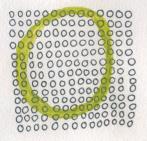
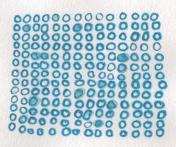
# Phono-Fictions and Other Felt Thoughts

Catalyst: Eldritch Priest





becoming a recipient.

Edited by David Cecchetto Catalyst Book Series

# Phono-Fictions and Other Felt Thoughts

## Catalyst Book Series

- 01 Plastic Blue Marble—Catalyst: Amanda Boetzkes
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## Series editors

Amanda Boetzkes David Cecchetto Ted Hiebert

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#### Contributors

G Douglas Barrett Marc Couroux Émile Fromet de Rosnay Ted Hiebert Nicola Masciandaro Juliana Pivato Gary J. Shipley Tang Yan

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Editor: David Cecchetto

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## Catalyst

The twenty-first century is a time of prodigious creative and intellectual experimentation, with many thinkers, artists, and makers engaging in a range of practices that are foundationally speculative yet nevertheless transformative. The Catalyst book series aims to represent this space of possibility by coupling theorists and artists in ways that galvanize logics, spaces, politics, and practices that are not yet mapped ... and perhaps never can be.

Catalysis instigates processual differentiations over a space of exchange; it is eventful, unpredictable, and generative. To chart a catalyst is to bring attention to the critical and creative processes that reveal hidden perspectives upon the event of their becoming. Thus, contributors to the Catalyst books think *alongside* the catalyst, edging and forging implications, connections, atmospheres and weirdnesses. The essays do not review or critique the catalyst's work but rather sound points of contact in pursuit of resonances, enacting gestures of performative solidarity through intellectual and creative engagement.

Catalyst books build speculative communities, inviting a wide range of perspectives into conversations about shared artistic, political, and intellectual values while privileging the unique, distinct and personal insights that characterize any single voice of engagement. Each volume in the series provides an in-depth look at an active thinker or artist—seeking after the full relevance of their work. The series focuses in particular on voices that have not already been widely featured but who have unique and relevant perspectives to share on questions of art, theory and culture.

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## Catalyst: Eldritch Priest

Eldritch Priest writes on sonic culture, experimental aesthetics and the philosophy of experience from a 'pataphysical perspective. His essays have appeared in various journals and he is the author of *Boring Formless Nonsense: Experimental Music and the Aesthetics of Failure* (Bloomsbury 2013). Eldritch is also a co-author (with fellow members of the experimental theory group "The Occulture") of *Ludic Dreaming: How To Listen Away from Contemporary Technoculture* (Bloomsbury 2017) and is active as a musical composer and improviser. He is Assistant Professor in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University, where he is working on a new book about earworms, daydreams, and other lived abstractions.

## Introduction

### David Cecchetto

From its provenance as a description of Oakland, Gertrude Stein's famous quip that "there is no there there" has seeped into the quotidian lexicon used to characterize the emptiness of late-capitalist infrastructure. And really, fair enough: it's hard to argue with the assertion that something integral is altogether lacking at the heart of ... well, whatever one looks to for unmitigated integrity. And yet, to emphasize this relative lack—to insist that the "theres" of our time somehow fail to fully take place—is to risk missing the more nihilistic thought suggested by the inverse statement. In short, what would it mean to say that there is a there there? Would it not be to suggest that every there has already slipped into another? That is, to say that "there is a there there" is to start a chain reaction in which "there" points always to something that is already somewhere else; where? There, there, there, there ... the absence indicated by the negative—i.e., by the "no"—performs a double-negative that retreats from the *more than totalizing* reality that obtains in its absence: if there were a there there, then one would be forced to accept that thereness is constitutively in excess of itself. Thereness is thus simulational, and ironically so.1

All of which suggests at least one question: who really cares? And again, fair enough: in the context of a contemporary technoculture that screams incessantly for our (in)attention, care is perhaps best not freely given.

Indeed, this is only more the case when we are asked to attend to something that teeters, seemingly, on a point of irony that fails to exit the orbit of mere language games. And yet, perhaps even to raise the question in this way gets caring the wrong way round: perhaps it isn't so much that something invariant procures one's care or attention (or doesn't) but rather that the modality of attention itself is invariantly relentless. If that is the case, the trick would be to modulate, fold, multiply, and attenuate attentive flows rather than to try to give or take away something called "attention." Intuitively, this makes sense: how else to explain the passionate cries of "I don't care!"—sometimes voiced as "that's just playing with words, it doesn't really matter!"—that inevitably meet language when it moves along its ironic wavelengths?

Such a delineation of attention silhouettes the twopronged gambit through which Eldritch Priest-this collection's catalyzing figure—parlays one thought to the next, be it in his musical, writerly, or otherwise work: firstly, that the integral transparency (characteristic of both control modalities and rationalist endeavours) that would wantonly instrumentalize all that it meets-precluding any and all ambiguity and inscrutability in the process might well be turned on its head by the useless expenditures of boredom, formlessness, and nonsensicality; and secondly, that the gambit of a gambit is always in the continuing expansion (spatial, temporal, and logical) of the field of play. That is, it isn't that failure fails to fail when it fails (i.e., because it succeeds in failing), but rather that failure is just kind of "meh" when it "fails," so the trick is in keeping up the trick of "suspending" meaning by multiplying it against itself.2

Such multiplications are part of what nominate Priest as an ideal catalyst for this series, in so far as catalysis is always a process of differentiation. That is, Priest's thoughts are as proliferative as they are constative, never quite at home (either with themselves or any particular discipline) but always homing in on targets that are all the more effective for having never really been there. Boredom, bullshit, earworms—each a prominent object of Priest's attention all share a certain ontological indeterminacy at the level of causality: they are at once causes and effects not of a single chain of events, but rather of "the assemblage of conventions and assumptions that produces the appearance of an intelligible, orderly world." In this way, the topics that capture Priest's (in)attention do so not so much as objects of study proper, but more as latches and levers in a world where everything is connected to something but nothing to everything. Thus, in so far as Priest's writing does something it pushes and prods at other doers, human and nonhuman alike; this is a situation where differentiations can't but proceed because it is one that collectively yields a profusion of action-at-a-distance between actors that are complexly entangled with one another.

Priest, then, is something of a catalyst under erasure with respect to this book: the thought doesn't just think the thinker (as per Whitehead) but in this case thinks the thinkers, and it is precisely this pluralization that is profiled in this volume. Put differently, Phono-Fictions and Other Felt Thoughts—as a volume—concatenates a series of signals of wildly divergent types and intensities, many of which are so radically singular that they could never conjoin otherwise: the integrity of this volume lies in part in the impossibility of integrating its contents. Indeed, one might thus think of

the collection as *coincidental*, noting as one does that such coincidences might always instead be occluded hyperstitions: it's certainly (im)plausible that *Phono-Fictions* quasi-caused the connections that purportedly led to it.

If such a characterization of this book seems abstract, that is (once more) fair enough: this is a book for thinking with abstraction after all and, as Priest explains (via Brian Massumi), "abstractions are by nature nonsensuous, [so] insofar as they are perceived, they are felt as thought." For Priest, to insist on this is to shed light on the lived dimension of abstraction, the contingent and contextual ways that thinking vibrates in, as, and of the world(s). This book variously reflects, refracts, bends, and absorbs that light.

