They're very good at generating sophisticated terminology and theory, but I sometimes wonder how much they wanted to put it in practice and how much it was going to help the underprivileged. Then again I also wonder how much what we do helps to change the dominant culture, and the people excluded from it.

For me the important thing was Eddie Prévost's workshop, where I met people like Tim Goldie, Anthony Guerra, Denis Dubovtsev and Romuald Wadych, great people. I heard about Eddie's workshop through the LMC.

*HOW MUCH OF WHAT WE DO HELPS CHANGE THE DOMINANT CULTURE AND THE PEOPLE EXCLUDED FROM IT?*

DW: So you were listening to improvised music by the time you got to Saint Martins, then?

M: I went to an LMC festival in 1999, and saw John Tilbury, Mass Producers and Filament. They had like a stall with all the *Resonance* magazines, so I got a few of them and started reading, and that's where I heard about Eddie's workshop. And it really changed my life. People were so committed to what they were doing. People like Seymour Wright. There was a feeling that we were doing something interesting and important. It was very focused and there was a sense of self-organisation. Eddie's generosity was exemplary in the sense of giving us the courage to just go and do it. It inspired us to self-organise, get our concerts, get labels running, write about what we do and so on.

DW: How were the workshops organised?



Eddie had a kind of... strategy, like ways of playing, duos, trios, quartets. There wasn't much talking. Maybe that was kind of part of the AMM thing. After the workshops we'd go to the pub, and there we'd talk. Share information, organise concerts. I like talking! I don't make a distinction between talking and improvising anyway, they're both part of the same thing. I don't believe there's any kind of purity in playing music. There's a musical quality to talking and a conversational element to playing, and they feed each other. They're both ideologically and historically constructed practices, frameworks that limit (or focus) our scope of action. The more that we talk about them, the more we're able to understand and transform them.

#### CAN TALKING BE A FORM OF PRAXIS?

DW: When you started, you were using a guitar and sampler. When did the computer become your instrument?

M: I went to Berlin in 2000 and there was this off-ICMC computer music conference at Podewil, and all these people were playing, like Zbigniew Karkowski, Merzbow, Pita, everybody was there. It was very refreshing. When I came back to London I got a computer. I basically liked that the computer was not only an instrument for music but for many other things. I could basically run my label with the computer: email, covers, website, music, mastering, burning CDRs... . But more and more I think the idea of the instrument is problematic. We're faced with so many possibilities: focussing on a single instrument sounds very reductive. Especially now that trumpets try to sound like electronics, and electronics like acoustic instruments, and so on. I try to think of ideas as instruments, to have a more open understanding of what improvisation could be, rather than focus in formal terms as it was before. At some point improvisation became so enclosed.

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE WE THOUGHT THAT THINGS CAN BE DIFFERENT YET WE DAREN'T CHANGE THE SITUATION WE ARE IN?

DW: Explain how computer feedback works.

M: It's very simple. I've always had a very direct approach to things. If you turn up the volume of your computer, and set the the little microphone inside to maximum level it will feed back, just like any other type of microphone. I just put it through some filters and add some white noise or pink noise. For me, the thing was to use elements that were marginal in other types of music, take something of no real value and use it. I was influenced by Keiji Haino and Bruce Russell, and wanted the computer to sound like that, like those guys who played guitar in that very brutal way. I didn't want to sound like Mego. I didn't want it to sound digital. I didn't want it to sound glitchy. I wanted it raw. Punk rock. When I saw Masonna, it was like punk taken to extremes. People find punk rock kind of stupid, kind of limiting in its parameters, but at the same time the kind of affective quality is empowering. It gives you the feeling that you can also do it. I'm still dialectically dealing with that, trying to make something out of that contradiction between sophistication and brutality.

#### HOW PRETENTIOUS CAN I BE?

DW: When did you start the w.m.o/r label?

M: In February 2001, to release my own stuff, and have control over it. There were three things that interested me at the time: that Haino/Russell guitar sound, the nasty feedback of Whitehouse. And Radu Malfatti, who was equally radical in a different way. There was something going on that was really mind-opening. Can you do that? Yes you can! You can hear 30-second silent tracks in Whitehouse's *New Britain*, and if you amplify Malfatti's *die temperatur der bedeutung* to death it's fucking noise. You can see they're very similar. Maybe it's about going against a certain notion of 'musicality' to achieve your own voice, but the extreme and perverse has always interested me.

RIGHT NOW, I CAN DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY AND I DON'T WANT TO ASK MYSELF LATER: WHEN DID I MISS MY CHANCE?

DW: How did you get into Malfatti's music? Which piece opened the way?

M: I'd heard a lot about Malfatti and then we did a tour with Joel Stern and went to Nickelsdorf [Austria] and Christof Kurzmann told us about the duo [he'd released, Rotophormen (Charhizma)] with Annette Krebs and Andrea Neumann and mentioned Radu and Bernhard Günter, like if you like silence you should listen to that. I saw Günter perform live, and thought, wow, this is something. After hearing all those punk records played as loud as possible, to be able to hear all the detail was fantastic. I was also listening to Cage and Reynolds' *Blank Tapes*, the very quiet stuff. I've always been interested in minimalism. As in, how minimal can you get? How boring can you get? What questions emerge when you push things to extremes? So when I heard about Radu Malfatti and Wandelweiser, things like Antoine Beuger's Spinoza piece, *calme étendue (spinoza)*, I was interested.

Apparently it took a month for Beuger to perform that piece, which consisted of extracting all the monosyllabic words from Spinoza's *Ethics*, and reading them one by one, one every eight seconds. So he was performing from four to eight hours a day, just sitting there reading calmly. The extreme nature of the work, its duration, questions what a concert is, what music is, what the audience is if it cannot hear the whole concert, and to what extent one is committed. It just breaks with so many conventions of what a concert or performance is. And then you have the issue about value, how do you measure the value that is produced in this concert? Do you judge it according to its musical quality? What is the musical quality of the piece? Or do you give value to the amount of boredom that is produced? But aren't we actually pretty bored ourselves even if we are constantly reading and writing in internet forums, blogs and websites like this one? Another piece that I found interesting along the same lines was Robert Barry's Closed Gallery Piece, in an exhibition in Amsterdam, 1969, at Art and Project, which was basically an invitation card saying:

during the exhibition the gallery will be closed

This type of work questions value production, and the limits of what is considered art or not. But why are all my references to male artists or musicians? Graciela Carnevale did a much more radical exhibition in a much more difficult context (Argentina under strong repression) a year earlier. She was part of the Grupo de Artistas de Vanguardia, formed in the 1960s, which created some of the most important examples of political and investigative art in Latin America. Their practices encouraged the viewer to consider ideas such as power, economic disparity, the state and the social role of art. An early work by the group, *Experimental Art Cycle* (Rosario, October 1968), was a series of individual exhibitions that challenged the conventional role of the gallery, placing art within a wider context. On the opening night of Graciela Carnevale's exhibition she locked the guests in the exhibition space (she slipped out and then locked the door from the outside). They only escaped when a passing member of the public smashed the gallery window. This exhibition radically questions notions of authorship, forcing the audience to activate the space, think about power structures and do something about them in a situation which is fucked.

For me the most interesting artworks of the last century were probably Duchamp's readymades, Cage's 4'33" and Debord's first film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, which interestingly enough came out the same year that Tudor performed 4'33" for the first time, in 1952. Even if politically I wouldn't trust either Cage or Duchamp, and Debord's filmmaking took ideas from Isidore Isou, what their works have in common is that they bring a new paradigm shift on how art and music can be understood. They radically question what the framework of artistic activity is, what its relationship is to our everyday life. They bring the social context in which they are presented or produced to the forefront. Their minimal nature makes people question at the same time the production and the reception of the

piece. In Duchamp's readymades, is the worker who has mass-produced the bicycle wheel the artist, or the one that claims it as art? Or in the case of the Cage or the Debord, who is performing the piece when the audience itself activates the context in which it is presented, often by its own rage? I saw *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* screened in New York, and almost 60 years later it still created conflict: some people started singing, others told them to shut up, and others replied: 'do you think this was made to be appreciated in some puritanical way?' I often question myself about improvisation today. People seem to be making this music just to show what great players they are, rather than to open things up, or show how fucked up things are. If somebody intervenes during a concert they get angry, as if something was being taken away from them. Or, even worse, if somebody copies them, they think that they're being ripped off. This type of wanna-be-genius mentality makes me sick.

I'M PROUD TO SAY I HAVE INVENTED  
NOTHING  
ALL I'VE DONE IS TAKEN FROM SOMEWHERE  
ELSE

DW: When did you meet Radu himself?

M: Thanks to Christof Kurzmann I got a residency in Quarter 21 in Vienna for three months in the summer of 2003, and set up a concert there with Klaus [Filip], who I knew already, Dean Roberts and Radu. We went on to record that disc that came out on Grob [*Building Excess*], and it was a great feeling. That quartet was really special, totally surreal, really beautiful. It's probably the most mellow thing that I've done. I'm very happy with that album. Radu wasn't. The label had to pay him 400 (instead of copies of the disc he preferred money). I remember you criticised it quite a bit too.

DW: Did I? You remember my reviews more than I do. Maybe I'd been blown away by *Whitenoise* first, and it was a question of EAI overkill. I listened to it again not long ago and enjoyed it very much, if that's any consolation. Had Radu heard

your noisy stuff before you played together? When I played with him and Frédéric Blondy, he'd been tipped off by Axel Därner that Blondy played piano like Fred Van Hove, and Radu was worried. Until we did the gig and he was delighted.

M: No, I always played it cool with him. I showed him my soft side (laughs). I really wanted to play with him. About that time I was preparing the MA thesis on improvisation and politics, and I had one extended conversation with Radu, which was very interesting, and then at the end of my stay in Vienna we recorded *Whitenoise* in Amann Studios and it just clicked. It just felt right. That's one of the best things that I've done. It was very clinical – we did one thing for about 30 minutes, like warming up. Radu had three mics on his trombone – Amann you know is very meticulous – and the computer was very loud, so we were in two different rooms, listening to each other through headphones. There was no editing at all, apart from taking the silence away, like removing the sounds of Radu's stomach gurgling and the saliva in his mouth. It was very straightforward. A great experience. When we finished we knew that we had made a good record.

For me *Whitenoise* reaffirms an already established appreciation of improvised music. Nowadays I'm interested in making records that are more difficult to categorise. People tell me that what I do is too conceptual, that it's no longer about music, that it's post-music. But of course it's about music. Perhaps not the music that you like, but I still play concerts and make records which contain sounds. It's not about subtraction, as if bringing ideas prevents you from focussing on the music. It's about adding ideas and concepts in order to explore what could be done without reaffirming or consolidating an established genre of music.

How can we make a music that cannot be easily pigeonholed? Take *Attention*, for example. When Taku Unami and I finished that record we didn't know how people would react. Many people laughed at it and took it as a joke, but others didn't: Jean-Luc Guionnet told me that along

with *Whitenoise* it was the best record I'd been involved in, and Miguel Prado thought it was even better than *Whitenoise*. Alex (Angelus Novus) gave it one of the most interesting reviews we've ever had, and another guy at a post punk blogzine, *ZGUN*, even did a review in the form of a concrete poem. The release inspired him to experiment with the format that he was dealing with. I get a kick out of these types of responses rather from people telling me I am a 'good musician'. They're probably lying anyway.

DW: Was the following year's *Pinknoise* [with Junko] deliberately intended to be the total antithesis of *Whitenoise*?

M: Well, it made sense. One was quite quiet and the other was quite loud. The story about that is very simple – in March 2004 when I produced those CDs I was in Australia, staying with Swerve from Dual Plover. There was this computer shop run by these Chinese Australians who were selling clam-shell cases, five clear, and five pink. We needed a lot of CD cases, so we used the clear ones for *Whitenoise* and the pink ones for *Pinknoise*.

DW: How was that session with Junko?

M: Beautiful. She's like... a highway, you just go with it. Playing with her is not about improvisation, it's about keeping the same level of intensity. One of the speakers got fucked (sorry Taku!). Junko is such a special person. When we recorded that, I was with Taku, who mastered the album, and we took Junko to the station afterwards to catch her train. I'll never forget the sight of her, just standing there waiving us goodbye. It was so touching, this person who can produce the most horrific, brutal sounds, looking so sweet.

At the end of 2007 I organised a solo concert for her in a tiny venue in Berlin, a very small basement with a huge PA. Junko's microphone was on the verge of feedback, and she played for an hour, the longest hour of my life. Each scream was like the sharpest knife slicing your brain, and the more the people left the

room the louder it got because there was less protection between you and the speakers. By the end of the concert there were only eight people left, three of them in tears, and we all looked totally disturbed, as if we'd just watched our fathers being raped for a whole hour. Total alienation in the form of the most beautiful sound poetry ever.

DW: Unami is one of your frequent playing partners these days. When did you start working with him?

M: I first saw him play with Mark Wastell at the Bonnington Centre, but I'd already heard that CDR of his, *Music for Whitenoise* [2002], which I thought was very interesting. I'm very interested in white noise, as you can imagine. So I went to the concert and he was like, oh we can set up this tour for you. Being with Taku is extremely inspiring. I love his... I don't know if it's right word, but perversion, the idea that things are possible, the craziest, stupidest things. Try things out. Anything is possible. For example, in this interview, I should be just talking about my background and my music, so that others can understand what I'm doing. But one thing I learn from improvisation is that you don't always know what you are doing. Do I really know what I'm doing? Do you?

DW: No.

M: What are the privileges that allow us to do this? I'd love to have a Marxist and/or feminist analysis of the situation. Why don't you do that instead of concentrating on details of my miserable and pathetic musical life?

WHY HAVEN'T I MET ANY FEMINIST OR QUEER ACTIVISTS IN THE IMPROV SCENE?

DW: Firstly because I'm not sufficiently well-versed in Marxist analysis to undertake the task, and secondly because I find those details more interesting than you do. I'd sooner listen to a piece of music than read a book of philosophy, unlike my friend and yours Jean-Luc Guionnet. Talking of Jean-Luc, how did you meet him?

M: I first heard him with Hubbub at Freedom Of The City in May 2003, and then he set up a concert for Tim Goldie, myself and him at the Instants Chavirés. I remember that gig, Tim with his mirrored sunglasses saying: 'this is fucking cool!'

DW: It was fucking loud.

M: Well, we like to have fun (laughs). *Is playing loud the only way I know how to have fun? No no, I also like to be soft.* Did Jean-Luc tell you about this project that we're doing? We're about to release this concert we did in Niort with Seiji Murayama last summer. We're all interested in philosophy, and Jean-Luc saw certain connections between the non-philosophy of François Laruelle and non-idiomatic improvisation. I already knew philosopher Ray Brassier in London, who'd organised some conferences on the subject of noise at Middlesex University, and he told me he did his PhD. on this obscure French philosopher, who turned out to be François. So, Ray was the man to work with. We thought he'd want to do something with language, a kind of commentary, something like that, so we met up in Paris for a couple of days. And he said, 'I don't know what I want, but I know that I don't want to be the "philosopher", I want to be up there with you.' So I was like, well what can you play? He said, well when I was about ten years old this nun taught me a couple of chords on the guitar... and Jean-Luc was saying, "fuck, I've played with too many bad guitarists. What's going to happen?" Then we had this opportunity of playing the NPAI festival in Niort, and Ray picked up an electric guitar for the first time in his life. We had a basic structure worked out so that he would play solo for the first 15 minutes. So there he was, this guy who'd never played an electric guitar in his life, playing in a festival of improvised music. The whole concert was very intense, amazing. Many musicians who were there didn't like it at all, because there was something else going on other than just music. Other people really liked it. What we set out to do was to make people cry. And one person did! So that's what we're going to release. We learned many interesting things from that concert.

Most importantly that you don't need to be a musician to improvise. Musicianship isn't all that important. How much can you expand the notion of improvisation? Get rid of the roles. Who is the philosopher here? Who is the musician?

DW: Have you always felt the need to explain what you do in words?

M: I've always seen musical production as part of social production, linked to different elements of society. Like I said, I grew up with punk, and the lyrics of the songs I liked were about reality, and young people were expressing themselves by playing music. It's always been more about attitude, for me. Expressing yourself within society. What does it mean to produce sounds in this society? In the '60s there was more discussion of that, of the politics, and I want to return to that. Music production is political in and of itself. I'm interested in exploring that.

In this regard I find the Scratch Orchestra extremely interesting, in the sense that everybody was welcome to participate, and there was no unified sense of aesthetics. I've been listening to the 1969 10" mini LP and it's so rich in ideas. Just the other day I went to see an exhibition on Cornelius Cardew at the centre d'art contemporain (CAC) in Brétigny, and they were showing the film *Journey to the North Pole* on the Scratch Orchestra made in 1971. There were two amazing moments that really impressed me. One with John Tilbury lying in the street playing a bird whistle and a melodica at the same time while tied to five other people – imagine seeing that in your street! – another with Keith Rowe quoting Mao; basically saying culture is produced either for the benefit of the bourgeois class or against it. Who are we doing this for? Class distinctions might be more blurred today than they used to be, but I still believe that what you do either serves the dominant culture or counters it. In improvisation there's a false understanding that we're doing it just for ourselves. What do we actually represent? If you imagine the general reader of this website you can think about specifics: gender, sexual orienta-

tion, economic and social status, a certain education, race... . If we compile a few statistics we might find that the general reader of this website only represents a tiny part of society, probably quite privileged and perhaps well inserted within the dominant culture. Of course, it's difficult for us to care about that which we are not, or about what we don't identify with, but we have to acknowledge that there are a lot of people living in much more difficult conditions than we are, and that what we do might help them, or might help them to remain marginalised. I don't think we should forget this, or forget about the people that we have above us who make our life miserable.

'NEEDLESS TO SAY NO SCRATCH MUSIC IS COPYRIGHT'  
-CORNELIUS CARDEW 1971

DW: What was it about the shot of Tilbury that interested you?