### Phono-Fictions and Other Felt Thoughts

The first three chapters of Phono-Fictions each engage in different ways—the nihilistic strain of Priest's work, specifically Priest's refusal of meaning even as he again and again takes up its (usually ironic) appearance. Chapter One—Nicola Masciandaro's "To Become Purposeless: A Failure"—seeks to "shed purpose" via an extended meditation on a statement given by Meher Baba in 1960. In its entirety the essay incants a "failure to begin," though it bears noting that it is just precisely this failure that at once conjures and (paradoxically) completes the argument's "unfinished cathedral." In this way, Masciandaro brings out the participative dimension of the theory of failure that Priest develops in Boring, Formless, Nonsense, pivoting the latter from the province of experimental music to that of what Nietzsche called "our so-called consciousness" via a (meta)commentary that we follow as "a purpose leading only to its own purposelessness."

Shifting slightly to the terrain of uselessness, Chapter Two-Émile Fromet de Rosnay's "Taunting the Useful: Gestural Potential (with Agamben)" emphasizes the importance of performativity in this register. Specifically, de Rosnay insists on the doubled negativity of "taunting," a gesture that "is not only negative from the perspective of magicians of usefulness [but is more radically] negative insofar as its expenditure leads to nothing outside of itself." From this insistence, de Rosnay demonstrates that uselessness is best approached *modally*, wherein the stakes of thinking the useless reside in how thought can encounter the truth of a given modality beyond the binary sets that structure the mode. Where Masciandaro's essay charts a failure to begin, de Rosnay registers in his argument a failure to end that is constitutive of the useless, such that useless potential (viz. Agamben) limns a "non-negative space ... for eliminating resolutions in which one entity is used to the end of another."

If I've insisted on the importance of participation and performativity in the first two chapters, this is by no means to suggest an anthropocentric understanding of those terms. Chapter Three—"Toy Involvements" by Juliana Pivato—makes this explicit by manifesting a materially distributed agency in the form of what we might think of as incipient (dis) figurations, wherein the parenthetical "dis" signals the troubling performed by the materials in play. That is, the images that make up the chapter are clearly gestural, but it is an attuned gesturality that comes as much from the particular material arrangement as from Pivato *per se*: the texture of the paper towel that grounds the drawings pulls at the ink—itself delivered by an ink-dipped pen—and wicks it, causing it to spread and soak in according to its particular paperly instincts (thereby coaxing those same strange instincts out

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of Pivato). In this sense, the work is about the paper towel as much as the images, activating the materials to coax figural abstractions out of the meeting point between the media. Here, then, the meaning of the figures—the what of their figurative representations—is set aside in favour of the how of interest, and specifically a (dis)interested bending of the conjugal process of drawing itself: the 21 images—miming the number of oval patterns on each image—were selected from a collection of many more according to a distended and skewed process that was intuitive, but only if one counts thinking as a part of intuition's distribution. In some cases, the selection leads to awkward multiples of a similar shape (thereby making material differences more apparent), while in other cases differences of a different sort are displayed. Taken together, the overriding impression is of a process wherein the material has in some sense obscured Pivato's attentional faculties, but that has also over time entrained it to a warped reality of "toy involvements:" an ironic (dis)figuring of the (dis)engagement of meaning.

As Priest demonstrates—and in some cases explicates—music grants a certain privileged expression of the vital dynamism of lived abstraction because it proceeds in part by perpetuating "the identity (confusion) of symbol and meaning." As a result, to listen is to engage in a process of building new relationships between reality and appearance. Chapters Four, Five, and Six each take this up through the phenomenon of the earworm, which is to say the experience of having a song fragment stuck in one's head long after it has ceased playing. Chapter Four—Gary J. Shipley's "Pure Dreaming: Radicalized and Vermiculated Thought, Or Death as an Earworm—takes up the figure of the (ear)

worm specifically in the province of death to insist that we are "the conduit through which death makes its perpetual return: not zombies but hosts for a vermicular hoard of zombied reprisals." Death, then, is understood by Shipley as a "lived abstraction" of death, and specifically one that is affectively clarified—in its full horror—by listening.

As with Chapter Four, Chapter Five—"Brain Music: From Earworms to Ems" by G Douglas Barrett—works the topos of the earworm in tandem with an expanded conception of music. Barrett's emphasis here is to understand the latter, and creative labor more generally, "as a form of experimental theory." From this position, Barrett demonstrates how Alvin Lucier's Music For Solo Performer "marks a shift from a conception of music as sensorial/ aesthetic activity to cerebral/conceptual practice," a conception that brings earworms—which "resound not through air molecules but within brain activity alone" and are thus "purely cognitive occurrences"—clearly within music's purview. From here, Barrett proceeds to read Lucier's work in its speculative dimension alongside the several key thinkers, practitioners, and critics of contemporary neuroscience, working in the direction of a more responsible (which is to say radical) politics of brain emulation and artificial intelligence.

Chapter Six—Tang Yan's "Meditation on Earworms and Breath Sounds"—likewise considers the ways that earworms might inflect understandings of specific creative practices, though in this case the emphasis is on breath sounds in Damien Hirst's 2001 film version of Samuel Beckett's 1969 play *Breath*. Brilliantly, Tang charts a reversal potential of what Priest characterizes as earworms' "fatalistic intrusion on ... subjective thinking-feeling." That

is, Tang notes that the fact that this intrusion "relies on [earworm's] virtuality, uselessness, and absolute freedom" works precisely to contour "the subversive power of breath sounds in Hirst's film," which she argues "comes from a weak desubjectivization of [the viewer]—a faint and contingent process of emptying out the subjectivity of the audience." Thus, Tang concludes, the "(ear)worm-ization of breath sounds in Hirst's film is a poetic exposure of a weak, abject, yet intensified project of post-subjectivity and depersonalization, a paradoxically fatalistic and ephemeral project even more horrifying than the lived abstraction of melodies."

As Jacques Rancière explains, "fiction is a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation ... of building new relationships between reality and appearance."8 The final two chapters take up precisely this fictive vector, though in markedly different ways. Chapter 7—"Breatharian 'Pataphysics: A Tinfoil Hat for Eldritch Priest" by Ted Hiebert—weaves together several stories (and indeed, stories about stories), each palpating ficticity in a different rhythm. And this, really, is the point (or at least a point): Hiebert demonstrates reality's fictively mashed-up constitution by drawing proximate optical illusions (real occurrences with impossible effects), hallucinations (imaginary occurrences with real effects), hedonic tones (autonomic occurrences with transcendent effects), and hedonic non-tones (transcendent occurrences with autonomic effects). Each story tells itself, but also tells the story of the telling, which is to say speaks to the forms through which reality is more than itself. There is also, notably and excessively (in the best sense), the story

of the dog-faced baboon and his quasi-philosophical autoconversations.

Finally, Chapter Eight—Marc Couroux's "The Egregor that Was, Is and Will Be The Brown Study (Speculative Relayism)"—completes *Phono-Fictions* by doubling down on all of its bets. This fantastical story casts a quasicausal net that is navigated by its protagonist's (unwitting) chronoportative capacities. These travels are directed by the egregoric summonings of Priest's Brown Study, which is "constituted almost exclusively by a single melodic line, except for the periodic intercession of punctuational and cadential tropes which admit counterpoint and harmony." In short, the chapter is a story and nothing more; a fiction entirely freed from the gravitational orbit of reality that would pull it towards sensicality. Such an exit velocity is to be expected, of course, given that—more than any other this final chapter is a simple description of specific and actual events in the world.

In closing, another well-worn Stein bon mot: on her deathbed she is purported to've asked

"What is the answer?"