M: The fact that he was in the street, not a professional context but an open framework, a social and public space where all types of different people pass by, and there he was, taking risks without being afraid of looking utterly ridiculous! It reminds me of something that happened during the recent riots in Athens, where journalists came across a gang attacking places that represented neoliberalism to make noise, using breaking glass and burglar alarms as instruments. Improvising in the city. That's so inspiring, like the Futurists, the Scratch Orchestra and Black Block joining forces in an extreme form of sonic *dérive*! Imagine using police sirens as your instrument! Imagine what a beautiful drone twenty of them would make! The urban space offers so many possibilities for noise production, let's use the city as our venue – we'll always have an audience!

TAKE IMPROVISATION TO THE STREETS!

DW: Do you think the music today has lost that political edge?

M: This connects to the previous question about class. Capitalism has developed very sophisticated forms of alienation

and fragmentation. What is contemporary class consciousness today? Nowadays we often contain within ourselves different social classes; it's very difficult to relate to each other in general terms, we can only relate either through very specific interests – an interest in a specific form of improvised music such as EAI, for example – or through extreme mediation with the use of social network software such as Facebook and MySpace, while somebody else makes a profit out of our interaction. If you're talking about the improvised scene, well of course it has lost that political edge. People seem so claustrophobically interested in a few little fucking sounds that a few 'great players' produce. I'm not interested in that, I'm not interested in being in a fucking little niche. For some time I was part of one, and now I don't give a fuck. I find allies, people I work with and they're the ones that matter. I could criticise people as much as you like, but what good would that do? Don't get me wrong, I am interested in critique, but I just think that there are more important things to critique than a few great improvisers. I want to know what this music means and whether making it might be a way of changing our immediate environment. Do these people care about that? Why don't they care? I care.

STOP WRITING AND ORGANISE BLACK BLOCK CONCERTS!

DW: So you play the agent provocateur, the bad boy of music?

M: Well that says a lot about this scene, doesn't it? In other scenes what we do would be normal (perhaps like punk or noise), but here in improvisation if you do something a bit out of the ordinary they just call you an agent provocateur. The bad boy of music or whatever stupid term they come up with. I've never described myself as anything like that. I have a set of interests that I want to explore and try out. Sometimes that pisses people off, but that's not my problem. I've talked to several people about the experiences they've had in the improvised music scene, and how conservative it is



in some aspects. In the beginning, when I started improvising, there were so many taboos: you were supposed to improvise just with your instrument, not your voice; moving around the room was considered strange, and interfering with other people was out of the question. So many things were like, oh you mustn't do that! You have to respect this, you have to respect that! And that maintains a certain status quo. For me improvisation is about taking risks, not alone in my living room but out there on stage or with other people. I have a problem with the notion of respect: you have to respect each other, you're playing too loud, you're playing too quiet, you're taking this idea from here or from there... respect what? Normality? That normality that shapes and constrains us every fucking day of our lives? I'd rather piss a few wankers off than get depressed at home.

#### STOP READING AND ENGAGE IN URBAN WARFARE!

DW: You mentioned earlier that you had a 'basic structure' worked out for your Niort concert. That seems to be something you do quite often. I wanted to ask you about the gig I saw in Paris [Comète 347, April 21st 2008], where you started off normally enough and then suddenly stopped playing for ten whole minutes. You actually went to the bar for a beer and sat down next to me in the audience! What was the idea there?

M: I'm interested not only in performing but in all aspects of the concert. What is the framework of our improvisation? What if different notions of silence are played out in a concert? There are many kinds of silence. There's the Radu Malfatti silence where you stay with it, listen, but if people see you go and get a beer, you know, it becomes a very different type of silence. People approach silence differently. The interesting thing for me was how our silence that night differed from one of Radu's silences. For example, when Taku Sugimoto plays one note in one hour, there's a lot of silence, but he's there, the musician

framing the silence, and it's very formal. There are many sounds that are produced during that hour, but because they've not been made by the musician, they're not perceived as having the same musical value as Sugimoto's note. I find that problematic in the sense that we accept certain hierarchies *de facto*, while in reality we might be producing more sounds than he is. Does our condition as audience preclude us producing something interesting? Somebody might say: 'not now, this is not your time, this is not your framework, we've paid to see and hear somebody else, if you want to express yourself get a career, and show us you're serious about what you do.' But you can be very serious about disrupting a concert, and why not? It might also make it more interesting.

In many ways I think improvisation is lagging behind other disciplines like visual arts. For example, in the visual arts when Minimalism came after Abstract Expressionism, context became relevant: the artwork was part of the space that it was presented in. Dan Flavin's everyday object fluorescent lights is not only about the light itself but the way it affects the space: the artwork isn't just trying to hold your attention, like a Rothko painting, but make you perceive your environment differently. Clement Greenberg's idea that the work is self-contained became problematic, as it failed to take into account the context and the forces of production behind the making of the work. So conceptual art, and later institutional critique started to investigate the framework and take into account all the conditions in which works were made. For me, reductionism really opened the way to reflect on the context of the production of this music. There are great records that bring contextual sounds to the surface, like dach or the live disc of Futatsu, but they're still perceived in formal terms. And that's my problem with a lot of the reductionism going on now: rather than use silence and space to analyse the context of production, and enable us to experiment with a different relationship with the audience, it's still about looking at silence in formal terms. There are people who are trying different things out, taking a more conceptual

approach rather than a formal one, and that's great. Like Lucio Capece's piece (about *The Society of Spectacle* by Guy Debord) on *Wedding Ceremony*, which you criticised so much in the *Wire*.

Debord's critique of the 'public' is as devastating as it is accurate. *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, his last film from 1978, is probably the best film I've ever seen. I think his critique of alienation, though it might be a bit dated, is really helpful. It's time we developed a more updated version, now that we have become the spectacle of society. We're no longer contemplating our life through certain forms of representations. We've internalised the spectacle to such an extent that we, the way we relate to each other, our interactivity in everyday life and experience, are reproducing it not with a feeling of passivity or distance but with an intense desire to enjoy ourselves, be ourselves and be connected. Have your say, produce, write, listen, start your own blog, comment in online forums, express yourself...

Never before have we had so much access to self-representation but never before has our subjectivity been such a product of representation. The distance between producing and consuming is decreasing – we consume our own production, no longer passive consumers of our life but active participants in developing new forms of alienation involving our feelings and emotions, thinking we are freer than ever. We no longer live in the society of the spectacle, we are the spectacle ourselves, generating what Marx called general intellect or general social knowledge, which is not only knowledge shared by many people, but also a capacity to think and be more self-analytical. Before I said how these days we contain within ourselves different social classes, and this is because we're increasingly in charge of putting out our imagination, knowledge, desire, our ability to express ourselves, in other words our potentiality in order to be more visible and more social. And in doing so we gain more value in this economy of attention. Right now, in this interview, even if there's no money involved, we know that we're producing

cultural capital, which adds recognition and reputation to me as an improviser and to you as a journalist with a specific knowledge in improvisation. So maybe in the future it'll be easier for me to get invited to festivals, or for you to write for other magazines that might actually pay you. As Paolo Virno says of the general intellect: 'They are not units of measure; they constitute the immeasurable presupposition of heterogeneous effective possibilities.' It's not that we are producing value in a very concrete way, but instead we're producing the potential to produce value. That's why improvisation is so important right now: our ability to react quickly to new situations, to be inventive and imaginative, to be 'original', has greater value in post-Fordism, where we no longer produce objects but services, knowledge and experiences.

As improvisers, the way we combine thought and action, and our personalisation of subjectification – for example when we play our instruments – might well make us not avant-garde musicians but avant-garde capitalists!

#### NOW IS THE TIME FOR SELF-DÉTOURNEMENT!

DW: The idea of anti-copyright is an issue that's important to you. Why?

M: The people I have affinities with politically are all interested in these issues. I was reading these critiques of authorship, Barthes's *Death Of The Author* and Foucault's *What Is An Author?*, and the idea of authorship seemed pretty fucking rotten, totally linked with capitalism. How can you attribute an idea to a single individual, with all the kind of influences that give rise to it? It's bourgeois ideology. Now technology is able to fuck with that, and it's very interesting. More and more people are appropriating things from the past. How far can you explore the concept of authorship? It's all very problematic, and there's a lot to explore. For me improvisation goes against the idea of authorship. And yet once a record is produced it has a kind of authority, it's a kind of statement. I think we should have the same kind of openness with making records as we do in a concert

situation. People try to frame and limit the exploratory aspect of improvisation, and I think it should stay in motion; elusive and unstable. Why set limits?

Of course you can understand limits: a concert has a beginning and an end, but many people discuss the concert before it starts, and after it finishes. The framework is always troubled by social considerations, and it's the same with records. Once one person plays it on a different stereo it's a different experience. We talked about that in email about your review of Seymour Wright & Keith Rowe's *3D*. You and I see things very differently. For me the most inspiring comment I read about that release was Brian O'Leary's, who played the discs in three different machines at the same time. Of course he couldn't press play on the three players at the same time, and even if he had been able to, the players would have had different start up times. So by playing the three records at the same time, he was not recreating the concert, but producing something unique for him. What's inspiring is that he played around, he experimented with the release itself, avoiding any sense of objectivity, instead of claiming as you did that one or more of the three recordings was more accurate or better.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, NONE OF THIS INTERVIEW IS COPYRIGHT

DW: And the Free Software Series also ties into this, I suppose?

M: Of course. I was back in Bilbao in 2004 and there was this hacklab in a squat there where they were promoting free software, with a very political conscience. I was interested in the free software thing, but I'm not the most technically minded person. They were giving free classes in GNU/Linux, so I went there every Wednesday and it was the most progressive community I'd encountered. About the same time Julien Ottavi was working with GNU/Linux and he introduced me to things too. I saw that there were a whole lot of people making music with GNU/Linux, but for some reason the music made using proprietary software was somehow supposed to be 'better',

sort of 'quality' music. I thought that was very strange, and pretty stupid. So promoting free software is also about leaving things open, letting other people access it. It's a way of moving the debate on intellectual property forward. I am so behind with the Free Software releases, I want to apologise to Loty Negarti, Taku Unami, and Martin Howse, I hope to have the records out this summer. I am very sorry about this!

DW: How do you see the next five or ten years of this music? Are you optimistic?

M: I could criticise the blandness in a lot of what we see, but that's not where I get inspiration from. I'm more interested in people like Emma Hedditch, Karin Schneider, Julien Skrobek, Mathieu Saladin and Miguel Prado, different people with a lot of energy, pushing things. And people in the Basque country are doing very interesting stuff, like Xabier Erkizia, Loty Negarti, Xedh and everybody connected to Arto Artian ([www.artoartian.org](http://www.artoartian.org)).

DW: Tell me about *Feedback Conceptual*. How am I supposed to listen to a six hour piece?

IT'S MADE TO BE LISTENED TO AT WORK  
IF YOU WORK EIGHT HOURS A DAY YOU STILL  
HAVE TIME  
FOR A BREAK  
FOR FOOD  
MASTURBATION  
AND A NAP  
IF NEEDED

M: There's no proper way of listening to things in the same way that there's no proper way of improvising. If you want to listen to *Feedback Conceptual* in one go you can, but if you want to do something else at the same time that's fine too. The good thing about file players is that you can put a cursor at any point and listen to it from there, just like a record player (but if you try to cut six and half hours into a record you're going to get hardcore reductionism – and probably quieter than Francisco Lopez's release on Mego!). How can we mix noise and improvisation

with conceptual art and still try to show the political connotations of what we're dealing with? I was interested in trying to put aspects of noise making into theory, and bring them back to music. What could feedback mean in conceptual terms? I also wanted to incorporate the discussion of intellectual property and make that part of the piece. I was very inspired by those pieces by Xabier Erkizia [*Spam Detect!*] and by antyology '0', an electronic chemical sound poem by Aitor Izagirre (Loty Negarti) and interested in the way in which our conversation was an important part of the process. There were several things going on at once, and it became a big melting of pot of language and exploration. Discussion also has its musical qualities, in the same way that music produces discourse.

DW: I can't understand what you're on about because it's all in Spanish.

M: So then listen to it as sound. Why should it be in English anyway? Most of the discussions of this music you see online are in English already. The record I'm working on is a follow-up of *Attention*. Another essay CD trying to combine the making of a CD with language, a constant dialectic between noise and language, and the way that language might change the listening environment and the perception of space. I want something that fucks with my mind, that really questions to the core what judgement itself is; a social thing, an ideological thing, not something that reaffirms my own 'very good taste'. I'm interested in exploring the conceptual side of things, blurring or making problematic the distinction between performer and audience. At Future Tenant in Pittsburgh recently I played this concert with very loud laptop noise for about half the set, and then I stopped and said, 'I find what I'm doing very conventional and the way you're reacting to it very conventional too. Let's try something out: I want us to take the computer down to the basement' (where there was another PA system). So we carried everything downstairs including the PA system, and it was feeding back all the time, and people started playing around

with the feedback themselves, putting their mobile phones and coins on the speakers, (like Taku Unami does). We were all part of something. In Washington the day after, I stopped playing after ten minutes and sat down in the audience and started to criticise myself. It's important to be able to criticise one's own position. When Marx said: ruthless criticism of all that exists, surely he was including himself?

IN CRITICISING OURSELVES WE ALSO CRITICISE THE STEREOTYPES WE REPRESENT

DW: Tell us about the concert with Radu Malfatti at Erstquake in New York in September 2006.

M: I wanted to talk with Radu beforehand about what we were going to do, but we only had a brief discussion over lunch. I wanted him to play one of his own compositions, and I would record the sounds during the silences and play them back. For me it's possible to bring composition into the context of an improvised concert, because the reception of the composition itself becomes the improvisation. But the soundcheck was a disaster, and I had problems with my sound card, and it ended up as a total improvisation. I could see him looking at me while we were playing, like, this is not happening at all. It was very intense, and people felt uncomfortable because they knew they were part of it (actually one member of the audience fainted). Next day, Radu and Klaus played a very, very beautiful concert in Brooklyn, which kind of confirmed something I'd thought for a long time: that there are people who make far more beautiful music than I do. Radu is interested in calmness, but I'm not. I'm interested in transformation, trying things out, even if they don't work. I'd rather test ideas in improvisation as a way to explore the limitations of the context we find ourselves in than confirm or reaffirm a ready-made understanding of what music is, or what playing an instrument is.

IT'S EASIER TO HAVE AN IDEA THAN TO PLAY AN INSTRUMENT

# Taku Unami and Mattin: Improvisation in the form of an interrogation

Performance as part of the Labor Sonor series at KuLe (August 10, Berlin-Mitte)\*

By Diego Chamy

On Monday the 5th of November 2007, Taku Unami (a Japanese improviser musician who plays laptop and guitar) and Mattin (a performer and musician from the Basque Country who is currently living in Berlin) performed in KuLe, a room that is well-known for regularly hosting experimental music and performances as part of a series called *Labor Sonor*.

Taku Unami and Mattin occupy the stage sitting at a small table one in front of the other. Each of them has a laptop. The lights go off. The screens of the laptops, which now become the only lights in the room, only just prevent complete obscurity. A sound starts to come out from the loudspeakers. It's a very simple and poor sound, as if someone was timidly hitting a table with a small object. Coming from musicians devoted to electronic music, it's an almost ridiculous sound. It is performed in a somehow stupid way first by one of the musicians and

then by the other one. You can say that the sound doesn't meet the expectations of the audience, but anyway that's what is going on.

After a while, Taku Unami stops playing the laptop and starts to scrape it with his fingers, making an almost inaudible and even poorer sound than the one he was making through the computer. Then he unexpectedly closes his laptop, picks up his electric guitar and plays only one note, repeating it for a while.

Then he picks up another note and does the same, and then he makes silence.

While this is happening, Mattin faces the audience and turns on a spotlight pointing to the spectators, as if the situation was a police interrogation. He starts to say: 'you're a very polite audience, you are so quiet' in order to continue shouting: 'Are you always so quiet, or is it just when you pay?' 'Why are you here?' 'What for?' 'Why are you so quiet?' The audience is confused. A certain tension fills the room. Mattin keeps on repeating these questions. Some people try to answer and some others try to argue with him, but he keeps on repeating this sort of questions and then making very long silences. When the audience makes noises he forcefully asks for silence. And when there is anxiety he asks: 'Are you now asking yourself what's coming next?' But nothing is coming next. Taku Unami kept on playing the same

material with his electric guitar, sometimes with the guitar plugged to the amplifier at very low volume and sometimes with it directly unplugged. Always playing repeated notes for a short while and then leaving long silences. The long silences between what he was playing and what Mattin was shouting become longer and longer. Somehow everything is out of the blue.

The audience becomes more confused. Everyone looks at one another. Some people laugh. Some keep on trying to answer the questions that Mattin is shouting, but Mattin never enters into an argument with them directly. The people are strongly effecting each other with a nervous, uneasy and jumpy feeling. After a while a person leaves the room. Mattin asks him why he is leaving and the person answers with an outraged voice tone – that he doesn't know. The situation continues like this. After some minutes some more people leave the room. There is restlessness and even worry. Kule's audience had other expectations when Taku Unami, from Japan, was announced.

A 45 minutes concert would have been better. After an hour Mattin turns off the spotlight. At 23.30, in total obscurity, the audience is still waiting for something to happen. Nothing else will happen, but at the same time so many things are already happening. Time passes. More and more people leave the room. Now it is already midnight,

now half past twelve, now one o'clock... Most of the people have left the room. Time itself becomes important. The situation becomes already an event. From inside the room it's possible to hear how the people are arguing in the bar at the entry hall, trying to understand what's going on. Some of them are complaining. Nothing is clear. Inside the room the lights are off but the performance has not formally ended and there is still a part of the audience which perseveres.