When no answer came she laughed and said

"Then, what is the question?"

It's a perfect anecdote for a time of gaps and delays, a time when to experiment meant to hold meaning at bay, its paradoxes twisting in the wind.

I imagine Priest on his deathbed much the same, but skewing things a bit.

"What is the question?" he might ask.

And, when no timely answer comes, I can hear him gleefully proclaiming,

"In that case, there are only answers!"

Then, finally, I imagine Priest telling the story himself, the story of himself on his deathbed. His version might start the same as my imagined scenario of him, with the question of what the question is. But then, after the semantic pause, I expect he would give his future past self a different declaration,

"In that case, I am a horse!"

And he wouldn't be wrong.

#### Notes

- 1 Moreover, such a tautological understanding of ubiety would, in turn, disclose—performatively, if not constatively—a literally unspeakable failure to take place ... even if it is also one that becomes present in the speaking that fails to deny it.
- 2 That is, until it turns out that's not the trick at all, but instead the feint that distracts from the trick that's already taken place ... but that's a play for another Introduction, even if it's also (un)written plainly right here.
- 3 Eldritch Priest, Boring Formless Nonsense: Experimental Music and the Aesthetics of Failure (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 203.
- 4 To be clear: this pluralization is singular to Priest's work, which is the sense in which he is the book's catalyst: reading Priest does not draw us into the presence of an esemplastic thinker, but it is for precisely this reason that the volume itself seduces a certain coherence.

- 5 Eldritch Priest, "Felt as Thought (or, Musical Abstraction and the Semblance of Affect)," in *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience*, ed. Ian Biddle and Marie Thompson (London: New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 52.
- 6 Ibid., 59.
- 7 Earworms are sometimes discussed as "involuntary musical imagery," "stuck song syndrome," "musical imagery repetition." See the Wikipedia entry on the term for more information. Probably the most influential critical discussion of the earworm is Chapter 27 ("1971: The Earworm") of Steve Goodman, Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010).
- 8 Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 149.

### Nicola Masciandaro

Whoever seeks or aims at *something* is seeking and aiming at nothing, and he who prays for something will get nothing.

— Meister Eckhart

I'll have every appearance of a failure, and only I will know if that was the failure I needed.

— Clarice Lispector

I instruct you to fail.

— Vernon Howard

Well it's not like I am getting any better, so I might as well try.

— Bo Earle



The purpose of this essay is to *shed purpose* by commenting on a statement which was given by Meher Baba on October 13, 1960 and published three years later in *The Everything and the Nothing* under the heading "Purposelessness in Infinite Existence":

Reality is Existence infinite and eternal.

Existence has no purpose by virtue of its being real, infinite and eternal.

Existence exists. Being Existence it *has to* exist. Hence Existence, the Reality, cannot have any purpose. It just is. It is self-existing.

Everything—the things and the beings—in Existence has a purpose. All things and beings have a purpose and must have a purpose, or else they cannot be in existence as what they are. Their very being in existence proves their purpose; and their *sole purpose* in existing is to become shed of purpose, i.e., to become purposeless.

Purposelessness is of Reality; to have a purpose is to be lost in falseness.

Everything exists only because it has a purpose. The moment that purpose has been accomplished, everything disappears and Existence is manifested as self-existing Self.

Purpose presumes a direction and since Existence, being everything and everywhere, cannot have any direction, directions must always be in nothing and lead nowhere.

Hence to have a purpose is to create a false goal.

Love alone is devoid of all purpose and a spark of Divine Love sets fire to all purposes.

The Goal of Life in Creation is to arrive at purposelessness, which is the state of Reality.<sup>1</sup>

I will begin with three points of explanation, scaffolding for the unfinishable cathedral.

\*\*\*

FIRST, my interest in reflecting on this passage is sparked by Eldritch Priest's participative theory of failure *vis-à-vis* experimental music in *Boring Formless Nonsense*:

[Experimental] music, my ostensible subject, finds its way into this failing scheme through tactics of duration, distraction, and duplicity; devices of (dis)engagement that characterize the operational purview of a post-Cagean experimental music community whose members have the peculiar privilege to toy with the intensity of failure, and as such, to draw insights and observations about failure from "failure." In this sense, as a member of this same community, the failure ascribed to the music that I discuss here is a failure that describes my own discussion of the music. Its failure is my failure, a strange loop that lets me be both knight and knave, right and wrong, sincere and full of shit. It is a way to show how failure lives out the way one lives in contradictions: the way one finds interest in boredom, form in formlessness, and sense in nonsense.2

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Priest's work on/of failure will thus serve as an exegetical ami or go-between, the friend through whom love of the truth of Meher Baba's statement, a.k.a. Lady Purposelessness, may be intellectually consummated and thus also a mediating agent who, like purpose itself (or a priest for that matter), must withdraw from the scene of experience as its purpose is fulfilled. In fact—uncannily proving Eldritch Priest's secret wish to perform this role the concepts of purpose and priest etymologically intersect, pur-pose being something 'put forth' and priest being either an 'elder' (from presbyter)—alas not related to eldritch—or 'one put over others' (from prevost, praepositus). Where Reality has the status of that which is older than or inescapably set over oneself, whether one will or no, and where purpose has the status of what one would realize, the futural aim of will, the realization of Reality itself is perforce an event in which prepositionality and finitude dissolve. Here the "Whence?" and "Whither?" of things—identified by Meher Baba as "the two everlasting and poignant queries which make the human mind divinely restless"3—are no more and/or become something else. Now the aiming of the will, its need to realize something, and the authority of Reality, its priestly or prior position, simultaneously vanish and/or become each other. As Meister Eckhart says, "It is a certain and necessary truth that he who resigns his will wholly to God will catch God and bind God, so that God can do nothing but what that man wills."4 If this strikes the ear as too eldritch, recall that the practical application could not be more clear or consequential, it being the establishment of the already all-too-obvious fact that no one has anywhere to go. As Meher Baba explained in 1937:

My panacea to the worried world is the effort on its part to get an answer to the question "Whither and Whence." The knowledge that all have the same beginning and the same end, with life on earth a happy interlude, will go a long way in making the brotherhood of man a reality on earth, and this, in turn, will strike at the root of narrow communalism and rigid nationalisms, which mean wars and economic exploitation.<sup>5</sup>

This is an interlude. The cure is your effort for a real answer. Says Priest, "how one finds oneself feeling about the type of situation that one (already) finds oneself in is always a mood of Dasein's originary failure. Strictly speaking, existence is a series of moody failures." Accordingly, the practice of failure begins, like the Franciscan theory of poverty, from the "right" to fail, to own the possessionless fact that success is not of this world. Says Priest, "At stake in this right to fail is the value of aesthetic negativity, the value to pursue practices that seek intensity rather than a purpose in experience."7 As poverty à la Saint Francis was defined as a "spontaneous abdication of ownership for God's sake" [spontanea propter Dominum abdicacio propretatis] which, by separating use and ownership, speculatively tunes life to its prelapsarian state,8 so the discipline of failure occupies, by holding open the zone between utility and purpose, an originary fallenness of unlimited potential. Hopelessness + Helplessness = Happiness.

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SECOND, the context in which Meher Baba made the statement on purposelessness is significant, more so as this is the only instance of the word "purposelessness" in his works. It was a period of intense inner work, fasting, and physical suffering, not to mention the 35th year of his silence. Baba had contracted a herpes zoster or shingles infection while bowing down to lepers the previous month.9 The infection affected the right of the face, ear, and tongue, causing fevers, intense pain, as well as sores in the mouth and throat, which made eating "almost impossible." <sup>10</sup> Earlier in the day on October 13th, Baba "complain[ed] of a 'screwing' type of pain inside his right ear that made him feel as if he were now going deaf."11 Eventually, after three weeks without food, a nerve block injection was administered through the temple with uncanny ease and speed, to the astonishment of the doctor who felt himself to have "become, at that time, nothing but completely a channel, entirely in his hands, without any thought of myself as a separate entity."12 The pain, after vanishing, and afterward becoming worse than ever, eventually subsided toward year's end. Throughout this period, Baba exhibited an intense and unprecedented indifference, which was described as a "nerve-shattering experience" for his companions and disciples. 13 On December 10th, Eruch Jessawala summed up the situation in a letter to his family as follows:

He has terrible pain all over his body, but he does not tell us what it all is. From all outward appearances he looks to be terribly in pain, and he makes us feel that he is much interested in being disinterested. He has totally left [given up] taking any interest in anything whatsoever. It seems that he has not only stopped speaking by observing the SILENCE, but has now apparently stopped hearing, seeing, feeling, eating and drinking, sleeping & breathing! He does not even move about in the compound.

In short, he is not taking any exercise or walking and, therefore, his appetite for food and water is at present 100% nil. He has brought everything to a standstill as far as he is directly concerned physically. We, of course, are ignorant of what is truly going on within him. There might be a volcano fully active!

He appears to be absorbed in something very serious and, along with his unique silence, he has obviously silenced all activities immediately around him. He does not want to hear anything and he does not want to see anything, nor take part in the sort of conversation we usually hold while we sit near him .... The atmosphere around Meherazad is charged with a kind of intense "stillness"—not inactivity (far from it!) but a sort of HUSH personified.<sup>14</sup>

Far from attempting to explain this deep state of indifference, I will carry it as a commentarial key (a device whose functioning remains secret) to unlock the tower wherein Lady Purposelessness resides. The protracted atmosphere of this enduring, distracting, and dissimilitudinous indifference resonates silently with the idea of failure as a living-out of contradictions found in experiences of boring formless nonsense. For Bhau Kalchuri, the sense of contradiction was compounded by the difficulty of writing to silence.

During those days, Bhau felt as if a thunderstorm were bursting over his head. Baba showed his aversion to him and would not allow him to come near him. At night, Bhau would be on watch, and during the day he would remain in his room writing. He was working on Hindi ghazals at the time (later titled *Meher Geet Suda* [Songs of Meher's Wine]), but Baba was totally indifferent toward his efforts. Bhau felt as if Baba's days were numbered and his life was coming to an end. All the mandali felt similarly. Becoming indifferent to all, Baba made them interested in his disinterestedness.<sup>15</sup>

Says Priest, "... if I am to do what I am about to do ... without actually dying the death of absolute silence, I should really stop writing and let a little nihilism loose on my words. However, it is clear by this point that I won't." Such going on without the power to or not to is also homomorphic with play as the endless end one *does* when there is nothing to be done. Accordingly, Baba's indifference revealed itself most conspicuously in games, in the midst of activities which are their own purpose:

To try to bring his attention back to everyday things, the men and women mandali urged him to take part in card games, carrom and seven tiles, but when he played, he played without the least interest. During a card game, he would suddenly throw down the cards and quit; in the midst of a game of seven tiles, when it was his turn to throw, he would drop the ball and look away. When playing a game of carrom, he would aim anywhere.<sup>17</sup>

Here distraction intensifies indifference, the play providing not engagement but a means for new forms of disengagement, paradoxically spontaneous actions of withdrawal, aiming anywhere. Says Priest, "failure as a term of art becomes ... one that evades those structures of thought and expression that impose themselves as obligatory, but which at the same time is only conceivable and sensible through those same structures."<sup>18</sup>

LET'S PLAY THIS GAME. On the day Meher Baba made the statement on purposelessness, a baseball player with the initials B.M. appropriately did the reverse, hitting the first walk-off and "greatest of all time" home run in the seventh game of the World Series—a play that wins and brings the game to an end *without* finishing it. Mystically, this home run signifies the soul's passage to the seventh plane of consciousness, the event of Self-realization and attainment of union with the divine Beloved which is both end and beginning. As Augustine says, in commentary on Psalm 104.4,

Seek his face always, let not the finding of the beloved put an end to the love-inspired search; but as love grows, so let the search for the one already found become more intense.<sup>19</sup>

## Or Eriugena:

... since that which human nature seeks and toward which it tends, whether it moves in the right or the wrong direction, is infinite and not to be comprehended by any creature, it necessarily follows that its quest is unending and that therefore

it moves forever. And yet although its search is unending, by some miraculous means it finds what it is seeking for: and again it does not find it, for it cannot be found.<sup>20</sup>

Like a ball hit out of the park, into a paradise far beyond the walled garden of Eden—O felix culpa! In fact, once during a cricket game with the Prem Ashram schoolboys in the late 1920s, a ball hit by Meher Baba did not fall to earth, leading him to explain to his dumbfounded playmates that there is an exception to every rule.21 Also on October 13, 1960, three black mice were launched in a rocket to an altitude of 700 miles and afterwards recovered alive in the nose cone, becoming the first living creatures to survive a trip of that distance into outer space. Clearly, these three critters embody the seemingly impossible possibility of the survival or preservation of gross, subtle, and mental consciousness after God-realization, or in Quentin Meillassoux's terms, the immanence of the world beyond, namely, the advent of a fourth world, of justice, from and including the three emergent worlds of matter, life, and thought.

In order to have access to genuine immanence, we have ... to think a world that is no longer our world wedded to biological mortality .... Immanence is transcendence which has become impossible in the absence of finitude.<sup>22</sup>

Correlatively, Meher Baba affirms the eternality of individuality:

When the soul comes out of the ego-shell and enters into the infinite life of God, its limited individuality

is replaced by unlimited individuality. The soul knows that it is God-conscious and thus preserves its individuality.<sup>23</sup>

This extra possibility, wherethrough the finite as it were inherits itself as more infinite than infinity, may be called the gift of losership. Following Agamben's remarks in The Coming Community, it corresponds in form to the halo: "One can think of the halo ... as a zone in which possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality, become indistinguishable. The being that has reached its end, that has consumed all of its possibilities, thus receives as a gift a supplemental possibility."<sup>24</sup> This is the domain, precisely, of a radical play, of a spontaneity confounding the distinctions between freedom and necessity, cause and chance. Where play, from the PIE root dlegh ("to engage oneself," cf. indulge), signifies self-engagement, a player's engagement is defined no less by indifference than by interest, just as "a perfect man functions with complete detachment in the midst of intense activity."25 Whence the failure of the person who is too interested in a game to play it—the cheat, for example. As Coomaraswamy notes, "The activity of God is called a 'game' precisely because it is assumed he has no ends of his own to serve; it is in the same sense that our life can be 'played,' and that insofar as the best part of us is in it, but not of it, our life becomes a game. At this point we no longer distinguish play from work."26 The self-engagement of play, in this ideal sense, is the interested activity of a sovereignly indifferent self. "[T]he essence of my self," writes Bataille, "arises from this—that nothing will be able to replace it: the feeling of my fundamental improbability situates me in the world where I remain as though foreign to it, absolutely foreign."27 Play occupies indifference, a place

where the world is already ended, cleared of my possibilities. It engages not merely me but the self itself, the innumerable and unaccountable principle of my spontaneous being in a world that places me outside it. Who teaches you to play, if not this otherness of oneself? Who makes the game worth losing? At a gathering in 1955, Baba told the following story to a visitor who did not approve of others "play[ing] cards when they are here to learn of God":