A person – maybe drunk, maybe angry – starts to throw peanuts at other people in the audience and also at the performers. Another person wants to leave the door of the room open, but someone else closes it again. This situation with the door repeats itself several times. People come in and out, concerned about what's going on, but it seems that there is nothing to do to help the situation. A woman in the first row wants to leave but she does this, incomprehensibly, trying seriously not to make any noise when the gesture has no sense at all because the whole situation is already a mess. One person from the audience starts to mumble in a bizarre way for a while and then he stands up, goes onto the stage, stands there for a while and all at once sneezes loudly over Mattin. A lot of other small things continue to happen. Like a variation of Buñuel's *Exterminating Angel*, here everyone can

enter and leave the room, but there is something that is held, there is something that is not possible to be understood and transmitted. For the most part the speculations that are made outside – 'this is just a provocation', 'this is a never ending game' – are just not satisfactory.

At 02.00 there are only four people left in the room besides the performers. The people that were speaking in the entry hall already left the place and now there is calmness and silence. After a couple of hours of complete silence coming from the performers, Taku Unami plays one more time the repeated notes that he made before with his guitar (why now?). It is too late and the people in charge of the place don't know exactly what to do. There is hesitation. You can hear them trying to decide what to do. They don't want to interrupt the performance, but by now they have to leave the place. It's late and in the room there are only 4 people left. Finally they enter the room and turn on the lights. The performers are still there, on stage, in silence. One of the KuLe organizers decides to start sweeping the stage. It is the end (is it?). Now Mattin laughs, and the four-person-audience starts to clap. The applause continues without stopping for the next 10 or 15 minutes. A disoriented journalist runs into the room unsuccessfully trying to catch

the meaning of this elusive event. What exactly happened? It is not clear. After speaking with some of the people that were present, it is possible to say that many of them were receiving something violent: 'Why was he asking me all these questions? Was this a provocation?' Some of them just got bored. Some others felt uncomfortable and exposed. Some were left disappointed. But no one could say exactly what it was all about or what the goal of the performers was.

Was it only a provocation? There was no provocation. A provocation is not something confusing but quite clear: people know what it is about, how to behave in those situations and what to think. A provocation works more as an act that desires to cause a reaction. In this case it's not sure that the performers would have wished for any specific reaction. Mattin was somehow asking the audience to accept what was going on as it is. And both artists were exposing themselves whilst an agent provocateur will never really expose himself. But if the whole thing was not a provocation – because it *cannot* be – what was it? Why was it like that? These questions show themselves to be insufficient. We need to find other questions. There is no ready-made 'why?', or even a specific goal. An action is defined more by its effects than by its intentions. On that night you had to

build up a sense for yourself. But not just any sense. We can go back to Mattin's questions (Why are you here? What for?), but you have to want them; otherwise best to forget these and make new questions that are better for you. Nothing is going to happen. Everything is happening all at once right now. Maybe this bothers you. You wanted to reach a point. Maybe you had expectations and now you are offended. You have paid the ticket, but what did you get in exchange? You came with your expectations and someone put them out because you didn't get what you wanted. After the performance someone from the audience said that if the performance would have been free, he wouldn't have gotten upset. Does this make any difference? How does money-flux compel and limit the way we conceive and are affected by events? Mattin and Taku Unami put under question – and perhaps also fooled – this exchange-based logic that we are used to: the logic of the right exchange.

There are no right exchanges. Such a thing is not possible. Every exchange oscillates in time, liberating and catching forces that promote changes of speed in the fluxes that constitute our bodies. This oscillation prevents the exchanges from being *right*. Exchanges are unfair by nature and unstable *de jure* when they are seen in a temporal perspective. We are not

able to escape from them for now, but it's in the way we face them that we can mark the path of a new understanding. Mattin and Taku forced the audience to experience this problem by making a slight displacement in the way a performance is supposed to be. And besides this, they showed how difficult it is still for us to attend an event without carrying expectations and how hard it is still to accept an event the way it is.

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# Karin Schneider & Mattin's performance as part of Melanie Gilligan's exhibition at Transmission Gallery, Glasgow, 26 April 2008

By Benedict Seymour

As a participant it struck me as a lot like being on Ketamine at a free rave, but with the difference that at a free rave nobody asks you to vocalise into a microphone your impression of taking a painful shit. As a whole it was like a free improv version of Tino Sehgal, with a Dantean crowd of strangers and acquaintances circling or vegetating in the empty white space of the gallery while performing Reichian 'loops' of activity; some transient and free/ doomed to observe while orbiting (like me) others slumped at the side of the gallery gazing into mirrors and mouthing 'I am so wonderful' to themselves, and a host of variations on futility including counting to 600, climbing up and down a ladder and laughing unnervingly at other participants/victims of this incrementally developing system as they passed by. Each participant was let into the gallery one at a time from the street, with no foreknowledge of what would ensue (hence the feeling of having been slipped an unknown drug) and, after wandering disoriented through the developing human flora and fauna for a few terrifying/fascinating moments, being lead into a curtained backroom where Karin and Mattin would tersely assign them a task to perform. Once released back into the tank, the visitor/participant became actor/voyeur, some immobilised flat on their backs, others, like myself, having to perform more obviously to the rest of the zoo. Someone was shouting out at regular intervals 'Stop talking!' though it was unclear if this was a response to any particular act of communication, while a woman at a microphone was making odd 'huh'-ing noises (I found out later that she was supposed to be evoking some kind of erotic moan or groan, perhaps a counterpoint to my anguished

– and over-played – pantomime of excretion.) The feeling was one of confinement and also of ethical ambivalence – should one play along or refuse, talk to the other participants or get on with one's task? Acquaintances and friends seemed estranged by their roles and hard to approach, the strangers oddly more intimate and easier to address than moments before outside on the street. Like a continually evolving Milgram Experiment, one was not only confronted with one's willingness to obey commands, and forced to examine the basis for this, but also, again depending on the role assigned to one, to overcome embarrassment or scruples about participation and articulation in such a confined and uncanny space. Inevitably, as well as reflections on the paranoia/possibility inherent in this situation, one considered possibilities of solidarity and exchange with other prisoners/players; thinking of Melanie's works but also of my own adventures in late capitalist 'fun' houses such as raves and clubs one couldn't help the almost de rigeur feeling of being in a microcosm of post-Fordist immanence, a continuum of watching and acting in which critical distance and escape are impossible, solidarity hard to imagine, and the confines of the system radically indeterminate i.e. what part of the human 'events' unfurling around one as if from a computer code were scripted, and what part improvised or simply diversions? Was the girl who had been drifting round in narrow circles in the far left hand corner now chatting on the phone pretending to be talking to someone or was this her 'real life' imposing itself onto the queasily magical space? Was Lisa still 'on script' as she started to rove around the gallery posing questions and, later, clapping us into clapping the show over, or was she wildcatting? And, more uncanny, had they allotted us roles on the basis of their knowledge of our personalities, or had our roles been arbitrarily assigned, acting instead as a Rorschach-like prop prompting us to confront the habitual attitudes and behaviours which constituted our identities? I was struck by how much I maintained my interest in, and hence obedience to, the game by analysing it, my passivity while orbiting and 'taking in' the event (of which I was of course one component, like a moon in an orrery) making continued repetition of the assigned role endurable. Critique as the highest form of integration.

The proximity of 'normal' behaviour and assigned 'routines' was one immediate revelation, intensifying the performance's power as a discloser of convention and role play. Having determined that there were no more new players coming onto the 'stage' of the gallery through the curtain from the street outside, I was discussing with a friend whether we should make a break for it and if indeed the performance's architects would ever call a halt to it. (It had been unfolding for an hour and a half at this point and I was, having been inside for 40 minutes, starting to feel weary of my Dantean circulation). Ambiguity was so deep that when one of the former door persons called out 'enough' or words to that effect I felt that this too should be treated as a scripted speech and subject to assessment. It was simultaneously scripted and sincere, yet another moment in the game and a statement which, if followed, would at once confirm the hold of and dissolve the game.

Did one want to stop on these terms? And would it be right, given the contract between performers and scripters, to call it off or make an escape? A friend of mine had already run out screaming 'I can't take anymore' but it seemed stagey to me.

I reckoned I knew Mattin and Karin well enough that they wouldn't script in a determinate ending, and I later found out that the performer who called 'enough' had been left absolute discretion as to when to do so. As it transpired we were all spared a long night in an abstracted, sensory deprivation version of the Big Brother cells, but it would have been intriguing to see how we guinea pigs would have responded to an even more drawn out incarceration. As the performance collapsed into applause, a little predictable and yet appropriately stagey in its own right, I remembered the closing scene of David Fincher's *The Game*, as we stood around discussing with strangers and (other) acquaintances our roles and complementing each other on our performances ('you were supposed to be taking a shit? I would never have guessed!'; 'you were brilliant at "stop talking", a real natural', etc).

Throughout the piece, or at least for some time before I entered the room, the artist who commissioned it, Melanie, sat in the centre of the room typing into a laptop. Looking at the screen one discovered it was not covered in rows and rows of 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy', like the type written screeds of Nicholson's frus-

trated writer in *The Shining*, but rather contained a detailed real time transcription of all the events transpiring in the room – and, contra to my impression/projection during the performance (another Rorschach moment of self-revelation through misrecognition) Melanie had not known her role in advance any more than the other players. This had been her assigned task, and she had carried it out, apparently, quite sedulously. I haven't read it over yet but all participants were given a print out copies of her screed on completion of the piece and perhaps are now finding out how, from a central – panoptic? – point, the madhouse/playroom/prison appeared to its passive architect. The other devisers of the piece never saw any of it, remaining behind the black curtains at the back of the gallery, and the whole event was undocumented but for Melanie's report and the testimony of participants such as this one.

Franz Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony' came to mind often during the performance, and the only once broken paragraph of Melanie's report resembled not only *The Shining's* scroll but the flesh of the harrowed convict in that story. But of course here the machine was activated by its subjects/objects and their movements were at once page and writing. Like Agambenian sonderkommando, the victims were victimisers, perpetuating the game. This thought, naturally, was hard to shake off as one navigated the city-wide 'art safari' which the Glasgow International festival was pleased to bill itself as – one more bourgeois bohemian circulating in the enchanted game of art appreciation/production/criticism on which this city (like thousands of others) has floated its now seriously stymied chances for survival.

As the tramps stumble scabrous along Sauchiehall street and the hordes of girls (un)dressed as policemen disgorge from stretched limos onto the teeming beaches of Saturday night, the looping implications of the performance unroll in my head, up to and including the recognition, as the closing night party hosts thank the corporate sponsors for their generosity, that this game accurately reflects the sense of passivity and complicity which already structures 'artistic' production in the wider open prison.

Not news, but something made news by this piece – one criterion for a valid or at least half critical art work in the age of compulsory participation?

# A Fearless Foot and an Unscrupulous Mind (A Scream from the Extremity)\*

By Ludwig Fischer

*One reason for the asphyxiating atmosphere in which we live without possible escape or recourse – and for which we are all responsible, even the most revolutionary among us – is this respect for what has already been written, formulated, composed or performed, what has been given form, as if all expression were not finally exhausted and has not reached the point where things must fall apart if they are to begin again. – Ludwig Fischer and Mattin*

For all those interested in the perfidy of critique, let me recall an event, an intervention, a date, January 3rd, 2009 – in which I, Ludwig Fischer, was less a collaborator than an accomplice, a participant in a kind of cerebral crime. Through a mixture of friendship, convenience and comradesly commitment, Mattin solicited myself and one L.F. to play the part of the critic, to be responsible for introducing a critical incision into his performance with Drunkdriver at the Silent Barn. The occasion for this reflection is the recent release of Mattin's and Drunkdriver's album, *List of Profound Insecurities* by Philadelphia's Badmaster label – a potent document of their shared commitment to those sonic experiments that trouble classificatory regimes

and demineralise the obvious. However, despite its many virtues, it could not but be a hopeless substitute for the insecurity and the prevailing sense of threat that pervaded their performances – an impossible record of their essential cruelty, their hunger after life and cosmic strictness, to which I lent a piteous foot. The many joys of the album poorly convey the sheer effort of their collaboration, its difficulty and antagonism. Let us recall, invoking one of my many masters, that effort means cruelty, existence through effort is cruel. It is important not to let the antagonism engendered and internalised between Mattin and Drunkdriver, whose faint echo can be heard on the recording only with immense effort, fade into indifference. Let this little text, however insufficiently, serve to amplify this echo. For those familiar with Drunkdriver's refined malevolence doubtless know that the brute materiality of their performance buries all pretension, especially to sense, forcing language to reside somewhere between thought and gesticulation. Michael Berdan's microphone seems an extension of a striking fist, a weapon that he frequently swings like a ball and chain or hurls into the crowd, convinced that a performance, like a dream, must be bloody and inhuman in order to unforgettably root in the audience an idea of perpetual conflict. Yet, the addition of Mattin and his fateful instrumentalisation of my foot that evening at the Silent Barn, served to reveal that the precedent of their performances and the source of their vitality seemed to lie less within the annals of punk rock and the proliferation of its sub-genres,

as within the tortured screed of the theatre of cruelty. Mattin's cerebrally focused machinations introduced a new tension into their performances that could not but be perceived as a threat to Drunkdriver's organic integrity. Sometimes the critic must risk destroying the object of one's love. The integrity of Drunkdriver's sound depends upon their ability to generate a momentum that careens centrifugally, always at the limits of control. And Berdan's pact is to place himself at the mercy of this limit, affirming the dangerous vitality of a ship manned by a drunken master, kept on course by its own forward momentum. Mattin's interventions that night took aim at this pact by tactically interrupting the momentum, severing Berdan from the sound that acts as his rudder. For all appearances Mattin integrated himself quite well into the band. However, he set strict temporal parameters on the development of the performance. These restraints served to construct a situation that forced the band, Mattin included, to react to conditions that were artificial and designed to challenge the groups organic integrity by interrupting its development and exposing it to the vicissitudes of contingency. My role was clearly defined. Ten minutes into the performance I had to step onto a pedal that cut the amplification to the guitars, signalling the drummer to stop. Only the microphone was left on. At fifteen minutes, the amplification was to be turned back on and the performance was to conclude at twenty. In the interval, as if to intensify the cruelty of the situation, Mattin planted a heckler, one L.F., to critically malign the performance. The extreme

austerity and simplicity of these restraints served to condense the critic's great contempt to the muscular exercise of the foot – a blow I delivered like a nerve spasm that suddenly cut short the life of the organism, opening the band to unforeseen contingencies. This simple exercise shifted control from the band to the audience and suddenly Drunkdriver (Mattin included) had to confront head on the intensities that their sound had engendered. By suddenly cutting all amplification except to the microphone, the band's sovereign, Michael Berdan, was cut loose and had to reel independently of the noise colossus that normally steers him. The crowd grew restless as the time unfolded, each second being felt, their ire stoked by L.F.'s aspersions. By ratcheting up the cruelty to ascetic proportions, Mattin designed a perilous situation, letting loose forces that the band itself could not endure. The drummer broke his commitment to follow the parameters. He began to drum, deploying a ritualistic and clichéd drumroll to anchor Berdan's chaotic meanderings. Mattin, struck in the head by the swinging microphone and bleeding, momentarily fled the scene, not before smearing audience members with his blood. The performance continued, but now under conditions that were unpredictable, flawed, botched. The collaboration went awry. But by maintaining oneself within this prolonged laceration something was touched upon that no party could really sustain or maintain. Mattin was less a transient member of the ensemble than a rogue particle, a foreign agent that MUST be expelled by its host. The violent intensity that their collaboration fomented could neither be sustained by Mattin or Drunkdriver, for it

was bent on their mutual disintegration. Such is the end of all vital collaborations. Mattin's interventions, like my own, proceed at times with surgical precision and others with the crudeness of a cranial blow from a battleaxe. There are no doubt times and situations appropriate to both actions. At the Silent Barn, he swung the battleaxe. Yet, the failure of the performance exposed the radical difficulty, the inhuman effort required of us critics who seek to question structures of mastery. I for one share the conviction that the present state of society is iniquitous and ought to be destroyed. If Mattin's unflinching commitment to improvisation is a certain gust of fresh air, situating his experiments in the interstices between performance, punk-rock, noise and electro-acoustic improv, it is no doubt due to the innocence with which he leaves formal concerns to the aesthetes, to those eardrum sophisticates whose erstwhile commitments amount to little more than the institution of a new form of decorum.

With an untroubled insistence Mattin refuses the autonomy of the auditory, inscribing it at all times within a social apparatus that the musician whether consciously or unconsciously performs. Decorum is not merely an external ornament, but an affective regime that one internalises and then performs. And music, as with all of the arts, is worth little if it cannot interrupt this process that leads to new forms of consensual judgement, to new forms of mastery, serving as a new stimulus to good taste, confirming rather than challenging the established order. It is thus above all in the performance that Mattin seeks to dislocate, dis-

turb, or at a minimum expose the mechanics of aesthetic refinement, reminding himself as much as his listeners of that now ancient adage: To be done with judgement! One must treat *List of Profound Insecurities* as a literal record, a document not simply to be listened to, but read. If most improvisation labours over the introduction of a little necessity into contingency, obsessing over compositions perilously perched at the very edge of disappearance, Mattin perverts this procedure, accelerating the contingent, the random, the chaotic in order to make thought coincide with actions. One should attend to those moments in the record when the machinic crackle of Mattin's laptop obliterates the difference between foreground and background, the structure swallowing that which it structures, the master exposing his bloody head. In such rare moments the guiding proposition of Drunkdriver's and Mattin's short but intensely agonistic collaboration becomes discernable: Ah, that's it, that's life! Well, it's a mess.