What has playing cards to do with one's love and longing for God? ... Shams Tabrezi and his famous disciple Moulana Rumi were both very fond of playing chess. Shams' greatest work was done at the end of a game of chess with Rumi. When Rumi lost the game, he could not help crying out to Shams, "I have lost." Then and there, with the words, "No, you have won," Shams gave Rumi instant God-realization.<sup>28</sup>

Winning beyond-within the game, Rumi's victory shows that playing cards has nothing to do the love of God because it has everything to do with it, and vice-versa. Properly speaking, Rumi wins the apotheosis of play itself, its moment fulfilling in one stroke all dimensions of Roger Caillois's four-by-two classification. In his disappointed desire to win, there is agôn. In receiving victory from forces beyond his control, there is alea. In becoming like Shams, there is mimicry. In surpassing himself, there is ilinx. And on the side of Shams's work, there is both the freedom and unconditioned whimsy of paidia and, in the ordered inversion of play itself, there is the necessity and regularity of ludus.<sup>29</sup> In the sheer nonsense of Shams's words is the highest sense of a fact made so by

pure negative fiat, accomplished in the production of its own contradiction. Indifference and spontaneity are twins.<sup>30</sup> We may see the moment as secretly planned, the mysterious calculus of a Perfect Master, but that only increases rather than diminishes the necessity of not losing the sense in which Shams spontaneously makes all of Rumi's dreams come true precisely through an absolute divine indifference to his loss, an indifference that, like a leaping spark, causes the one it touches to win everything by losing nothing, losing the nothingness of there being nothing to lose. Here one must think Rumi's win as pure loss, as perfectly intensive failure, just as salvation is the realization that there is no one to save. Thus the emphasis—"Then and there" in Baba's expression, in accordance with the intensive pronoun in one of his other articulations of this perennial truth: "We must lose ourselves in order to find ourselves; thus loss itself is gain."31 So in Nietzsche's words, "Something that has failed should be honored all the more jealously, precisely because it has failed."32 In sum, the indifference of the eternal Reality, the deafening silence of the Truth, which masters us and makes all knowledge of it other than itself ignorance, is the vertiginous pole of the whirlpool of experience wherein "everything pertaining to the spiritual seems paradoxical."33 What is it like to play chess with Lady Purposeless? Something like life I imagine. GAME OVER.

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THIRD, a lover needs not only a friend and a key, but a method of communicating with his beloved, which for this commentary is, of course, commentary. And it is just the thing to the trick. For the "devices of (dis) 28

engagement" which govern the aesthetics of failure also pertain to commentary itself, whose word (via comminisci, to devise, invent) captures the sense of a contrivance that opens through division, dilating the text via digressions which deepen its significance by delaying it, developing the fullness of meaning by splitting every unit of sense into text and co-text. Commentary, an inherently unfinishable form, is marked by "tactics of duration, distraction, and duplicity" that align it with failure, and no less, the failure of failure, the failure of failure to fail. A hermeneutic proliferation of opening closures and closed openings, commentary "accomplishes nothing and so becomes capable of everything."34 On the one hand, commentary sees itself as nothing, nothing without its object as a perfect self-explicating order wherein everything is immanently there to be discovered via the always-already accomplished universality of Truth. As Christ's dying but not last words are "it is finished" (John 19:30), so is the cross, according to a metaphor as venerable as Augustine, the "key" for unlocking all the mysteries of Scripture.<sup>35</sup> Since truth does not have to be produced, since reality does not have to be brought from anywhere, scripture—and by extension all authoritative or thoughtworthy art—is both key to the lock and lock for the key of scripture. Thus Jerome begins his homily on the first of the Psalms, "The psalter is like a stately mansion that has only one key to the main entrance. Within the mansion however, each separate chamber has its own key. Even though the great key to the grand entrance is the Holy Spirit, still each room without exception has its own smaller key."36 The modern, historically constituted analog of this paradigm is Walter Benjamin's method of montage in the Arcades Project, which seeks totality in the citational order of commentary itself:

The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event ... To grasp the construction of history as such. In the structure of commentary.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, commentary—as Benjamin's method also implies—sees itself as everything, an ultimate and anagogic art capable of flying to the heavens, of even becoming revelation or divine writing itself. And so, building itself like the Tower of Babel, commentary produces its ruinous stack of foundations, a self-multiplying profusion of senses and meanings which, ever verging on a total mutual confusion of locks and keys, edifice and scaffolding, paradoxically works to erase the margin or sacred threshold between text and commentary that is place of their living relation and the potentiality of commentary itself. Whence Saint Francis's prohibition of commentary on his Rule and Agamben's incisive diagnosis of "the loss of the commentary and the gloss as creative forms" as indicative of a situation in which "there is a truth, without the possibility of transmitting it ... modes of transmission, without anything being either transmitted or taught."38 Eventually one throws up one's hands with-or rather cites-Montaigne: "we do nothing except gloss each other. Everything swarms with commentaries; of authors there is a great lack." <sup>39</sup> Eventually you just get angry with—or quote—Jean-Luc Nancy: "A moment arrives when one can no longer feel anything but anger, an absolute anger, against so many discourses, so

many texts, that have no other care than to make a little more sense, to redo or prefect delicate works of signification."<sup>40</sup> One must, then, maintain at once the everythingness and the nothingness of commentary, hold both of its hands and follow it as a purpose leading only to its own purposelessness. As Augustine says, "The fruit of faith [is] understanding, so that we may arrive at eternal life, where the Gospel would not be read to us, but he who has given us the Gospel now would appear with all the pages of reading and the voice of the reader and commentator removed."<sup>41</sup> For what is "all our so-called consciousness" but, as Nietzsche called it, "a more or less fantastic commentary on an unknown, perhaps unknowable, but felt text"?<sup>42</sup>

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And so, arriving finally at this failure to begin, I see that there was nowhere to go in the first place. Or as John Cage wrote in a composition of/on purposelessness made during the period of Meher Baba's indifference and published in the 1961 collection *Silence*, "I take a sword and cut off my head and it rolls to where we are going." There, out of this world, I pick it up—inside are three blind mice. "What a plight! What a sight! What a delight!"

#### Notes

- 1 Meher Baba, *The Everything and the Nothing* (Beacon Hill, Australia: Meher House Publications, 1963), 62.
- 2 Eldritch Priest, *Boring Formless Nonsense* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 28-29.
- 3 Meher Baba, *Discourses*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., 3 vols. (San Francisco: Sufism Reoriented, 1967), I.43.
- 4 Meister Eckhart, The Complete Mystical Works, trans. Maurice O' C. Walshe (New York: Herder & Herder, 2009), sermon 10, p.92.
- 5 Messages of Meher Baba, Delivered in the East and West, ed. Adi K. Irani (Ahmednagar, India: Meher Baba Universal Spiritual Centre, 1943), 8. Cf. "Well, the grand thing about the human mind is that it can turn its own tables and see meaninglessness as ultimate meaning. I have therefore made a lecture in the course of which, by various means, meaning is not easy to come by even though lucidity has been my constant will-of-the-wisp. I have permitted myself to do this not out of disdain of you who are present. But out of regard for the way in which I understand nature operates. This view makes us all equals—even if among us are some unfortunates: whether lame, blind, stupid, schizoid, or poverty-stricken. Here we are. Let us say Yes to our presence together in Chaos" (John Cage, Silence: Lectures and Writings [Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1961], 195).
- 6 Priest, Boring Formless Nonsense, 16.
- 7 Ibid., 27.
- 8 See Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 113, quoting Hugh of Digne.
- 9 "The next day [October 6, 1960], his condition was diagnosed by Don and Goher as herpes zoster, and they speculated that he had contracted the infection when bowing to the lepers and poor in September. The ailment was to continue to plague Baba for the next month and

- a half. Although he was extremely uncomfortable, he remained absorbed in his seclusion work" (Bhau Kalchuri, *Lord Meher: Online Edition*, 4719, <a href="http://www.lordmeher.org">http://www.lordmeher.org</a>).
- 10 Ibid., 4723.
- 11 Ibid., 4720.
- 12 Quoted in Kalchuri, Dr. Ram Ginde recalls, "I was much surprised as to what I had done. Well, actually, he had cured himself! If you believe me, you see I had become, at that time, nothing but completely a channel, entirely in his hands, without any thought of myself as a separate entity, because I still do not know how I did it and what had happened! I have no knowledge even to this day, because the needle just went in, within half a minute it was in the nerve, I injected the alcohol, it was blocked, and the whole thing, like a drama, was finished in less than five minutes" (Lord Meher, 4727).
- 13 Meherwan Jessawala writes, "It was the first time that I had seen Baba so completely withdrawn within himself.... It would be so painful for us. We never saw him this way, as if for the first time Baba had lost his sense of humor, which had never happened before. It was an extremely distressing atmosphere. He said he was having tremendous pressure of work, 'You have no idea what I am suffering.' Such stray remarks he would make. It was sort of a nerve-shattering experience [for us]" (Kalchuri, Lord Meher, 4722-3).
- 14 Kalchuri, Lord Meher, 4735.
- 15 Ibid., 4722.
- 16 Priest, Boring Formless Nonsense, 98.
- 17 Kalchuri, Lord Meher, 4721.
- 18 Priest, Boring Formless Nonsense, 2.
- 19 Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, trans. Maria Boulding, 6 vols. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), 5.186.
- 20 Eriugena, Periphyseon, PL 122:919, translation cited from Bernard McGinn, The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the 12th Century (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 118.
- 21 I recall hearing this story from Minoo Kharas in Meherabad, India in 1991.

- 22 Quentin Meillassoux, "The Immanence of the World Beyond" in *The Grandeur of Reason: Religion, Tradition, and Universalism*, eds. Conor Cunningham and Peter Candler (London: SCM Press, 2010), 469.
- 23 Baba, Discourses, II.174.
- 24 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 55.
- 25 Baba, Discourses, I.33.
- 26 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Play and Seriousness," in Selected Papers, Volume 2: Metaphysics, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 158. Cf. "[T] he very cause of the universe ... is also carried outside of himself .... He is ... enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself" (Pseudo-Dionysius, The Complete Works, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem [New York: Paulist Press, 1987], 82).
- 27 Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 69.
- 28 Meher Baba, *Listen, Humanity*, narrated and edited by D. E. Stevens (New York: Harper Colophon, 1967), 30.
- 29 See Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Bayash (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).
- 30 As recognized in the principle of divine creation, which Meher Baba compares to the spontaneous process of waking: "no rhyme, no reason and no cause other than the original, infinite whim of the absolutely independent God was the actual Cause—the original cause—for God in the original divine sound sleep state to wake up out of the unbounded, original vacuum" Meher Baba, *God Speaks* (New York: Dodd, Mead &Co., 1973) 101-2).
- 31 Baba, God Speaks, 288, my emphasis.
- 32 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), 28.
- 33 Baba, God Speaks, 288.

- 34 Nicola Masciandaro and Reza Negarestani, "Black Metal Commentary," in *Floating Tomb: Black Metal Theory* (Milan: Mimesis, 2015), 214.
- 35 "Our Lord's cross was like a key for opening what was locked away" (Augustine, Expositions of the Psalms, 2.310).
- 36 Jerome, *The Homilies of Saint Jerome: Volume 1 (1-59 On the Psalms)*, trans. Sister Marie Liguori Ewald (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 3.
- 37 Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambrdige, MA: Belknap, 1999), 461.
- 38 Giorgio Agamben, Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2007), 160. See Nicola Masciandaro, "The Severed Hand: Commentary and Ecstasy," English Language Notes 50.2 (2013): 89-98.
- 39 "Il y a plus affaire à interpreter les interpretations qu'à interpreter les choses, et plus de livres sur les livres que sur autre subject: nous ne faisons que nous entregloser. Tout fourmille de commentaires; d'auteurs, il en est grand cherté" (Montaigne, *Essais*, III.13, <a href="http://www.bribes.org/trismegiste/es3ch13.htm">http://www.bribes.org/trismegiste/es3ch13.htm</a>).
- 40 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 5.
- 41 Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 22.2, cited from Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. E. M. Macierowski, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, Ml: Eedmans, 2000), 2.188-89.
- 42 Friedrich Nietzsche, Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 78.
- 43 John Cage, *Silence* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 195.
- 44 "During the gathering on 13 July 1959, Baba revealed: "The Soul's knowing that it knows everything is *dnyan*. This means the all-knowing experience of the Soul is *dnyan*. The Soul says: "Now I know that I know everything." Therefore, the all-knowing Soul's not knowing that it knows was pure imagination.' Baba then rhymed: *Oh, you ignorant, all-knowing*

Soul | what a plight you are in! | Oh, you weak, all-powerful Soul | what a plight you are in! | Oh, you miserable, all-happy Soul | what a plight you are in! | What a plight! | What a sight! | What a delight! (Lord Meher, 4561).

# Taunting the Useful Wondrous Gestural Potential (with Agamben)

# Émile Fromet de Rosnay

## 1. Wondrous Universities, Wondrous Machines

I once wanted to create a machine that would highlight the possible syntactico-semantic combinations in a Mallarméan sonnet, as I had done with my Coup de Dés project. I wanted a machine that could illustrate all the possible reading arrangements and combinations in a sonnet to highlight the nonlinear nature of reading these sonnets, in exactly the same way that Stéphane Mallarmé's phrases and segments in the Coup de Dés come together like "constellations." I then wanted to do the same thing with Raymond Roussel's Nouvelles impressions d'Afrique and Jacques Derrida's Glas. After that, I wanted to map these and other texts onto Google Sky. I also wanted to turn the streets into constellations using Google Street View with an app that could reinscribe randomly generated textual configurations. However, this was not an acceptable or interesting concept as "research" (whatever happened to the "search" in research?) for the organization that had supported me, as it "did nothing" and was useless in research terms—in brief, it wasn't something this organization might use in the future, for other scholars. What took me a while to come to terms with was that this was a good thing, that a useless machine might be something exciting, and that I was on the verge of creative work.