\*First published in *Machete Magazine*, 2009. [www.marginality.org/category/machete-group/](http://www.marginality.org/category/machete-group/)

Mattin's Performance at No Fun Fest  
Music Hall of Williamsburg, Brooklyn,  
#16 May 2009

By Marcia Bassett

White

Male

Heterosexual





# Mattin & Taku Unami, Rigoletto, Paris, 14th December 2009\*

By Julien Skrobek

There are two wooden chairs on the stage, each of them bathed in the pool of light of a white spotlight. Mattin and Taku sit down and quietly look at the audience. As always with those two, no one knows what is coming. Their position resembles the one evoked on the *Attention* record, a favourite of mine. However, Taku is not holding a guitar, and as a matter of fact, there are no instruments on the stage. I think of what Mattin told me earlier about making 'simple things'. I must admit what they did tonight may be simple in its means, but it's surely quite complex in its implications. After a while, they start sobbing. It is not clear at first if they are crying or laughing, so the audience sort of takes the easy way out and assumes they must be laughing. They take it lightly and some people are laughing too. However, the sobbing gets more intense, and they begin to make the most heart-wrenching crying. I remember thinking they must be reminiscing over sad memories until the tears come to their eyes. The audience began to feel uneasy. You can really feel it. All the laughing stops. You wouldn't laugh at someone crying in front of you, would you? What would you do? To come on stage and comfort them or ask them what is wrong would probably interrupt the performance. How would they take it? We will never know, because nobody dared to ask them anything. After all, this is a performance that we are watching. Two men are focusing on their inner darkness enough to make themselves cry in front of an audience, and this audience is paying for it. The performance works on many levels. Sonically, the voices are no different from instruments. Mattin and Taku's voices are quite different, so I am reminded of two reed players with different tones. Mattin cries like a baby, slowly rising waves, while Taku's body is completely shaken by sobbing, making a more percussive sound in a way. It took me a while to realise that this actually worked as music. My neighbour told me this was better than Phil Minton as far as abstract vocal performance was concerned.

Now I don't know about Phil Minton (I sure hate that Toot record though) but this allowed me to take this in as music and realise it was some kind of free music after all. I have read and heard so many people talk about how Ayler or Coltrane could make their saxophones cry, I guess I was ready to hear some music in this crying tonight.

The effort of concentration is visible upon their faces, until another peal of crying can be brought up. You can't escape the fact that those men are focusing on crying, and this puts the whole idea of sadness at the forefront in the venue.

Mattin has tears in his eyes, but I think this is mostly because of the white spot directed at him. Maybe the absence of real abundant tears shows the artificiality of the performance to some extent, but it doesn't undermine the fact that the sound comes from the feelings they can bring up and arouse within the audience. To some extent, the sound of crying is severed from the act. I'm sure they are not so sad, or at least not for the same reasons and not to the point of crying so much, but the sounds they produce communicates a feeling even though it is decontextualised. I am very impressed by the amount of ideas they brought up with, well, nothing but ideas.

This lasts for an hour. Some people have left, others seem devastated by sadness. There is even one guy who is crying himself. At the back of the venue, a couple of girls are giggling nervously, and I can't help but think that they are trying to get rid of this strange feeling they are experiencing.

What would you do if you saw somebody crying in the metro? Either you'd comfort them, or you'd ignore them. Here this is an impossible alternative. No one will walk on stage, and everybody paid to see this, making for a very uncomfortable but questioning situation.

After an hour, I start clapping (as Mattin and Taku had instructed me to do) soon followed by the rest of the audience. The end. Later on at the bar I can hear Mattin explaining to someone that he had asked me to clap after an hour, because the guy thought it was so rude of me to interrupt this crying!

A very very strong performance.

\*First published on the [ihatemusic](http://ihatemusic.com/) message board, [www.ihatemusic.noquam.com/](http://www.ihatemusic.noquam.com/), December 2009.

## NOISE & CAPITALISM: a performance on being and doing.

In search of new forms of thinking and performing society.

By Janine Eisenaecher

*Berlin, January 21<sup>st</sup> 2010: The artists and researchers Mattin, Anthony Iles, Howard Slater and Ilya Lipkin were invited to discuss the book *Noise & Capitalism*<sup>1</sup>, which had been recently published (edited by Mattin and Anthony Iles), at Basso, a studio founded by a collective of Berlin-based artists that occasionally hosts art events and publishes a magazine regularly. Around 40 people wanted to hear what these four men would have to say about the question Mattin announced on his website [www.mattin.org](http://www.mattin.org): 'Can we use noise as a way of disrupting the normalisation process that stops us from abolishing this economic system?'*

*The performance took place within the framework of the one-week workshop 'Going Fragile' lead by Nils Norman (artist, currently teaching at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen/DK), Anthony Davies, Howard Slater (writers and researchers, Mute magazine) and members of the Walls and Space course at Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen/DK. Most members of the audience were participants of this workshop, coming either from an artistic and/or left-activist background from different countries.*

### Intro

A book entitled *Noise & Capitalism* must be provocative, especially to people producing or consuming noise music, suggesting that there is a particular relation between the two. It could be a similar one, so noise and capitalism would have something in common. Or, they could be in opposition to each other which, of course, sounds great if one is against capitalism or has a critical opinion about the capitalist system and is interested in possibilities of how to change or break it.

But according to the post-modern way of thinking one knows as well: it's not so easy, it's neither the one thing nor the other. Everything is highly complex, interwoven and always in the process of change, which makes it so difficult to speak about precisely or even to do something differently, something that makes a difference. What is the relation between noise and capitalism? And why is there a need to publish a book about this?

*Noise & Capitalism* gathers several essays written by academics, practitioners and philosophers about noise and related music scenes such as free jazz or free improvisation, analysing the particular practices as well as their potential to subvert capitalist economic structures and power mechanisms. The need for this analysis arises from, as Anthony Iles put it this evening, Mattin's inner desire to discuss the noise scene and its problems. He often experiences the noise and improvisation scene as very patriarchal and oppressive, with regards to its structure and forms of production as well as its ingrained aesthetics, it's distribution of particular languages and forms of behaviour. Altogether, this book does not give a definition of noise music and it is not dealing with noise music only. It is rather a reflection on society and (collective as well as individual) identity, on power relations and the connection between artistic practice and economic structures in general. In doing so, it displays the search for a new consciousness and an alternative practice of performing society.

Consequently, it was not a surprise that the majority of the audience had high expectations of the supposed book presentation which turned out to be a book presentation-concert-discussion-performance lasting about two hours which made everyone in the space feel irritated and quite uncomfortable. To me it seemed that clear answers and concrete directives were expected from the four performers, some programme one could note in five points and then go outside and enact. This did not happen in the usual way of using (only) verbal language. It was instead a rather subtle and also more interesting way of formulating questions and giving answers –

they were performed. These questions and answers came into being through the circulation of the uttered thoughts, bodies, actions and noises in the space. It was a physical experience and a challenge.

The reasons for taking this approach are the complexity of the issues Mattin, Iles, Slater and Lipkin are attempting to deal with and the difficult task of trying to deconstruct everything that was happening *in situ* and to make exactly this visible while performing. Our identities, one's own ways of being and doing, of thinking, talking and behaving are structured by the capitalist system and that creates a state of ambivalence, an in-between which at the same time means a process and struggle of ongoing de- and re-construction (at least for those, who criticise this system). The four performers raised questions, made connections, tried to behave and discuss things free from patriarchal ideology and power structure, considering each element in the space as equal. At the same time, inescapably, they were reproducing and establishing elements of this ideology and power structure, provoking the audience to confront this and to claim the space. The challenge was not to expect anything within a given structure that has constructed your desire and is accepted, but to do everything that is possible in order to create a different structure that can always be changed, at least newly discussed.

So here we come to noise: I've chosen five elements (n.-o.-i.-s.-e.) that I consider essential for noise in relation to capitalism, organised in five parts that are linked with each other. This is not a definition, and I don't raise the claim of this being complete. It is an essay in the very literal sense of trying something out, and my subjective overview of what happened, combining aspects of my experience of the performance and a theoretical reflection of the issues addressed. Quotes that appear without names in brackets are things the performers said during the performance.

## N. – NEGOTIATION

From entering the space at Basso one was immediately confronted with a standard hierarchical set-up in the space:

At the one end of the room there was a table with four chairs arranged around it. On the table one could see some bottles of beer, cigarettes and matches, different notes and papers, two copies of the book *Noise & Capitalism* and a Macbook connected to a mixer and the sound system. Clearly, that was the stage. The place of power, the place for speaking. And this was accepted as a fact. The rest of the space, which might have been as much as eighty percent of it, was the audience's space with a bar in the background. Arranged looking towards the stage, half of the audience sat, the other half stood.

This is a decision. This is an order. It structures the communication of thoughts and the energy flow between the bodies. Here, negotiation needs to begin.

Four men sitting around the table, partially with their back towards the audience, talking so quietly that almost no one could hear or understand a word. Also present in the space, voices from the audiences, sounds from the bar. Then: noise. Loud. For the duration of one and a half minutes, while Howard Slater, Anthony Iles, Ilya Lipkin and Mattin simply continue what they do and are: four performers sitting at a table, drinking beer, smoking and talking. As this noise ends (we are going listen to much more during the performance because it is one track on a CD, with its noises and its silences that appear and are part of the performance) we switch to another form of communication, to a more usual form of addressing the audience. But rather through the volume of the voice than through addressing the audience face to face. Short welcome. Introduction. With long pauses between each sentence. Listen. Another sentence. Then again: noise. Then: three men sitting at the table and one man standing, all of them reading, writing, thinking, making noise; trying to just be there in time and space, who or how they are. Suddenly, Slater starts to utter in a kind of stuttering, like speaking in fragmented, disrupted words. Not really syllables, that one could put somehow together in one's imagination to create meaning, rather single letters in an unordered order. He produces noise. He creates another language. Another meaning, a different

sense. He is not interested in producing meaning at all in terms of being understood on the basis of consensus. He examines the process of speaking for himself as much as the material of language. The things themselves are put in the centre and into question, regarding their coming into being and their qualities. Slater performs some of the most important and also precarious questions of post-modern and post-colonial discourse: (How) Can I speak about something at all without reproducing certain ideologies and power structures? In what ways can I speak or communicate without producing something that is going to be incorporated and commercialised by the market immediately? How can I speak about something that is outside of my personal perspective or experience, or about something that is so complex? Can I speak for someone else (solidarity)? From what position am I speaking? Are my voice and what I say heard in public?

Noise music from the CD overlaps the men's voices again. It's like big industrial tools working and destroying the floor you sit upon underneath your chair. It disrupts one's own feeling of where one is and what one is in. It definitely does not fulfil the expectations of those who came to hear something. All impressions get estranged and rearranged, you're thrown into something unknown and it is disgorged before it can become too comfortable, before anything can make sense. Mattin, Slater, Iles and Lipkin continue talking as before, no one can hear them at all. They might be talking about how to continue the performance, or they may be reflecting upon what's going on just now in the space. It could be a joke as well. They let the noise be what it is and let it do what it does. They pay attention to it as if it's another voice speaking but not one more or less important than anything else. It is something that is in the space like them, like the audience. Like the table they are sitting at. They are aware of everything. They are present.

Now, writing about it, it also appears to me as a simple but impressive image for the changes of working structures: On the one hand, you have noise that one can associate with industrialism and masses of physically hard-working people,

mostly men; on the other hand, you have four male artists and researchers sitting at a table and discussing, who belong to the era of the 'new capitalism'<sup>2</sup> with its introduction of a much more individualised, competitive and flexible working structure, and who represent the so-called 'knowledge society' and the 'creative class'.<sup>3</sup> There's alienation in both systems of work. And alienation is exactly what the audience starts to feel at this time of the performance. They get the impression of being excluded. They are interested in what is discussed but they can't hear what is said (except for those sitting in the first or second row). There is an invisible but perceptible border that forms a 'we' and a 'them'. The noise ends. Pause. Mattin asks: 'Who is we?'

And so on. This continues for quite some time. Different sorts of speaking and discussing interfere with each other and are again and again overlapped by noise. When Anthony Iles stands up and reads out a passage of the book in manifesto style, the noise music suddenly comes together with his voice. You cannot understand what exactly he is saying, you just listen to a voice talking, a voice with a claim. When the noise is over, he continues reading... and 'we' as the audience apprehend the development and context of the book. Probably, at this point, some people felt relieved and thought that we would begin a coherent presentation, but no. The attitude was clear while a lot of things in the space just were.

One could experience negotiation already up to this point of time on different levels (and this continued until the end). In questioning the very basic elements of a system or society one lives in, considering all its structures and how they developed, lies the urgent need to re-start, re-locate, re-structure everything from anew, but from within. Which means to negotiate in common – and here again: Who is we? – e.g. what kind of society do we want to live in and how it should be structured. This is not only the wish for a change just because capitalism is obviously not working for most of the people on this planet and for the planet itself. This is moreover a call to everyone to re-claim and participate in the process of

discussing and reshaping society. Secondly, the form of having a discussion within a performance or making the negotiation of different opinions and attitudes within the performance itself is another aspect. It comes into being throughout what they do. It is not only human beings which negotiate, everything does. Words, sounds, noise, architecture, space etc. are equal elements that need to be taken into consideration. This demands an awareness of the necessity of putting oneself always and everywhere in relation to what or who surrounds you. On top of everything, negotiation also describes the state I am always in. I always negotiate (with) myself in relation to someone and something else. Not only via verbal language, most of the time invisibly. Being a citizen in a capitalist society whom at the same time criticises and appreciates what it is or does, displays something of the ambivalence the evening is all about. And we all have to deal with this situation. Interesting though that the verbal negotiation between the performers and the audience started a bit later when the physical experience of power and exclusion – perceived through not being able to hear what the performers were saying – made the audience feel slightly aggressive. Let's sum up for now: negotiating is reflecting the frame you're in as well as its norms, and what structures and power relations they (re-)produce. Negotiating is putting yourself in relation to, claiming what you consider important (and maybe in danger) and taking responsibility for that. Noise as art or as artistic practice can trigger off negotiation, and/or can contain negotiation as one of its elements.

## Q. – ORGANISATION

According to what Mattin said later, the noise scene is mostly a very patriarchal, white and heteronormative social field. So forget about the always-subversive quality or effect of noise. It is as ambivalent as everything in capitalist society, it derives from capitalism itself. Going back in time and history, noise was inspired by industrialisation and the noise industrial workers produced with their tools or machines whilst working. It is connected to exploitation and alienation, to speed and mass production.

'Mama!'

By talking about aspects of organisation, I talk about economic structures and power relations, about gender and class issues, and about how important it is under what conditions something is produced. A product can't be separated from its process and conditions of production. And so it goes with the reproduction of ideologies, economic structures and power relations. *'The capitalist society which is a patriarchal structure by itself always reproduces patriarchal structures,'* says Mattin. And right he is, though one should add that there exist examples and/or at least experiments with non-patriarchal structures, working on a small scale. But still: what the audience experiences in the beginning of the performance is *'...four men talking about noise, mastering and marketing the discourse on noise.'* (Mattin)

'Mama!'

Looking especially at the role of art or culture and the artist's work in relation to economic structures and conditions of working, we enter a precarious field and important discussion. Because it is not that different from other fields. The art market as well as the funding policy is a capitalist, patriarchal structure. The artist, who in general always has been connected to economy and money and never was outside of this cycle, nowadays is regarded as the future model of the perfect worker. Due to his/her way of working he/she is trained in 'enjoying' exploiting him-/herself and in being flexible, and by now he/she is his/her own company. Enjoying no separation between work and life or work and leisure – he/she likes what he/she does, puts as much time and effort into it as necessary, and as much money as possible (which for the majority of unknown and especially freelance artists is obviously not much and becoming less). And here again, it depends in which structures you work, what attitude and artistic practice you have and what kind of art you produce. Speaking from my own perspective of being a performance artist who deals with process much more than with producing a product as such (by this I mean, the performance does not exist

as visible product any more after it has been performed, it won't be repeated or stay the same, and you can't buy or sell it like a painting or a sculpture, you don't make copies of it like of a film etc.), I am anyhow at the very margin of economic or financial success in terms of making ones living from this. And by this, I am kind of automatically within a discussion of capitalist structure.

'Mama!'

But more important, in fact, is the role of art and culture in capitalist society in general. Capitalism always tries to suck everything in – yesterday underground, tomorrow mainstream. And who becomes an artist or decides to be one? It is clear that this is mostly, if not always dependent on privileges – it may be the economic situation, the access to education, language, critique and exposure, or the social capital one has. *'Culture is very much part of the engine of capitalism. The transition from noise as something that was probably really fucking annoying and damaging to something you can now almost consume as a form of high culture ... this mostly comes from a privileged background, it's mostly privileged-background people consuming noise. And there's a class and gender issue going on which I'm trying to understand.'* (Mattin) I still wonder if the noise scene is particularly more patriarchal than other fields of art or artistic practices. I have no answer to this, yet.

*'I wish my mama was here.'*

That's why reflecting upon all sorts of structures is important. That's why it is necessary to deal with language and to deconstruct the power that structures language and thereby our identities. Fighting representation, which is, of course, very difficult. But the only thing there is is *trying* it, *doing* it. The rest will develop throughout the practice. Not surprising that this is a challenge for an audience who expects representation, or is used to it.

The performers change their positions at the table, reorganise themselves. But it is still the quite closed space with four men mostly talking to each other, to themselves, producing noise.

The quite cynical power structure set up and executed by the performers reproduces the same structure within the audience. 'They' are there to talk and present, 'we' are there to sit and hear what they say. But because 'we' couldn't hear everything, reactions of people transformed... maybe also because of the noise music, they started feeling agitated and slightly aggressive. When Mattin said that it was *'...a very strange feeling to be in between this kind of trying to be natural and fucking around with either doing a book presentation, or a concert, or some performativity.'* I still had the impression that most people in the space expected something to be delivered. THE answer or THE solution. Or a change in the power structure and form of communication... which, of course, is a good sign and an interesting potential of being an audience.