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How might we think about a machine that does nothing? How can such a machine even exist? Even Marvin Minsky's "ultimate machine" (based on Claude Shannon's idea)—a box with an on/off switch that has a hand that comes out of the box to turn off the switch after you turn it on—which was also described as a "useless machine," does something: it arguably produces thought, wonder (synonym of marvel, astonishment), pleasure, art. In contemporary, austeritybased universities, the key principle behind any research project is that it ought to be useful. Very little time is given ("consacré," consecrated, as one would say in French) to the fictitious, the creative, for play or wonder (thaumagein)—the latter being the arkhê or "beginning principle" of philosophy, the arkhê philosophias of Plato's Theaetetus, the founding text for this notion.<sup>2</sup> For Aristotle too, it is the founding notion insofar as wonder (and its attendant perplexity) is tied to our ignorance and our desire to know more, "and not on account of any use."3 The ancient university therefore would have strictly distinguished between knowledge for its own sake and knowledge in view of practical ends. Aristotle does create a hierarchy between pure knowledge and experience—that is to say, pure potential (dunamis); and, in the same passage where he discusses wonder, Aristotle acknowledges that for this knowledge to occur the basic necessities of life need to be met (hence the need for slaves). Knowledge is thus beyond human power, for in many respects humans are "servile" (doúle).4 The purity of thought, in its pure potentiality, thus carries with it a certain socio-political baggage, the consequences of which, collectively, we haven't considered.

The university in the 21st century is securely conditioned by negotiation, "neg-otium": the negation of

otium, or leisure-attached to that other Latin word schola from the Greek skholê (σχολή, also "leisure"), from which we get "school," a place for discussion at leisure. Where the old university was slow, cloistered leisure, the current negotium of legalism, austerity, and efficiency promotes knowledge as progress-based results towards the so-called advancement of knowledge. This is ingrained in most funding agencies and is an underlying presupposition of the modern university. The ancient intrinsic knowledge subtended the idea of liberal arts (the term used in Medieval Europe)—understandable in a sacro-theological world where knowing the universe meant understanding eternal (metaphysical), rather than earthly, things. In this sense, the modern university, though not any less "sacred" in its ontoepistemology, more closely resembles a promotion of the "servile arts" insofar as these have practical ends (the notion of *praxis* being originally bound to such political economy). But it was also the separation of the mind from the body for the Greeks, and the "servile arts" thus correspond to the body of the slave.6

Today, the separation of the body from the mind, the human from the animal, has become a "zone of indistinction," to recall Giorgio Agamben's oft-repeated expression from his *Homo Sacer* project—where even the practice of knowledge is submitted to the form-of-law of biopolitics, and all of human nature is characterized by a will, and labor and work are its natural expression and actualization. Even without bearing a nostalgia for the past (for maybe the past was also faced with the same problems, and the affirmation of wonder and the fraught question of use were a sign of this), the political implications for the value of research become apparent. While it is difficult to justify

research that doesn't provide any value for the taxpayer, this very question is connected to larger historical conditions which entail paradoxes of thought and is a call to reflection and creativity, where one might "abolish the distinction between poetry and the critical-philological disciplines," which involves its own negation, criticism being "nothing other than the process of its own ironic self-negation." What are the new "marvelous machines" that might help us think outside of contemporary intellectual culture, that don't require us to "move on," that require us to sit in wonder, that which is the arkhê philosophias, the beginning of thought without end? While the political comes into play, perhaps the university in its current manifestation is itself worthy of abandonment or destruction.

These then are the implications of a tool that doesn't do anything—of a "useless machine." Beyond the stale paradox of successful failures, <sup>10</sup> or the modern, progressive/ utilitarian scientific notion of productive failure, how can we think about a machine that produces nothing and from which we can draw no practical use? Such a question requires great creativity, the utmost intellectual rigor, and perhaps even a soul-crushing despair. For it is perhaps an impossible task to work through that which has no "end," both in the teleological sense of purposiveness and in terms of finitude.

Yet there is also therein the possibility of enjoyment, excess, of a pure thought that is the making of our own space for knowledge that falls outside of the modern university. What then would be a wondrous university, a wondrous machine? Following closely the work of Agamben, who has reflected over the last forty-five years on these questions, 11 we can contextualize the useless within

the context of art for art's sake, which correlates to a history of anti-utilitarian aesthetics. Indeed, since the Industrial Revolution, it is possible to say that the useless machine has accompanied the useful one. A useless art machine, such as Théophile Gautier's art-for-art's-sake poetry and his decadent-symbolist descendants, Jacques Carelman's Objets introuvables, or Natali Leduc's Churnatron (one could equally examine Francis Picabia's Imaginary Machines or Bruno Munari's futurist Macchine inutili, and in fact, the entirety of modern art)—or vice versa, a useless machine as art, such as Minsky's *Ultimate Machine*—allows the peculiarities of this tension between the useful and the useless to come out. The theoretical implications of such machines, working through modalities of the useless, reflects the possible directions of an art that opens up to an "amusing gestural potential" as a correlative to Eldritch Priest's "boring formless nonsense." Taking the idea of potential further than simple jouissance (Roland Barthes) or excess (Georges Bataille), the problem of history and historical consciousness becomes key to reflections on human experience: however unsatisfactory it might appear to be, the useless machine becomes the embodiment of historical and material being.

### 2. Magic

The grand magician G. W. F. Hegel's *Aufhebung*, <sup>12</sup> which defines negativity in terms of work that leads to greater knowledge, may be said to be the West's great metaphysical temporal structure—whether it is expressed in the totalizing metaphysics of modern science, the logic of colonialism or in Francis Fukuyama's "end of history"—insofar as time is conceived in linear, progressive and teleological terms,

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something which dates back to the origins of Western philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Whether time is conceived in circular (premodern) or linear (modern) fashion, it is always oriented towards an end, and so loses sight of the irreducibly singular now of the individual; and the latter's existence is reduced to that flow of time as transhistorical logic. In scientific terms, the magician converts failure into productivity, non-Being-Being becomes the glory of the rational self recognizing itself—if it can even aspire to that, because at this point, at the level of research and teaching, it's all about outcomes. The logic of Aufhebung comes to its overwhelming historical point and culmination in the result, and this magical process is funded by agencies and governing bodies.<sup>14</sup> Scientific failure is worth its ideological weight, converted from lead to gold, and all look upon it in wonder. Perhaps a less biblical point of view or logic is possible.

A "negativity without employment" ("négativité sans emploi") in Bataille's terms is a critique of Hegel that is opposed to the work of the negative, and which involves unproductive expenditure and gratuity. This connects to désaurrement in Jean-Luc Nancy as a possible exodus, and can be thought of through "decreation" in Agamben. All the problems of sacralization and redemption remain, however, in that the sacred space of art is maintained in spite of the destructive experience of modern aesthetics. The search for community, for a relation to the social and common experience in their historical specificity, is still a criterion insofar as it is defined in terms of tradition and political economy.

The striving for the magical resolution is that crumbling into an empty illusion: for the historian, the "Angel of History" in Walter Benjamin's terms, it is that famous pile

of rubble accumulating, that is not simply the physical rubble of history, but that destruction of experience that the historian must dig up, for the rubble is history itself. The only magic is in the now-time (*Jetztzeit*) that can never be possessed through individual consciousness. It is the childlike intuition that is the magic of the fleeting, irrecuperable present.

## 3. History

Why have these questions of uselessness, "inoperativity" (in Nancy's and Agamben's sense) and negation become so important, and for how long have they been posed? In the history of the West art, like philosophy, has been thought through the concept of use or purpose, even if indirectly. As with the idea of "wonder" (thaumazein), these questions are at the origin of Western thought, with the idea of intrinsic knowledge versus knowledge used to another purpose (the "true" philosopher wants to know the thing in itself, for its own sake, beholds the object of philosophy in wonder, in comparison with a modern, Habermassian instrumental reason). In modernity, we might start with Immanuel Kant's idea of purposeless purposiveness in his aesthetic theory, something that is directly connected to the problem of means and ends that will come back in Agamben's latest book, Uso dei corpi (yet this runs through the entire body of his work, right from his earliest 1970 book, L'Uomo senza contenuto). Artistic uselessness, however, finds its most famous and symptomatic expression in the early 19th century, at the birth of (our) industrialized society, the commodification of art taken to accelerated proportions, and at the time of the philosophical development of utilitarianism.