## I. – INTERRUPTION

During the past years, developing out of academic discourse, interruption as act and aesthetic concept became really important within the performing arts as a means of problematising representation.<sup>4</sup> In short, it is understood as a means to break with the spectators' expectations, the conventions of perception as well as with the norms and power structures that a given space (a theatre, for example) is constructed of. By interrupting these structures the usually invisible mechanisms and rules are made visible and can be experienced differently. In our case here, we find interruption on different layers again. First of all, we have the frame of an alternative art context and an event that is announced as book presentation. Additionally, there's the context of the workshop and the participants from artist or left activist backgrounds. The expectations they might automatically have are interrupted by the performers enacting a mixture of a performance, a concert, a discussion, a book reading... and by doing this also putting power in place. The performance was continuously shifting its own frame, and thereby it suspended itself as well as the expectations of the audience continuously, or made it even impossible to expect anything at all. There was complete irritation about exactly what is going on while also a lot



of things actually take place. Then, of course, noise interrupts the performers speaking, noise interrupts the audience who can't hear any longer what is said, noise interrupts language in its very sense of creating representative meaning that can be easily consumed; the performers interrupt noise as well as each other but with a very special way of giving each other the space and time to communicate, more like layers and interacting comments. Finally, members of the audience interrupt the performance, not in its very basic structure, but through asking questions, giving comments, complaining and talking aggressively, they have influenced the course of the performance. Interruption is the condition for negotiation. It creates a gap or an empty space that at the same time becomes the arena or stage for negotiating conflict.

Woman: *'Can you speak up? I can't hear you about noise.'*

Mattin: *'You can move closer, too.'*

Woman: *'Can you speak up? There is no more than noise! There is only noise! That's kind of boring! You have to speak up really.'*

Mattin: *'Is this about transparency of information or is this about noise?'*

The performers open up the(ir) space towards the audience and Ilya Lipkin asks *'So what do you think about this? You see us here, four white men sitting in front of you talking about noise.'*

Question. Answer. Interruption. Comment. Back to question. Interruption. Comment. Interruption. Confusion. Question. People in the audience are moving. It becomes more and more uncomfortable. This one woman from behind comes to sit next to me in the first row and accuses the performers of being arrogant, patriarchal and boring, telling them what to do. They were still sitting at the table and looked at the audience. Then Lipkin made his final verbal statement:

*I am not sure what I am here to deliver, to be perfectly honest. I don't know what to make of this situation. I think it is what it is and I don't feel it's my responsibility to make it any more than it is, any more than it's anyone else's*

*responsibility. But if people are bored they should do something to entertain themselves.*

And here it is, the gap. Performance suspended for a short while. No one knows what might happen now. Something is circulating in the space. Lipkin, as if he would never speak again, simply remains seated and starts pushing and pulling the table in constant noise and rhythm. Slater is hitting a broomstick against the window and the radiator. Iles is already somewhere in the audience listening and Mattin sits aside on a chair discussing with some spectators from time to time. At some point, several people in the audience produce a rhythm by hitting the bottle caps against their beer bottles. This runs for quite some time. Then, the experts offer their chairs at the table to people in the audience. Only one man, Karl Lyden, a Swedish writer based in Berlin, has the courage to do so, and from his position he starts talking about Jacques

Rancière's concept of *police* and *politics* in relation to democracy and the performance situation we are in, which triggers off a short discussion only among members of the audience.<sup>5</sup>

That was definitely a moment that opened up the space and had the potential to become more, something in which everything would be possible. But astonishingly, that didn't happen. After some time Lyden wanted to leave the 'position of power to speak' again, he might have felt the audience's powerful gaze on him.

And now: an empty stage. A sudden fear or numbness lay over the whole space. The audience was hoping either someone would take over and do the job or that everything would end.

## S. – SILENCE

Considering all the elements of the performance as equal, whether it is the space, the audience, a human voice, a sentence, a word, the table, the book or the noise, is an empowerment of those (things) that were not listened to before. In artistic terms it is an empowerment of material that has been freed from its inherent hierarchies and conventions embedded in a patriarchal system. In this sense, empowerment goes along with emancipation from a given power structure.

I'd like to end with the description of two moments in the performance that were really crucial for me because they reveal the necessity of reflecting and deconstructing the economic structure of one's own behaviour and 'capitalist identity'. And they display the inability to deal with conflicts or with power in such a direct way as well as the effect of Western national states' contemporary policies of incorporating any kind of protest or resistance and drowning their citizens in a state of harmony and paralysis.

1. One young man in the audience, eager to know more about what the editors of the book think about noise as practice in relation to capitalism as well as in relation to the music production within the free improvisation scene, addressed Mattin and Ilya Lipkin with a question. When Lipkin turned away to read or research something in the book while Mattin was still listening, this guy stopped asking because he felt offended by Lipkin not paying attention to what he said. He silenced himself instead of claiming his voice, the space, the respect and his interest to know something. Only at the repeated request of myself and a few other people in the audience did he ask his question again a bit later.

2. Before the strange and slow fade-out of the performance, where the four performers were at different spots among the audience and no one was sitting at the table which was still considered to be the place of power and speech, everyone was waiting for something to happen or for someone to take over and continue, Mattin invited the audience, whoever wanted, to come in front and take the position of power.

Listen.

## E. – EMPOWERMENT

Relating to everything said so far about the connections between noise and capitalism as well as about the performance, I'd like to put empowerment as the fifth element in discussion. As a sociological term it is understood as a) the process of giving power to (groups of) people who were excluded from decision-making processes and not in the position of power (to speak or to be heard) due to e.g. social discrimination, that is, helping them develop confidence in their own capacities and increasing their spiritual, political, social and economic strength; and as b) a methodology often associated with processes of consciousness-raising.

Nobody came. He asked out loud: 'Who wants to take the authority?' No reaction. But then there was another young man coming up to the table and asking the audience: 'Please, can someone take the authority? I can't take this situation of nothing happening and no one being in charge. Please.' I asked him to do it himself, he said 'I can't, I'm German'. No one wanted to be in charge.

To not choose the table as the place to speak is completely fine. One doesn't need to and one shouldn't choose the position of power one considers wrong. But it was possible to speak from any other position in the space. This didn't happen either. Even in a frame of no serious danger or risk no one wanted to take responsibility. Was there nothing to say anymore? No statement. No comment. No claim. Nothing?

Certainly, imposing power on the audience in such a direct way that forces them to identify or disidentify with it completely, is a quite cynical and painful approach. It made almost everyone in the space feel uncomfortable and numb. But out of that feeling aggression arose, and it is positive that this aggression exists and was triggered off. This can count as proof that there is negative energy and aggression produced by the capitalist-patriarchal power structure we live in. It is in our bodies but oppressed in everyday life because the structure itself is not visible, and we have already incorporated it in ourselves. And only by confronting it, which is already the interruption of the ongoing process to produce (economic growth), and because it is a physical experience, it can be made visible and negotiated. The book is definitely worth reading, but the relation between noise and capitalism can't be experienced in a better way than the four white men have performed it.

## OUTRO

*I don't know exactly what I want, but I do know exactly what I do not want.*  
- Radu Malfatti

For further information about the book *Noise & Capitalism* as well as on the Works by Mattin, Anthony Iles, Howard Slater and Ilya Lipkin see:

[www.mattin.org](http://www.mattin.org)  
[www.metamute.org](http://www.metamute.org)

## NOTES

1. Anthony Iles and Mattin (eds.): *Noise & Capitalism*, Donostia-San Sebastián: Arteleku, 2009.
2. The term is from Richard Sennett and his analysis of the changes in US culture and identity through the changes in capitalist working structures. Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, Boston: Yale, 2007.
3. This term is from Richard L. Florida who writes about the connection between the economic strength of cities/urban regions and the number of highly engineered workers, artists, musicians and homosexual people who live and work there. *The Rise of the Creative Class. And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure and Everyday Life*, New York, 2002.
4. In the field of theatre (texts and performances) there is one important book to mention by Hans-Thies Lehmann, a German theatre scientist, who analyses in this book experimental theatre since 1960 and thereby refers to the French philosopher Jacques Rancière when talking about 'interruption' as aesthetic and political strategy. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*. London, New York, 2006.
5. The contemporary French philosopher Jacques Rancière understands democracy not as a form of governing and organising a state or country, but as a principle of carrying on negotiations in a public arena, subject to the condition that everyone has the same rights, the access and possibilities to do so. Something 'political' occurs or happens in the moment of an interruption that suspends the conditions of the supposed-to-be reality and the norm(ativity) by which the status quo is usually maintained. In this very moment of interrupting something invisible is made visible. Rancière calls the governing, everyday-business of politics 'police', and negotiations 'political' or 'politics'. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The distribution of the sensible*. London: Continuum, 2006.

# What a Reflection Supposes\*

11 general observations, and about one performance in particular

By Loïc Blairon

(translated from the French by Ray Brassier)

A form gives time when it does not let itself be framed by its mode of manifestation.

The material that resists formalisation generates a time which cannot be counted and which is not durational.

A form whose time cannot be counted establishes multiple points of observation (looks), ceaselessly displaced by the form.

Multiple points of observation generate a time without borders.

A time without borders implies that the (public) points of observation cannot be counted.

A form whose points of observation cannot be counted reveals, not the absence of frame, but rather the stakes of an absence of frame.

The stakes of a form are synchronised within a point that structures it as a whole: the figure of an unpronounceable struggle.

A form calls for the overcoming of a fixed point as time that counts for nothing.

A form (apologies to Kaprow) is not life.

A form that is not life (apologies to Godard) owes its borderless frame to the observation points (looks and public) that cannot be counted.

A form is what escapes number.

# A SIMPLE, BUT COMPLICATED, BEING TOGETHER

Unstable, fragile but daring together  
KYTN 10, Dundee Contemporary Arts, 28 December 2010

By Barry Esson

1. Music is never just about music. We may like to think otherwise, or choose to ignore the wider, specific structural and social, philosophical and ideological factors that produce any and all music. But to do this is to refuse our obligation to think and to cut short any possibility of a music of consequence.

2. If experimental music abstracts itself from its wider situation, then it can have nothing to offer back to it. That is to say, if we deal in sound-as-sound, then we produce music that has nothing to say about our wider social situation.

3. By embracing this abstraction into sound, a great deal of experimental music reinforces the status quo, which we might agree is defined by a prevailing false notion of freedom, and of a possessive individualism. Experimental music all too often is the practice of perceived unique individual expressive subjects trading in sound-as-sound; a (meaningless) process of stylistic innovation.

4. These tendencies can be seen in the recuperation of first radical, then venerable but now

ruined cultural edifices, into homogenised and occulted stylistic bonds that hold scenes together.

5. For example: I would argue that the power<sup>1</sup> of Noise music as it was developed in the 1970s stems from the conceptual propositions it made; ones of super-abundance, a focus on the unwanted in a situation, the practice of exceeding normative limits and so on....

5.1. This force of thought (if allowed to direct your action), obliged people to act in a certain way. It is this obligation to act that produces actions that included extreme (unwanted) volume, bodily risk and behavior traditionally considered unacceptable by the prevailing society (its language, laws and symbolic order), and so on.

5.2. From this radical (immanently political, philosophical, social) proposition, how have we ended up with a conservative and occulted Noise music of standardised aesthetic values (extreme volume, stasis..) and macho posturing?<sup>2</sup>

6. Or how about UK (free) Improvisation: I'd put it to you that what we can recognise as the force of thought of Improvisation, as it was developed in the UK in the 1960s, is a clear proposal based around notions of the possibility for alternative modes for the construction of social space, via a learned process of immanence, and in its widest cultural context, insisting on our obligation to think and to consider the consequences of our actions.

6.1. I don't think there was anything 'free' about this, to engage in this kind of production requires an awareness of power relations and ability to encourage, enforce or choose preferred ones, of nor-

mative social conditions and their alternatives, of modes of listening (or not), enquiry or interaction.<sup>3</sup>

6.2. It is a pedagogical stance, and it's insulting to say that it can be adopted freely - it's not difficult or specialist and it can be popular, but it does take time and a (political) commitment.

6.3. It is very rare to come across anybody practising (free) improvisation today who has not implicitly and reactively transposed the perceived notion of freedom and improvisation into a self-satisfying practice of stylistic and tasteful handling of sounds and an enquiry into their purely sonic qualities, and more often than not a pretty weak willed idea of consensual interaction.

7. Both of these examples<sup>4</sup> depict self-deluding movements in music that today still adopt postures of radical otherness to the mainstream while at the same time stripping away any relation to concrete everyday life, reducing their outlook to considerations of style, and to all intents and purposes embodying as values exactly the individualistic credo insisted upon by that same capitalist mainstream.

7.1. The prevalent notion of freedom I see in use in Free Improvisation or Noise right now is no freedom at all; do whatever you want, right now, in any way you see fit: this is the injunction of the Super Ego (I can! I will! I must!), which is of course also the injunction of modern capitalist society (Be all you can be! Have it now! Enjoy! Be free to choose!).

8. All of that is to say: radical propositions obliged people to act in certain ways. Those ways of making and doing, saying and interacting have slowly been stripped of their context and

transmuted into stylistic and empty gestures. The Noise or Improvisation scenes in experimental music today seem to me to have little to no fidelity to the original conceptual (political, philosophical, social) propositions or force of thought those movements once mobilised.

9. These notes are not some vague nostalgia for a (perceived) more radical past. But maybe they're a plea to take seriously what we find to be genuinely radical in a movement or idea, and to act as that idea obliges us to.

10. So: I would rather promote a qualitatively different step, to not just add a few more styles, but to do something of consequence; a practice that recognises and names something as a force of thought of music, even after the fact. A practice that excavates radical ideas and asks how we can think them now. I consider this an act of fidelity, a process led by rational obligation to an idea, which allows us to clearly measure success in stark terms, in relation to how that idea requires us to act. In this way new ideas and practices are generated, situated specifically within their current wider social context.

11. At our Kill Your Timid Notion festival in Dundee this February, Emma Hedditch, Anthony Iles, Mattin and Howard Slater initiate a short collective process involving a changing group of about 20 local artists and art workers, education workers and some of our festival audience members, culminating in a performance. Titled *Unstable, Fragile But Daring Together*, it proposed 'a simple, but complicated, being together'. Over two day-long

sessions and subsequent shorter meetings it opened up ideas of noise and improvisation and collectively investigated those in relation to how members of the group found purchase on those ideas from their own personal experience or learning. Without a predetermined hierarchy or structure, this immanent process collectively produced explorations, language, vulnerability, subjectivity, of ungrounding oneself, of the body and expressiveness; it attempted to create a collective environment for this exploration in full cognisance of the group's extended situation, as strangers working together; it took the material of specific artistic practices, treated them as symptoms of the problem, disorganised them and tried to find some new arrangement of core ideas that might have some relevance today.

12. As the very final action of the festival, members of this collective group (Emma, Anthony, Mattin, Howard, Liam Casey and Laurie Pitt) staged a performance. The large gallery space had been rearranged so that small groups of audience members were unevenly clustered throughout it. A 'house of safety' had been constructed in one corner (to which performers could retreat at any time). Each of the six performers had a microphone, connected to a speaker some way from where they were sat, together, in the gallery. In response to our normal practice of documenting each performance at our festivals, Vilte Vaitkute (one of the filmmakers we were working with at the festival) was asked to move about the space and record what happened, at times interacting with (in particular) Emma. Within a

strict time frame of 60 minutes, each member spoke; initially they each 'checked in' (a process from counselling in which people introduce themselves to a group and focussing primarily on how they are feeling at that moment in time) and hesitantly started to develop a kind of phenomenological conversation about how they were experiencing the situation as it developed, unscripted and improvised. Everybody was hesitant, considered and careful, but also clearly exposed within a musical context with apparently nothing musical to offer. As the performance developed, members of the audience started to ask questions, pose problems and react: the power dynamic in the room shifted and several of the audience members positions started to become clear (from cheery consensualism, passive enjoyment, to irritation, boredom, a sense of 'creepiness'). After a predetermined period (an hour) of (increasingly uneasy) dialogue, I brought the performance to a close.

13. The more I think back to this performance, the more I feel it has consequence. I've spoken to people who found it relaxing and open, and to others who found it to be unlike music at all. One person told me it felt like a group therapy session. I'd like to argue that it was all of these things, but also, in its radical fidelity to the force of thought of both Noise and Improvisation<sup>5</sup>, entirely musical. It seems to me that an attempt was made to collectively investigate the radical core concepts of Noise and Improvised music; to rethink both in terms of today's situation and from the specific situations of the people taking part. A genuine fidelity to those ideas was established, which



took little regard of how those kinds of music are supposed to be created today, but which instead rationally obliged a certain kind of action in the performance.

14. It was Improvised music. In that, it created a social space which was produced as a process of mediation between all the people invested in that space (importantly, this started out seemingly as the construction of the performers, but over time, as the audience asserted their investment in the situation, this social space was explicitly modified by more and more actors), and its means of production via a rethinking of specifically musical ones (improvisation), filtered through the experiences and additional context (both brought to it and immanent in it) of the people involved. It took the force of thought of Improvisation seriously, and applied it afresh.

15. It produced a Noise concert. In that it engendered a sense of peril – people were genuinely nervous, hesitant and affected by the situation, and made uneasy by it (which is to say that a self-created situation obliged them to act in ways that put them at risk): the group presented something within a specific context (a music festival, to which people had paid to come, with certain expectation – for entertainment, for provocation, who knows..) which was in stark contrast to what was expected and which focused on the all too often overlooked and unwanted remainder of music today – its foundational ideology, its social mechanics, its relationship to its situation. It took the force of thought of Noise seriously, and applied it afresh.

16. Their obligation didn't produce some finished article. I don't think it drew any conclusions, or was a perfect realisation of some form or music to set in stone, or indeed a perfect process to be repeated unchanged. It didn't change music in its entirety. But it did make a modest, but significant addition and contribution: a collectively developed (initial, emergent) mode of being together, and a process of critical consciousness-building leading to public action. I felt it to be a concrete strategy for effecting (real, however modest) change, suggesting another set of cultural arrangements, other topographies and other mappings. And however unlikely and unmusical it might have seemed, (and I found to be almost unrecognisable as Noise, or as Improvisation as we hear it today), it was radically, immanently and exactly that; it was a noise concert, it was improvisation, and it was music.

17. Something was put at stake, and I've not felt that in music for some time.

## NOTES

1 The philosopher François Laruelle would call this its 'force of thought': the point at which Noise is boiled down to a radical core concept; the unique point at which it meets and offers something to reality.

2 There seems to be a striking resemblance between this reactive process of recuperation into the mainstream and the kind of normalisation and reintegration into a predominant field that typifies reactionary politics – the kind of ideological conservatism that wants to return to a real or imagined old order of things, not out of nostalgia but out of self-interest i.e. Conservatism incorporates new ideas by divesting them of their political content so that they palatably reinforce the status quo; this seems to happen to radical music too, the sad thing is that people don't seem to notice or mind.

3 Here's a good quote from Esther Ferrer, it's not explicitly about improvisation, but it's apt in its proposing of a different (anarchist) notion of freedom: 'Our liberty is only limited by the personal decision to employ liberty intelligently, that is, to consider others as beings who practice liberty too....'

To follow a way of thinking that does not demand anything, that simply proposes the possibility that you have the courage to assume the decision and the consequences of your own acts, without protecting yourself in the imperatives of an ideology, a religion, or an authority, which convert you into an irresponsible person, first in regard to yourself, and then in regard to society.'

4 And countless others I could give.

5 In its apparent un-musical nature.

## 'Humorismo Extremo'

Notes on the concert Mattin | Loty Negarti + Jon Mantxi Guardetxea, Donostia, 8 July 2010

By Loty Negarti

This text is nothing more than a few open notes on a gig. The memory of something which pretended to be a concert and ended up being a kind of monster; a deviant creature. I thought I had been taking part in this day, both as a member of the audience and as a musician. But now I guess, by a certain point, I was no longer an audience member any more, even if I was in silence, even if I did nothing more than sitting down on a chair. Or at least, I cannot find a way of reviewing what happened that day whilst taking upon myself the traditional distance usually attributed to spectators.

The venue was the *Guardetxea* (Donostia, Basque Country), an old 18th century gunpowder warehouse, now reconstructed and adapted for cultural purposes. The gig opened a series of experimental music performances each weekend throughout August 2010. The supposed program that day was a first performance by Jon Mantxi and myself (as a duo), Mattin following us with a second solo performance. When I was asked to write a review of Mattin's performance, I started remembering that night, and in the end I realised the impossibility of writing anything less than a detailed memory of our own performance. I'll try to explain why. The idea for our gig was quite simple, and we wanted to proceed directly from this idea in the improvisation. Basically we were worried about the tacit norm among musicians of not speaking to each other during the 'sacred' time of the performance. Not only on the audience's side but, beginning with the musicians, these kinds of unspoken rules strongly determine what you are doing and how. It often happens that one doesn't feel comfortable with something: a sound, how the space is ordered, or another aspect of the situation. It's true that these uncomfortable elements could move you to an interesting situation. It is during these critical moments that one has the real opportunity to react unexpectedly and displace one's prefabricated behaviour for something else; even perhaps something more singular. But it is no less true that one of the aspects that functions to increase this intensity is the stage as a social device. Not necessarily in the literal sense of a 'stage' but in a broader sense of all the culturally instituted aspects underlying such events. Basically, a space and an appointed time to focus social attention in a specific way.

There is precisely a substantial difference between a gig and a rehearsal. The same sounds, the same relation between musicians, but a difference in the continually repeated 'intensity'. In a rehearsal, you stop for few seconds, make a comment, continue, or even speak without ceasing to play. In a concert, though, your behaviour is different, less agile and more constrained. I think that these restrictions play an important role in this process of making the moment stronger. And we wanted to experiment with these restrictions (modifying minimally but not necessarily cancelling them) in order to observe what happens and how this changed our experience as performers.

In improvised music one doesn't only try to make unexpected sounds or to get away from preconceived modes of playing your instrument. One also tries to establish a kind of acute relationship with the partner and the audience, one tries to find something shared, it could be a consensus or a dissensus, but generally something under some form of negotiation. And it seems that this kind of 'rehearsal behaviour' is not the favourite form of engagement, for the audience at least. But why?

Maybe because the relationship of attention between the people involved in the event is, in a sense, sterilised. So our main idea proceeded from this path of permitting speech if needed or wished, trying to avoid this 'stage' restriction. Why not introduce common dialogue within the performance, not only in terms of the sonority (or musicality) of the speech but as a tool to negotiate with other musicians?

As I said, we were supposed to be the first playing that night. But at the last moment Mattin asked us if we could invert the order because he wanted to be first. So, we changed the order. The audience consisted of a mixture of people, people from different places and different ages. Not exactly an homogeneous audience. Some rows of chairs were lined up in front of the stage, and everyone took their seats. Mattin stood up on the stage with his arms stretched out. No speaking, no movement, no music. Only the quiet sounds of the room in silence. After a few minutes looking extremely perplexed he started whispering quietly some words. It was difficult to understand what he was saying because it was almost imperceptible and because it took the form of responding to some questions which had not been verbalised. There on the stage, he looked like a crazy man responding to questions from an imaginary friend. After a moment we could begin to understand some of the words, and link them with each other. He was trying to dialogue with the audience, giving sketches of answers. 'I don't know, lets see',

'We can do what we want', etc. We could conceive some idea of the kind of imaginary questions he was answering: 'So, and now what?', 'What's next?', 'What are we doing here?', and so forth. After a time responding to questions he started formulating them: 'Why are you there and me here on the stage?', 'What do you want to do with this time?'. A big silence amongst the audience. It was as if a dense curtain of 'nothing' was growing between us and him, as if a deep cliff was suddenly appearing.

I was in silence, I didn't want to answer any kind of question formulated in this way. I wanted just to enjoy that big silence, that making explicit of the basic structure of that social space. Suddenly a girl in the audience entered into the game. She answered one of the questions, after, another person came to speak, and so on. One person asked Mattin to leave the stage. So, he came to us slowly and leant on the wall. Following the previous girl, other people entered speaking in a series of soliloquies. I remember one of them clearly: She was a woman. She started speaking about Power (with capital P), the spectacle and boredom. Actually she made a plea for the raw boredom, as a kind of exercise against this ubiquitous Power and his (sic) techniques for distraction. Then Mattin started a brief dialogue with her.

He asked if what he was doing was a power exercise. 'No this is an exercise of counter-power' she replied. And she was not wrong. There were these people gathered in a small room, almost in silence and facing a sort of situation that is antagonistic to *entertainment*. She related how worrying was the fact that from childhood 'they' want us to be amused. From the very beginning, we have the sound of the rattle working, lights, sounds and colours, to keep us distracted. So, to escape from this, we have to face boredom without fear. After her short manifesto, silence came again.

The atmosphere was really rare. I personally wanted to do something, but nothing which fell into the pantomime-like environment the performance had established. I wanted to play music. After a long silence, Mattin changed his role. He was not longer the artist but he was now looking from the space of the audience to a totally empty stage. We were looking there as well. Then he began addressing an imaginary performer, asking questions back and forth.

'How long will you continue with this?' and things like that. This was great, the most interesting point of the performance for me. The feeling was one of total absurdity. Nobody was there on the stage so the conversation was nonsense. But at the same time there was something interesting in it, because it was the same feeling one usually has in front of

a stage, but with a degree of difference. At this point we entered into a second stage in the performance.

The first stage was characterised by Mattin responding to questions from an absent interlocutor. This moment now passed into second stage characterised by Mattin asking questions from the floor to a supposed performer who is now absent. If in the first stage he was a performer, in the second he was now more a member of the audience, an active one, but a member of the audience. There is a big division between the stage and the audience. A big fence, something that miscommunicates these two sides. Even if you think that you are connecting with the performer, it is quite common to observe a painful isolation from 'the other' side. Things are so predictable and tested that rarely can the specific elements of the concrete situation enter and determine or modify radically the performance. This concert was great because here was the same division but inverted: a mere audience in front of an empty stage. The situation had no end, only if the people from the audience decided to do something to stop or extend it could the situation change. This was very similar to Graciela Carnevale's famous exhibition but with the doors of the venue open.<sup>1</sup>

Jon and I felt free to act so we went on stage and started playing. The situation was strange because the typical boundary between one concert and the other had become so distorted. It was not obvious at all if those sounds we were making on the stage were 'the concert' or only one more part of Mattin's performance. I didn't know at all myself but I didn't care either. I just wanted to play. After some minutes I felt that our idea of speaking on stage was not very relevant because these 'stage devices' were absolutely dislocated. In a moment Jon came to me and asked the people to go up onto the stage, because we wanted to speak. So, people from the audience came and took their place on the small stage. I don't know why, but I stopped playing. Jon was not playing at all, but speaking to the people about 'speaking' and the stage. People started talking amongst themselves. We were included and I didn't feel myself as a musician or as an artist any longer but as one more in a strange group of people speaking about different things. After a long time discussing we decided that the concert was finished. But what concert? Our concert? Mattin's performance? Were both the same thing? Did we determine or modify his performance? His action had clearly modified the course of our gig. Nobody knew properly how to classify the time, and the categories of the space were dissolved. This was something more like a monster than a well developed sane creature.

The defects, the errors and the detours had finally ended in something blurred, as beautiful as Frankenstein's monster. All of us went to the venue bar and continued with the conversation, this time in a fragmented manner. In the meantime many of these conversations were concerning the 'concerts'. Someone commented that they were really disappointed. He said that it had been an ambitious experiment with a poor and bad result stemming from a paternalistic approach. I didn't think so. Mattin does not have clear ideas about what was happening. Even if at the beginning it could seem that the contrary was the case, the truth was that he had no clear ideas about what was exactly happening nor about what could happen. For this reason I said he was not acting as a father who speaks looking down to his children being in the possession of the truth. I felt he was thinking about the situation itself in the very moment of the performance, making questions to himself switching the role performer-audience almost until the end, including the time of 'our' concert. Maybe it could be said that he was experimenting with himself as well.

Some boundaries had been expanded, or maybe reduced, who knows. It was not clear at all if we were performing our own gig (separated from the previous one as it was supposed to be) or carrying on Mattin's performance, bringing it somewhere else. The fact was that during all the time of the 'event' some usually assumed devices were changed, distorted, detoured, even broken. There was an incorporation of *noise*, considered as a distortion affecting a preconceived clear signal. From the very beginning of the performance (from the first moment of these understandable whispered words), there was a high level of *noise* in effect. Starting from that spoken language that was noisy and not clear at all, continuing with the lack of communication between all of us, going to the distorted categories of time and space, almost everything was corrupted.

But 'almost' is not 'everything'. There is an intermediate game between accepting conventions and rejecting them. You must deal carefully with this equilibrium, an equilibrium that is really dangerous. This is always present in the Mattinian approach to making music. A kind of ambiguity which moves you to question what is happening, what he, as performer, and you as part of the audience are doing. And this is great. But at the same time he is always giving you the required elements to make a criticism and that comes from the contradictory nature of his practice. You could put the questions far away, disintegrating many of the suggestions put on the table.

Why was his name written on the poster?

Why not break with this convention as well and pass radically to another level? In what sense do you need as an artist the kind of privileged attention of the name, the poster, the stage, the audience? In material terms maybe? In terms of the ego? In terms of cultural-symbolic value? There was a high degree of expectation after a long time without performing solo in the Basque Country. Many people were expecting something linked with the work he has been doing in the last years. These expectations are built up from the information you can find for example in his personal web page, in his last essays, in his last works. All this stuff is signed with a proper name. Almost all of them are developed because there is an institutional recognition of his work as being 'artistic'. Thus, he falls into a form of accelerated feedback. So, for instance, when that name appears in the poster and in the promotional information of the gig, the potential audience for this day could link information together and form an idea of the kind of 'spectacle' they might expect find there. Mattin, as many of us, is constantly accepting and using these expectations to his advantage. As a kind of offensive strength set against you but which eventually you may turn towards the fulfilment of your own aims. However, in the circuit of these expectations and attributions, the noise enters as well, bringing you the opportunity to enjoy the unexpected and chance misunderstandings. I remember now a young boy in the audience. He was evidently without knowledge about who we were, and what kind of music we could make. He was Italian and coming with the son of a man linked actively to experimental music making. Before the concerts, this boy asked the man which kind of music Mattin makes. '*Rumorismo extremo*' (extreme noise) the man replied. He attended the performance attentively with this idea in mind. He found everything really funny and he was sometimes laughing without cease. In the second part, when we were at the stage speaking together he said that he had enjoyed this kind of '*humorismo extremo*' (extreme humourism) music. Yes, he was right.

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Interview with Dan Warburton' in this book

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

" [sic] Tim Goldie  
" [sic] Tim Goldie is one of the most original noise musician/performers on the European scene. His double album *ABJECTOR [sic]* is a violent and considered examination of the fragmentation of language, the de-composition of instrumental research and the painful suffering that accompanies it. Valerio Tricoli, Netmage Festival, Italy 2009

### addlimb

Collective addlimb was formed by a small group of people based in Belgrade, Serbia, with a shared interest in experimental music, and, in particular, contemporary improvisation. Amidst the global atmosphere of rejection and suppression of what we believe to be democratic and genuinely critical qualities of this music, it is intended to try and open the door towards its theoretical grasping, extending the scope of its practice, and its promotion, primarily on the local scale.

### Anthony Iles

Anthony is a writer, pamphleteer and editor. He is a contributing editor with *Mute* magazine. He and I co-edited the book, *Noise & Capitalism*, published in September 2009 by Arteleku-Audiolab. [www.saladofpearls.blogspot.com/](http://www.saladofpearls.blogspot.com/) and [www.metanute.org](http://www.metanute.org)

### Marcia Bassett

Artist and musician based in Brooklyn. She was involved in bands such as Double Leopards and Hototogisu (with Matthew Bower). Since 2003 she has recorded solo as Zaimph. I put out her record *Emblem* on w.m.o/r. [www.zaimph.org/](http://www.zaimph.org/)

### Billy Bao

'When I came from Lagos (Nigeria) to San Francisco (Bilbao) life was tough here or there. I did not mind, I had a purpose in my life: to fight the system that fucks up everyday of our life. Back in my home town, I was an unknown songwriter but, as soon as I arrived to the streets of Bilbao, I discovered Punk Rock. It had energy and attitude and was exactly what I needed.

Next thing was to get a band. I found out the most primitive drummer in Bilbao, Alberto Lopez (ex-La Secta, ex-Yogur, ex-Atom-Rhumba), and the noisiest guitarists around, Mattin and Xabier Erkizia. The band was formed under my name, it could not have been any other way. These songs go beyond what rock and roll is and what it could be, in fact they are the degeneration of Rock & Roll against the regeneration of Bilbao.' Billy Bao, Bilbao Dec 2004

### Loïc Blairon

Loïc used to play double bass in improvisation contexts. Now his interest is turning towards theory and language and his practice is moving closer to performance and art. I released his first solo record on w.m.o/r. [www.loicblairon.fr/](http://www.loicblairon.fr/)

### Ray Brassier

Is a member of the Philosophy faculty at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon. He is the author of *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* and the translator of Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism and Theoretical Writings*, and Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*.

### Lucio Capece

An Argentinian saxophonist living in Berlin. We played together since 2005 as NMM [www.luciocapece.blogspot.com/](http://www.luciocapece.blogspot.com/)

### Diego Chamy

An Argentinian artist living in Berlin. He used to play percussion but now is working within more performative territories. [www.diegochamy.blogspot.com/](http://www.diegochamy.blogspot.com/)

### Deflag Haemorrhage/Haien Kontra

A group I play in with " [sic] Tim Goldie. It was formed at the end of 2001 in Hackney. The beginning of Abject Music. Our complete discography (*Luxury & Humiliated*) are released by Tochnit Aleph. [www.mattin.org/DHHK.html](http://www.mattin.org/DHHK.html)

### Drunkdriver

Arsecore band from Brooklyn consisting of: Michael Berdan (voice), Kristy Greene (guitar), Jeremy Villalobos (drums). One of the most ferocious bands that I have ever seen, perhaps too much to survive for a long time. The project came to an abject end last spring over internet rumours. Drunkdriver share the same label with Billy Bao (Parts Unknown) and like Twin Stumps they were part of a great noise rock scene that emerged in recent years in New York City.

### Janine Eisenaecher

Janine (1983) is a conceptual performance artist, freelance researcher and curator, based in Berlin/Germany. She works solo and in various constellations, mostly on the topics of identity, work, gender-specific questions, (post-)colonialism and economic structures in artistic work itself. Eisenaecher is a founder member of (e)at\_work and of Emanuelle (Berlin n@work), and she works as co-curator/-organiser for Performer Stammtisch and as tutor of the art association Flutgraben e.V., in both with the focus on speaking and writing about performance art (practice). Eisenaecher studied Theatre, Comparative Literature and Philosophy at Freie Universität, Berlin.

### Barry Esson

Along with Bryony McIntyre, Barry runs Arika, which produces some of the most cutting edge festivals in terms of experimental music and films such as Instal in Glasgow and Kill Your Timid Notion in Dundee (soon it will move to Edinburgh). [www.arika.org.uk/](http://www.arika.org.uk/)

### Xabier Erkizia

Musician, artist and curator very important in promoting experimental music and sound art in the Basque Country. He runs Audiolab in Arteleku (which published the book, *Noise & Capitalism*). He also directs the experimental music festival Ertz in Bera, which was the first festival that I ever played in 2001, and is also where Emma Hedditch, Anthony Iles, Howard Slater and myself performed together for the first time in 2009.

He also plays in Billy Bao. [www.arteleku.net/audiolab/](http://www.arteleku.net/audiolab/)

### Esther Ferrer

Esther (born in Donostia/San Sebastián, Basque Country in 1937) is a Spanish interdisciplinary artist and performance art teacher. In 1966, Esther Ferrer joined Walter Marchetti and Juan Hidalgo in the Spanish art performance and contemporary music group Zaj, famous for its radical and conceptual performances. Their pieces were presented in Spanish concert halls (originally devoted to the production of classical music) despite the difficulties of carrying out such experimental practices during Franco's fascistic regime.

### Ludwig Fisher

The bastard child of G.W.F. Hegel. [www.ludwigfischer.blogspot.com/](http://www.ludwigfischer.blogspot.com/)

### Margarida Garcia

Portuguese musician and artist based in Lisbon. She plays electric double bass and she often collaborates with Barry Weisblat and Marcia Bassett. [www.margaridagarcia.blogspot.com/](http://www.margaridagarcia.blogspot.com/)

### Jean-Luc Guionnet

Is a French electroacoustic music improviser and composer with a long running interest in philosophy. [www.jeanlucguionnet.eu/](http://www.jeanlucguionnet.eu/)

### Josetxo Grieta

A noise rock band consisting of Josetxo Anitua, Iñigo Eguillor and myself. It was formed in Bilbao in 2006 and it ended up tragically in April 2008 when Anitua decided to end his life. [www.mattin.org/Josetxo\\_Grieta.html](http://www.mattin.org/Josetxo_Grieta.html)

### Emma Hedditch

Artist and writer based in South London, who often works collaboratively with other artists and groups of individuals with an interest in process over products. Heavily influenced by politicised conceptual practice and feminism, her work often forms collectively produced films, fanzines as well as 'social situations' such as workshops, screenings and events.



Michel Henritzi

French writer and musician. He often writes for *Revue & Corrigée*. Member of the bands *Dustbreeders* and *Howlin'Ghost Proletarians*. He runs the label *Élevage De Poussière* (which released *Junko's Sleeping Beauty*) and *A Bruit Secret* releasing a lot of minimal Japanese improvisation. I published his infamous record 'Keith Rowe Serves Imperialism' on w.m.o/r. [www.michelhenritzi.canalblog.com/](http://www.michelhenritzi.canalblog.com/)

Junko

Legendary screamer of the Japanese group *Hijokaidan* (the English translation would be something like emergency stairs). *Hijokaidan* described themselves as 'Kings of Noise'. Her solo record *Sleeping Beauty* is probably the most horrific and beautiful record ever made.

Alessandro Keegan

Alessandro is a musician, artist and writer living in Queens. He was part of the noise rock band *Twin Stumps*. [www.akeeganart.blogspot.com/](http://www.akeeganart.blogspot.com/)

Alexander Locascio

Formerly active in the U.S. labour movement, now living in Berlin. Recently completed a translation of Michael Heinrich's *Critique of Political Economy*, and now working on a translation of the same author's *How To Read Marx's Capital*.

Radu Malfatti

Trombonist based in Vienna. He used to play free jazz but since the '90s he has focused upon ultra minimal composition and improvisation (what some people might call reductionism). He is part of *Wandelweiser* group of composers and he runs *b-boim* records: [www.timescraper.de/b-boim.html](http://www.timescraper.de/b-boim.html)

Seijiro Murayama

Percussionist with a deep interest in improvisation and philosophy. He was the first drummer of Keiji Haino's band *Fushitsusha*. He often collaborates as a duo with Jean-Luc Guionnet and he has also col-

laborated with the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy.

[www.seijiro.murayama.name/](http://www.seijiro.murayama.name/)

Loty Negarti (Aitor Izagirre)

Uneducated passenger. Improvisation, graffiti, writing, poetry... Originally from Getxo (like me) but now living in Donostia/San Sebastián, Aitor is one of the most active agents in the Basque underground scene. His activities include running the zines *Soliloquio* and *Pidgin* (experimental and concrete poetry) and *Hamaika*, one of the best labels I have encountered in years. Aitor is completing his PhD in philosophy at the University of the Basque Country. [www.gabone.info/](http://www.gabone.info/)

Eddie Prévost:

Percussionist, writer and founding member of the group *AMM*, Prévost has devoted his life to improvisation. Since 1999 he has been running an improvisation workshop in London every Friday. People like Tim Goldie, Anthony Guerra, Denis Dubotsev, Romuald Wadych, Seymour Wright and myself met there. He runs the label *Matchless recordings* [www.matchlessrecordings.com/](http://www.matchlessrecordings.com/)

Roman Pishchalov & Andrij Drel

Writers and translators based in Kiev, Ukraine. They used to run the experimental music magazine *Autsaider*, [www.atsaider.org/](http://www.atsaider.org/)

Acapulco Rodriguez

Writer of the most fucked up rockers around and member of the legendary 15 year old band *Chinese Restaurants*. I produced their first single 'River of Shit' released this year on *SS Records* (Sacramento). He also runs the label *Azul Discográfica*, [www.azuldiscografica.com/](http://www.azuldiscografica.com/)

Bruce Russell

Bruce is a New Zealand experimental musician and writer. He is a founding member and guitarist of the noise rock trio *The Dead C* and the free noise combo *A Handful of Dust* (with Alastair Galbraith). He has released solo albums featuring guitar and tape manipulation. He established the *Xpressway* record label, which was active from 1985 until the early 1990s, releasing mostly

cassettes and a few records. Russell then founded the *Corpus Hermeticum* record label. *Xpressway* released only music by New Zealanders, usually song-based. *Corpus Hermeticum* releases, by contrast, may feature New Zealand or international artists, and they eschew song forms in favour of free-form, experimental, usually improvised sounds.

Matthieu Saladin

Matthieu is musician and researcher. His music-making takes the form of a conceptual approach to music. He is interested in the history of musical forms and the relationships between music and society. He has a PhD in Aesthetics (University of Paris 1 – Panthéon-Sorbonne): his research focuses on the aesthetics of experimental music. He is a lecturer in the history and aesthetics of musics (20th century) at University of Lille (FLSH), and co-editor of the academic journal *Volume!* (about popular musics).

Karin Schneider

Karin is a Brazilian artist and filmmaker living in New York. She was involved in running the *Orchard Gallery* on the Lower East Side (2005-2008). [www.karinschneider.com](http://www.karinschneider.com)

Benedict Seymour

Ben is a writer, filmmaker and musician based in London. He was the Deputy Editor of *Mute* magazine and he is a member of groups *Antifamily* and *Petit Mal* (with Melanie Gilligan).

Julien Skrobek

Julien is a musician based in Paris working with a conceptual approach to improvisation. I released his record *Le Palais Transparent* in *Free Software Series*. He runs the label *Appel Music*, [www.appelmusic.org/](http://www.appelmusic.org/)

Howard Slater

Howard is a London-based writer and researcher and editor of *Break/Flow*. His texts have appeared in *Mute* magazine, *Datacide* and *Noisegate*. He is currently working on a book, *Anomie/Bonhomie: Notes Towards the 'Affective Classes'*, forthcoming from *Mute*.

Taumaturgia

Taumaturgia was conceived as a label devoted to improvised music and experimental practices. We are against copyright policies and the idea of intellectual property, thus we try to share and maintain freely the potencies of such activities as abstract forms. Taumaturgia is based on A Coruña since 2007.

Taku Unami

Taku is a musician based on Tokyo. He plays objects and things which he finds to hand. He heads two main projects, the depressive easy listening project *HOSE* and chamber black metal *Totas Causas de Malignitat*. He runs the label *hibari music*, [www.unami.hibarimusic.com/](http://www.unami.hibarimusic.com/)

Dan Warburton

English writer and musician based in Paris. He often contributes to *The Wire* and runs the online improvisation and experimental music zine, *Paris Transatlantic*, [www.paristransatlantic.com/](http://www.paristransatlantic.com/)

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- March 2001 Mattin, *Tinnitus*, CDr w.m.o/r 01 (London).
- June 2001 Mattin/Prévost/Parlane, *Sakada*, CD w.m.o/r 02 (London).
- July 2001 Mattin, *Higu*, CDr w.m.o/r 03 (London).
- September 2001 Bi Rak (Mattin/Dennis Dubovtsev), *Betzain*, CDr w.m.o/r 04 (London).
- May 2002 Mattin/Rosy Parlane/Xabier Erkizia, *Mendietan*, CD w.m.o/r 05 (London).
- November 2002 Sakada, *Undistilled*, CD Matchless Records (Essex).
- March 2003 Mattin, *Gora*, CDr Twothousand (London).
- April 2003 Mattin/Rosy Parlane, *Agur*, 3" CDr Absurd Records (Athens).
- April 2003 Belaska, *Vault*, CD w.m.o/r 06 (London).
- September 2003 Sakada, 3" CD Sound 323 (London).
- February 2004 Radu Malfatti/Mattin, *Whitenoise*, CD w.m.o/r 07 (Bilbao).
- April 2004 Taku Sugimoto, Yasuo Totsuka & Mattin, *Training Thoughts*, CD w.m.o/r 09 (Bilbao).
- May 2004 Margarida Garcia & Mattin, *For Permitted Consumption*, CDr L Limnomable (Ljubljana).
- May 2004 Mattin & Tim Barnes, *Live at Issue, NYC*, CDr Quakebasket (New York).
- May 2004 Radu Malfatti, Klaus Filip, Mattin, Dean Roberts, *Building Excess*, CD Grob Records (Cologne).
- May 2004 Sakada, *Never Give Up in the Margins of Logic*, 3" CD Antipic (New York).
- August 2004 Sakada, *Bilbao Resiste, Resiste Bilbao*, CDr Fargone Records (New York).
- August 2004 Junko & Mattin, *Pinknoise*, CD w.m.o/r 13 (Bilbao).
- September 2004 Mattin, *Basque Rd*, CDr Document (Sydney).
- October 2004 Mattin / Dion Workman, *Via Vespucci*, CD Antifrost (Barcelona/Athens).
- October 2004 Mattin & Taku Unami, *shyrio no computer*, CD w.m.o/r/hibari (Bilbao/Tokyo).
- November 2004 Sakada, *Askatuta*, CDr The Rizhome Label (Adelaide).
- July 2005 Billy Bao, *Bilbo's Incinerator*, 7" w.m.o/r (Bilbao).
- July 2005 NMM-No More Music at the service of capital, (Lucio Capece & Mattin) CDr Why Not LTD (Kuala Lumpur) Rereleased by No Seso (Buenos Aires) in Aug 2006.
- September 2005 Deflag Haemorrhage / Haien Kontra, *Luxury*, CDr w.m.o/r (London).
- September 2005 Mattin, *Songbook*, CDr hibari (Tokyo).
- November 2005 Billy Bao, *R'nR Granulator*, CD w.m.o/r (London).
- December 2005 Dion Workman / Mattin, *S3*, CD Formed Records (San Francisco).
- January 2006 Francis/Guerra/Stern/Mattin, 7" cmr (Auckland).
- February 2006 Billy Bao, *Auxilio!*, CDr Herbal Live Series (Vienna).
- February 2006 Mattin, *Songbook vol.2*, CDr Ausaider Magazine (Kiev).
- February 2006 La Grieta, *Hermana Hostia*, CDr w.m.o/r (Bilbao).
- March 2006 Mattin & Cremaster, *Barcelona*, CDr Audiobot (Antwerp).
- May 2006 Guionnet/Denzler/Unami/Mattin, CDr Fargone Records (New York).
- May 2006 Mattin, *Songbook vol.3*, Black Petal CDr (Tokyo).
- May 2006 Radu Malfatti / Mattin, *Going Fragile*, CD Formed Records (San Francisco).
- June 2006 Josetxo Grieta, *Reminder of a Precious Life*, CDr Audiobot (Antwerp).
- June 2006 Kneale/Mattin, *con-v*, CDr (Madrid).
- August 2006 Axel Dörner & Mattin, *Berlin*, CD Absurd Records/1000+1 Tilt (Athens).
- September 2006 Lene Grenager, Harald Fetveit, Lasse Marhaug, Lucio Capece & Mattin, *cdr*, CDr The Seedy R! (Riccarton).
- September 2006 Mattin & Tim Barnes, *Achbal al Atlas*, CD Little Enjoyer (New York).
- October 2006 Mattin, *Songbook vol. 4*, CD Azul Discográfica (New York).
- October 2006 Tony Conrad, Tim Barnes & Mattin, CD Celebrate PSI Phenomenon (Lower Hutt).
- November 2006 NMM, *Universal Prostitution*, CD IDEAL, absurd, 8mm (Sweden, Italy, Greece).
- November 2006 Mattin, *Proletarian of Noise*, CD hibari (Tokyo).
- December 2006 Josetxo Grieta, *Euskal Semea*, CD w.m.o/r (Berlin).
- May 2007 Matthew Bower & Mattin, *A New Form of Beauty (1975)*, CD Bottrop-Boy (Berlin).
- July 2007 Ryu Hankil, Jin Sangtae, Taku Unami, Mattin, *5 modules III*, CDr manual modules (Seul).
- October 2007 Claudio Rocchetti/Mattin, *Long Live Anti-Copyright, Death to Intellectual Property*, CDr Troglosound (Italy).
- October 2007 Mattin split with *Analoge Suicide*, & *GEN 26 [&] 3"* CDr (Ljubljana).
- October 2007 Mattin/Taku Unami, *Attention*, CD h.m.o/r (Tokyo/Berlin).
- November 2007 Billy Bao, *Fuck Separation*, EP S-S Records (Sacramento).
- December 2007 Mattin, *Broken Subject*, CDr Free Software Series (Berlin).
- February 2008 Billy Bao, *Dialectics of Shit*, LP Parts Unknown (New York).
- February 2008 Billy Bao, *Accumulation*, 7" Xerox Music (London).
- March 2008 Josetxo Grieta, *Sonrisas vendo, Donde nos llevan*, CDr Taumaturgia (A Coruna).
- June 2008 *Junko & Mattin*, LP Tochnit Aleph (Berlin).
- June 2008 Josetxo Grieta, *The Art of Distractation*, LP Ozono Kids (Barcelona).
- August 2008 Junko, Michel Henritzi & Mattin, *JE T' AIME!*, CDr Absurd (Athens).
- January 2009 Josetxo Grieta, *Distancia #2387*, CDr Hamaika (Euskal Herria).
- January 2009 Josetxo Grieta, *Hitzak, Eginak, Animaliak, Pertsonak*, DVD Discos Crudos (Bilbao).
- May 2009 Billy Bao, *Sacrilege*, CD Afterburn (Melbourne).
- June 2009 Deflag Haemorrhage / Haien Kontra re-issue of *Luxury*, CD Tochnit Aleph (Berlin).
- June 2009 Deflag Haemorrhage / Haien Kontra, *Humiliated*, CD Tochnit Aleph (Berlin).
- June 2009 Consumer Electronics, *Crowd Pleaser*, LP Hand to Mouth (Berlin).
- July 2009 Billy Bao *May 08*, LP Parts Unknown (New York).
- July 2009 Billy Bao *I am going to kill all the rich man*, cassette drone errant (Philadelphia).
- August 2009 Alan Courtis, Bruce Russell, Eddie Prevost & Mattin, *The Sakada Sessions*, LP Azul Discográfica (New York).
- August 2009 Drunkdriver/Mattin, *List of Profound Insecurities*, 12" Badmaster/Suicide Tax Records (Philadelphia).
- October 2009 Mattin & Malatesta, cassette Ozono Kids (Barcelona).
- February 2010 Mattin & Taku Unami, *Distributing Vulnerability to the Affective Classes*, CDr Rumpsti Pumsti (Berlin).
- March 2010 Billy Bao, *Urban Disease*, LP PAN (Berlin).
- April 2010 La Grieta *decisión*, CDr Black Petal (Tokyo).
- May 2010 Ray Brassier, Jean-Luc Guionnet, Seijiro Murayama, Mattin, *Idioms and Idiots*, CD w.m.o/r (Visby).
- December 2010 Mattin, *Object of Thought*, LP Presto!? (Milan).
- May 2011 Mattin, *Exquisite Corpse*, (with Margarida Garcia, Keving Failure and Loy Fankbonner) LP w.m.o/r, Azul Discográfica, Ozono Kids (Stockholm, New York, Barcelona).

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Noise & Capitalism  
Exhibition as Concert

Taking as a starting point the book Noise & Capitalism and the desire to explore noise and improvisation in social and political terms, the CAC exhibition context will become an improvised concert lasting for two months. Going through different degrees of intensity, nothing will remain static; the production and reception will take place simultaneously. By collapsing the formats of exhibition and concert into each other, the potential of the different usages of the noun Noise will be explored rather than simply perpetuating Noise as a musical genre. Playing with different levels of visibility and invisibility, some activities will be more formal than others. Interventions by different people will take different forms, such as an improvised zine, a continuously generated performance programme, an open invitation to improvise with the material conditions of the exhibition... Historically, Noise – in its many forms – has disrupted established codes, orders, discourses, habits and expectations, aesthetics and moralities. Noise has the potential to exceed the logic of framing, by either being too much, too complex, too dense and difficult to decode or too chaotic to be measured. At first encounter Noise has the power to suspend values of judgement such as good or bad or right or wrong. To think of it in moral or ethical terms seems ridiculous. Noise, with its epistemic violence, brings into crisis the division between activity and passivity, and between knowing and feeling. By making us aware of our incapacity to decipher it, Noise can expose to us our alienated condition, making us question our own subject position. Can the practice of Noise and improvisation help us in any way to understand or even counter the level of commodification that our lives have reached under the capitalist mode of production? Can we use Noise as a form of praxis going beyond established audience/performer relationships? Can we push self-reflexivity to the point of positive feedback?

Mattin en collaboration avec Loïc Blairon, Ray Brassier, Emma Hedditch, Esther Ferrer, Jean-Luc Guionnet, Anthony Iles, Matthieu Saladin, Howard Slater, Jarrod Fowler, Taku Unami, Zibigniew Karkowski & Evil Moisture, Diego Chamy, ' [sic] TIM GOLDIE, Malin Arnell, Ilya Lipkin, Barry Esson, Loty Negarty, David Baumflek, Daniel Lichtman, Maija Timonen, Anne Duffau

CAC Brétigny  
1 September – 30 October 2010

Curated by Pierre Bal-Blanc



























Do you think it could be possible to inject noise into theory (by that I mean to use conceptually some of the strategies that noise makers utilize rather than to focus on producing sounds, to focus in producing theory)?

Or let me put it in another way (and related to the series of conferences that you organized): what could noise theory be?

Distalbar - Psychological, medical  
Sci. - Linguistics & Pharmaceutical Sciences  
English - Philosophy  
\* Milanese Illustration - Giuseppe R. Kantor

# METAL MACHINE THEORY

AN ELECTRONIC EMAIL CONVERSATION

Yes: in a way, that was what initially drew me to Larueni's non-philosophy, but also precipitated my subsequent disenchantment: what i thought would be metal machine music, turned out to be coney island baby. So i am all for introducing noise into theory rather than generating more theory about noise, in a way that ultimately reaffirms the redundancy of both....But the element of theory is the conceptual and conceptualization cannot and should not be conflated with aestheticization: that way, only kitsch lies...Precision, saturation, density, frequential extremity: plausible conceptual analogues for these may be found but I suspect they would lie in the domain of mathematics rather than the kinds of discursive conceptualization usually deployed by philosophers....Also, I now believe that noise is not to be pitted against "meaning" (whatever that might be), as i naively thought when i believed having any philosophical truck with "meaning" was a symptom of reactionary senescence. My current conviction is that a properly exiguous conception of meaning can eradicate conceptual conservatism and engender all the desirable subversive attributes of noise...So to cut a long story short, the sorts of lexical and syntactical trickery that habitually engender obscurity, equivocation, ambivalence, polysemy, etc., (a la Derrida's Glas, to take just one notable example of philosophy supposedly tending towards or miming modernist experimentation with form) would be precisely how not to introduce noise into theory...What we find in such instances is a polysemic froth entirely beholden to norms of semantic functioning and yielding a decipherable philosophical 'sense' which turns out to be a philosophical bromide....All this to say that, in the conceptual element proper to theory, experiment at the level of form can mask conservatism at the level of content (e.g. Glas), while conservatism at the level of form may harbour extraordinary radicality at the level of content (e.g. Wilfrid Sellars)...

\*THE AMINE  $\beta$  RING

\*dextrorotatory components  
synthesis of  
sympathomimetic musics

Martin - question  
Ray Brassier - answer

My impression is that one of the most useful tools that you get from Laruelle is his use of determination-in-the-last instance. Could you please tell me why?

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# METAL MACHINE THEORY

I think the concept can do some useful work but not in the form in which Laruelle himself presents it. I'm basically sceptical of the alleged non-philosophical novelty of Laruelle's concept of determination-in-the-last-instance: I fear it boils down to a kind of Fichtean materialism of practice (or what Iain Grant has called "practicism") insofar as the last-instance is identified with the individual human being and determination is identified with his/her practice -- even though Laruelle has in mind a very specific concept of practice ---that of theory. Laruelle converts Althusser's conception of philosophy as "theoretical practice" into the idea of non-philosophy as a "practice-of-(philosophical) theory". While I favour a non-teleological alignment of theory with practice, my problem is with Laruelle's contention that it is the individual human being that is the real of the "last instance". If "I" am the real of the last instance, then I am the ultimately determining cause: history, society, culture, ideology, politics, economics, biology, neurology, can be summarily dismissed (along with philosophy) as redundant abstractions with no salient determining force. This easily degenerates into a kind of transcendental individualism, where the individual human subject is absolutized (notwithstanding Laruelle's own protests against philosophical absolutism). It also implies a kind of punitive nominalism, where everything but the human individual is relegated to the status of causally inert metaphysical abstraction. Ultimately, I'm afraid this non-philosophical protest against the supposed absolutism and totalitarianism of philosophical universalism ends up being both theoretically and practically --i.e. politically--- debilitating. I think venerable questions such as "What is real?", "What is causality?", "What is determination?", are still unresolved and urgent topics of philosophical concern, which it would be short-sighted to dismiss as antiquated metaphysical hangups: they point to the need to understand the complex stratification of reality and the different sorts of causally determining mechanism operative at distinct levels. All this to say that I don't think there is an ultimately determining instance in Laruelle's sense; which still seems to me to be that of an updated version of free human agency or activity--this is of course the core of Fichteanism. If there is an ultimately determining instance, it cannot be identified with the free activity of the human subject. This is not to say that activity, whether practical, theoretical or some fusion of both, cannot serve as a medium for some other determining, material agency, but the latter invariably operates behind the back of the human subject---which is precisely what Laruelle denounces and wishes to rectify with his concept of man as last instance. I favour a conception of the subject as organon or automaton, but one whose heteronomy---i.e. allocentric determination--- actually constitutes a kind of autonomy; the sorts of rule governed behaviour exemplified by subjects engaged in deductive activity exemplify a kind of "heterautonomy" where the only freedom available is measured by the potential failure to do what one is rationally obligated to. This is very Kantian of course, but it's a Kantian rationalism freed from the encroachments of morality.

You have written about noise in opposition to capitalism:

"What I consider to be interesting about noise is its dis-organizing potency: the incompressibility of a signal interfering with the redundancy in the structure of the receiver. Not transduction but schizduction: noise scrambles the capacity for self-organization."

Do you see any possible political use of the nihilist character of noise for the destruction of capital?

# METAL MACHINE THEORY

I don't think it's credible to attribute to noise a directly anti-capitalist political valence. The political significance of a phenomenon is often ambiguous (I say "often" rather than "always", because there is nothing ambiguous about the political significance of an English Defense League rally, for instance). Only rarely can it be unequivocally deciphered or straightforwardly translated into an identifiable political stance. And of course, it's not only content that is political, it's also the form of political deciphering: it's not just what something is but how it is interpreted that is political. Ultimately, this means that nothing in the realm of cultural production is inherently pro- or anti-capitalist: popular entertainment is sometimes slyly subversive; critiques of capitalism have long been grist for the academic culture industry. This ambiguity is quite evident in the case of noise. The noise subculture has been around for a long time now---at least since the early 1980s---and I find it telling that during its existence, it's been possible to ascribe to it just about every conceivable position across the political spectrum. Thus the politics of noise have variously been described as neo-nazi, crypto-fascist, neo-conservative, liberal-democratic, and anarcho-libertarian... To the best of my knowledge, noise has rarely if ever been aligned with communist or Marxist politics. There is every interest in doing so. But such an alignment should not take the form of the somewhat inane equation between dissonance and political subversion. Capitalism is no more threatened by noise than by any other register of abstraction, whether aesthetic or conceptual. The currency of "noise" as a commercial marketing category is ample testimony to this fact. But this need not provide a license for complacent or reactionary cynicism. Any allegedly "critical" or "subversive" politics must involve disciplined conceptual construction and noise's metamorphicity invites conceptual investment and elaboration to a degree perhaps unequalled by any other extant "musical" genre---precisely insofar as it threatens the logic of generic classification as such. This is where I believe noise's subversive potential lies---at the level of abstract form; and not in any alleged radicality attributed to its sonic content (volume, frequency, pitch, etc.). Construed in terms of the predilections of its practitioners, the politics of noise runs the gamut of political opinion, from absurdly reactionary obscurantism to mystical anarchism. At the same time, we shouldn't be surprised if the politics of noise's consumers turn out to be the default politics of all contemporary consumption: that of a terminally complacent neo-liberalism. If noise harbours any radical political potential, then it needs to be elaborated via a process of interrogation, which would involve working through questions such as: What is experience, given that capitalism commodifies sensations, affects, and concepts? What is abstraction, given that capitalism renders the intangible determining while dissolving everything we held to be concrete? What freedom are we invoking when we proclaim noise's "freedom" from the alleged constrictions of musical genre?

This is just to say that the "destruction of capitalism" evoked in your question certainly won't be achieved via any form of spontaneous or participatory experience. It would require the development of a political agency informed and instructed by cognitive achievements obtained over the course of a critical collective investigation. A "politics of noise" commensurate with such an ambitious task presupposes cognitive discipline, communal investigation, and collective organization.



"If you tolerate each other, you will tolerate anything"

Simon Yuill's contribution, a quote from Raoul Vaneigem

seems to perfectly summarize the Evacuation of the Great Learning workshop at the Instal festival in Glasgow.

During the workshop, it proved impossible for the group to arrive at any consensus about what to do or not to do, so the last day it was decided that every proposal would be accepted. But as someone subsequently pointed out, instead of collectively achieving something radical, we merely reproduced the paltry freedom of expression which capitalist neoliberalism accords to the individual subject, no matter how false this 'freedom' turns out to be.

It seems that capitalism has conditioned our subjectivity to the point where we are no longer willing to give up anything individually, even if this entails a bleak future for everybody. Following what you said at the interview Against an Aesthetics of Noise:

"Noise exacerbates the rift between knowing and feeling by spilling experience, forcing conception against sensation. Some recent philosophers have evinced an interest in subjectless experiences; I am rather more interested in experience-less subjects. Another name for this would be "nemocentrism" (a term coined by neurophilosopher Thomas Metzinger): the objectification of experience would generate self-less subjects that understand themselves to be no-one and no-where. This casts an interesting new light on the possibility of a "communist" subjectivity."

How might we initiate the process of desubjectification that is required in order to organize ourselves for a collective transformation beyond individual needs and desires?

# METAL MACHINE THEORY

AN ELECTRONIC EMAIL CONVERSATION

\*THE AMINE  $\beta$  RING

Acknowledging that individual subjectivity is shaped and conditioned down to its innermost recesses by impersonal social structures would be a good start. Unfortunately, it seems particularly difficult for artists, who have been encouraged to invest in their own individuality, to recognize this. Nothing is more emblematic of the chokehold of neoliberal ideology than the unquestioned conviction that individual self-expression remains a natural reservoir of creative innovation. The cultivation of individuality as a profitable personal resource is an efficient means of enforcing a reactionary conformism. Narcissistic or aesthetic self-cultivation can be usefully contrasted with the sorts of aberrant individuation generated through psychosocial pathologies. (One way of expressing this would be in terms of the theoretical contrast between socially prescribed subjectivation, which is personalizing, de-singularizing, and sociopathic; and socially proscribed subjectivization, which is depersonalizing, singularising, and communist.) Alienation is a profoundly unfashionable theoretical trope, but it might be time to rehabilitate it. It was summarily dismissed in the wake of postmodernist critiques of authenticity. But alienation arguably has nothing to do with lost authenticity, whether at the individual or species level. It is better conceived as expressing the contradiction between actually existing social pathologies and the absent social ideals that they indicate even as they deny them. The alienated individual can be seen to embody the objective contradiction between social ideal and social pathology. But what is required in order to prevent this from lapsing into a sentimental "outsider" romanticism is the imperative to individuate through conscious depersonalization. What is necessary is to achieve an objective or cognitively enlightened, which is to say, impersonal self-consciousness about one's own pathology; i.e. detached insight into how the pathological nature of own's own personality indexes the objective discrepancy between what exists and what ought to be realized at the collective level. By achieving an objective perspective upon her own pathology, the antisocial individual becomes more social than her well-adjusted, properly integrated peers. This is how individual de-subjectivation becomes the condition for collective subjectivization: one relinquishes the pathological markers of one's psychosocial individuation the better to achieve that depersonalized state in which subjective agency coincides with collective capacity. Subjectivizing depersonalization is the precondition for collectivity. A collective is constituted by a group of individuals committing together to a principle, or set of principles. Only by consciously relinquishing what is pathological (i.e. conventionally social, and therefore anti-social) in one's personality does one become capable of such collective commitment. From this principle or principles, specific objectives can be derived, together with appropriate criteria for discriminating between those proposals that optimize the realization of the central objective and those that inhibit it. The determination of the goal ensures the identification of a method for resolving disagreements. Consensus on matters of principle provides the condition for resolving dissensus over questions of method. Of course, this presupposes a commitment to a certain conception of dialectical rationality, as well as to rational canons of theoretical and practical investigation. This will be too much for some: too "dogmatic", too "authoritarian". An apt response to such protests would be to point out that the alternatives to rationality have hardly proven effective. The revolutionary potential of rationality remains sadly underestimated: reason is routinely castigated as conservative or defamed as "totalitarian". But the transparently reactionary and ideological character of this alignment should be perfectly evident by now, and it might be worth re-considering once more the critical efficacy of pure reason both in theory and in practice. --\_

How do we break out from the correlationist circle?

classical Psychological, medical  
Sci., Philosophy & Pharmaceutical Sciences  
British Museum  
\*Scientist Illustration Courtesy R. Kantor

\*dextrorotatory components  
synthesis of  
sympathomimetic musics

# METAL MACHINE THEORY

AN ELECTRONIC EMAIL CONVERSATION

First of all, what is the correlationist circle?

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Very simply, it seems to follow from the following reasoning: whatever you think about is thereby rendered relative to your thinking and so cannot be conceived as existing independently of your thinking about it. Thus, your claim to be thinking about something that existed before you began thinking about it is contradicted by your very act of thinking about it. If you say the earth existed for billions of years prior to your existence now, the correlationist will tell you that what you ought to say is that the earth has existed for billions of years for you now, not absolutely or "in itself". Everything is a "correlate" of your thinking and trying to think about things that are not correlates of your thinking is like trying to step over your shadow: you can't do it. The correlate is projected by your thinking just as your shadow is projected by your body. This is the circle: whenever you believe yourself to be thinking about something outside thought, your act of thinking re-envelops it within thought. Why is this a problem? Because it seems to imply that we can't think or know anything as it is in itself, independently of us. In its most basic form, correlationism is just another name for the kind of generalized skeptical relativism typical of "postmodern" ideology.

There are three possible responses to this dilemma. The first response is to reject the argument upon which this conclusion seems to rest. It can easily be shown to be invalid. But there's a sense in which this is not enough because we still haven't accounted for the peculiar force correlationism seems to possess. It's the vulgarization of an important insight. The important insight is that we need concepts to know things, and we can't know things without using concepts. But one can acknowledge this without accepting the argument that seems to lead to the correlationist circle, according to which all we really know are concepts, not things. The way to do this is to understand that even if we can't know things without concepts, we are connected to the world otherwise than through concepts alone. This is because we are not just minds but also bodies with nervous systems connecting us to material reality. Of course, correlationists will object that what is being invoked here is just the concept of a body or the concept of material reality, and that the circle remains closed: thinking only ever accesses its own correlates. But I think this objection can be refuted by pointing out that it rests on a simple non-sequitur: while it is true that you can't think about something without thinking about it, it doesn't follow from this that what you're thinking about is nothing more than the correlate of your thought. I can't think about a dog without the concept "dog", but this doesn't entail that the dog I'm thinking about is the same thing as the concept "dog". This is the assumption through which the correlationist presumes to be able to close the circle. But once you realize it's not valid, then it becomes possible to insist that there's nothing inherently contradictory in admitting the difference between concepts and things that are not concepts. We're connected to those things through our body, which is another thing, and although we have to rely on concepts to know anything, including our own bodies, this doesn't mean we only know about concepts. In fact, we ought to acknowledge that knowledge has two components: on one hand, it requires concepts, which we generate through our minds, but on the other hand, we also receive sensory information from physical reality via our nervous systems, since our bodies are physical things connected to the rest of physical reality. It is the fact that our mind is not a self-sufficient system but is intimately connected to a body which connects it to the world that prevents the circle of correlation from closing in on itself. This is the second possible response to the correlationist argument mentioned above.

The third is simply to deny or ignore the necessity of concepts and pretend we can know reality through some other medium. But this is to exit from the circle at the cost of giving up on the possibility of rational knowledge altogether.

The better way I think is to acknowledge that concepts are necessary for knowledge, but not sufficient. What I'm propounding here is the classical Kantian view of course----the irony being that it is Kant who is usually charged with being the founder of correlationism. In fact, I don't think he is: that dubious accolade is better merited by philosophers like Berkeley or Fichte, who deny that we have any reason to assume the distinction between concepts and objects. But Kant says we have very good reason to assume this difference, even if we need concepts to know objects. So he leaves open the gap through which we can access what is outside our minds ("the great outdoors"). The point is that we don't need to escape because we're not really locked in: the inside communicates with the outside. But because having a mind and being able to know things requires some distance from those things---a fundamental hiatus---we can't ever be totally immersed in the great outdoors, or lose ourselves in it, unless we want to cancel the very condition that makes us thinking beings in the first place. So I would say in response to your question: First, that there's no reason to believe the correlationist circle is hermetically sealed in the first place. Second, that some minimal or epistemic correlation between concepts and objects is a necessary condition for knowledge, but that this doesn't mean that objects are indistinguishable from the concepts through which we know them. Another way of saying the same thing is to distinguish between a good or epistemic correlation, which maintains the gap between concepts and objects, and a bad or metaphysical correlation, which tries to close the gap and render them indiscernible. Once this distinction is taken into account, then the conditions of the problem change quite significantly: it's a question of using the correlation to understand its outside, and of understanding its inside as a function of its outside, since there would be no outside without an inside and vice versa.



These pictures were selected by Dan Warburton to accompany the interview in Paris Transatlantic.



These pictures were selected by Dan Warburton to accompany the interview in Paris Transatlantic.

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Ourselves                      Endocolonised                      At the membrane  
From knowing the 'right' way as embryonic people  
To a tellingly-inarticulate cohesiveness of passion

'MUSIC' AS AFFECTIVE SOVIET  
shelter for broken subject  
UNMASS(k)d

So, Mattin, music and politics, noise and capitalism...  
much more than academic pursuits... movements in the  
slipstream of an accruing 'living history'... moments of  
resistance from the asylum to the music hall that  
combine tension and boredom; an immanence tempting  
us to acts.

Isn't there more 'going fragile' to done?

Eking out the noise of the system in our bios?

Sharing incapacity?

Using alienation as a material rather than succumbing  
to its private symptom?

Removing the shame of equalising standards?



"Filling the world" as César Vallejo said "with  
powerful weak"

I hope you're still alive

Comradely Greetings

Howard

22nd August 2010



VIEWS

**CAC BRETIGNY**