Théophile Gautier, another kind of "magician" and to whom Charles Baudelaire dedicated his Fleurs du Mal, whom we remember for the concept of "art for art's sake," was the first to provide a proper formulation and resistance to the nascent utilitarian ideology with his idea that art is never useful—that if you want something useful in the house, there's the toilet. This reaction to utilitarian conceptions of art, utilitarian in that they would contribute to the growth of art academies and literature departments that would replace the institution of religion as moral formation (and which continues the Romantic notion of art and beauty as privileged vessels of truth, culminating in the Bildungsroman), is in this particular respect a conservative one. The Romantic reaction to the Revolution represents a deep tension within the progressive politics of the time—where Victor Hugo (himself a "reactionary" in his early years) believed in progress of a democratically social kind in which art had a fundamental role to play. The decadent Parnassians and company were reactionary and often conservative, as in the case of Baudelaire, swinging from radical Proudhonism to an ambiguous de Maistrean conservatism after the 1848-52 period of revolution.<sup>16</sup> Baudelaire would be recuperated by a largely progressive avant-garde, yet the latter would itself be cut across with multiple conflicting tensions between conservative and progressive, reactionary and destructive, fascistic and chaotic etc., depending on their various manifestations. Many early modernist writers of the generation following Baudelaire, such as le Comte de Lautréamont and Paul Verlaine, would convert to Catholicism; some avant-gardes like Futurism had ties with fascism (Ezra Pound had a conflicted relationship with Benito Mussolini's fascism); T. S. Eliot became increasingly

conservative, which isn't the same thing. Not to mention many writers and their relation to anti-Semitism, such as Pound, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, the young, pre-war Maurice Blanchot, Paul de Man and many others. And even the far left—such as the Collège de Sociologie (Bataille, Pierre Klossowski, Michel Leiris, etc.), an avowedly anti-fascist school of thought—came of age in the interwar years, and both the radical left and right were disillusioned with the Western cultural (Bourgeois) ideals and democracy.<sup>17</sup>

It seems therefore that Europe, faced with a crisis of tradition in the face of political, social and cultural upheaval, would be henceforth characterized by a set of tensions between radical and reactionary politics, between innovation and tradition, between the loss of ground and the reinvention of society modelled on progressive and falsely progressive ideals tied to consumer capitalism. Tradition arises when that which is transferred is in the process of being lost, whether we see the threat as secularization, desacralization, and so on. The desacralizing tendencies of modernity become a form of resacralization, where the space of the artistic becomes the new sacred. 18 The "tradition of the Avant-garde" is thus a new paradoxical phase of modernity arising out of the industrial. This tradition of the avantgarde is a seemingly paradoxical notion since it breaks with tradition, is a process of ceaseless attacks on the past; but in modernity, the unacknowledged inventor of tradition, the avant-garde depends upon it. Antonin Artaud trying to resacralize art, Bataille with his excess: all of these function negatively to reconstitute art, revitalize it where it has lost its connection to history and to authenticity.

Furthermore, one cannot underestimate the role of knowledge, the destiny of knowledge that was undergoing profound changes in the 19th century and from which we have yet to see the end, which Benjamin, in his "Storyteller," describes as the loss of experience, but also as the opening up of possibilities hitherto unknown.

Thus, since the 19th century, has the useless always accompanied the useful in this specific set of configurations.

## 4. Magic II

That Gautier would be a sort of "Hermès trismégiste," an alchemist-magician turning lead into gold (or mud into gold in Baudelaire's terms<sup>19</sup>)—and what is Hegel's dialectic of Aufhebung if not a sort of alchemical magic?—evokes the particular problematic of the status of art in the 19th century. Where art is tied to prostitution for many authors (Baudelaire and, especially, Rachilde in her 1895 novel about transvestism, Monsieur Vénus<sup>20</sup>), it is thus bound to commodification, and commodification/capital becomes an alchemical process of transforming base metals into noble ones. The eternal search for the new in modernism is an allegory of the neverending need for renewal of capital: art as fashion, story as the page-turner/serial novel, language as commodity, the temple of art as the marketplace, etc. We can thus contextualize the inoperability of the dandy in this light as Agamben does in Stanze, 21 for instance, as a sort of rejection of the work ethic, the dandy's "inertia" being directly tied to "art" in that ert is derived from "ars" (art), which is in its turn connected to action (agere, to act). If you are iners, you are lacking skill in an art and are "inactive." Our modern conception of art is tied to work, so that to be inert means to be lazy, and Agamben shows how, to the degree that the Bourgeoisie converts to laziness the ancient

notion of *acedia* (from the Greek ἄ-χήδομαι, neglect), modern art will increasingly work through the useless and the unproductive. And since *acedia* is *ennui*, boredom and depression/melancholy, Baudelaire's work is a "combat to the death" against this *acedia*,<sup>22</sup> which presents us with a couple of problems: the dandy, emblem of modern art, becomes an artist of the negligible, which entails neglecting nothing, and is therefore a revalorization of the *acedia* or inertia.<sup>23</sup>

## 5. Negation and Wonder

There is thus a connection between negation and wonder, and this becomes the negativity without exit that emerges in Bataille's thought.<sup>24</sup> Bataille's non-savoir absolu (absolute nonknowing) comes from the realization that there's no way out from the interior experience ("expérience intérieure"), a question which is itself an interior experience. No way out, no response, no end in sight, a mise en question sans trêve ni repos admissibles ("an interrogation without interruption or rest"): "I wrote the (ecstatic) experience of sense and nonsense, reversing itself in a nonsense of sense, then again ... without a receivable exit."25 This is a negative theology which denies all possibility of knowing, but contrary to the Nietzschean eternal return, it is linear leading to the ultimate light of the ending, yet still oriented towards a future that surpasses us. This therefore is the insertion of negativity, of non-knowledge, within a transcendence, that of say Meister Eckhart, of a god above being, that Bataille never accepts. For Bataille, lived experience is in an absolute immanence, an être sans délai (being without delay), which implies a theology of non-knowing. It cannot accept a

superior being, and is thus, in contradiction to asceticism (an exterior constraint, privation, bound to the future), an intensification that, beyond ecstasy, implies drunkenness, erotic effusion, laughter, the effusion of sacrifice and of poetry. This is similar to Martin Heidegger's conception of wonder (*Erstaunen* translates *thaumazein*) in the sense of not knowing, and this is where potentiality might emerge as a bold concept.

For Heidegger, wonder (thaumazein/Erstaunen — also translated as "astonishment" or "marvel(ing)," etymological equivalent of the French émerveillement and étonnement) is to be opposed to the related concepts of Verwunderung, Bewunderung, Staunen, Bestaunen, which are all similar to "wonder" or "astonishment" (wunder/wonder being of Germanic origin, Staunen/astonish from the Vulgar Latin \*extonare, "to thunder out" or "stun"). Where Verwunderung is, like commonplace curiosity, a perpetual craving for the next thing, Bewunderung takes a neutral distance and is, in Kant's sense, "an amazement that does not cease once the novelty is gone," but is nevertheless "ultimately marked by measurement, comprehension, and self-affirmation and therefore has very little to do with the constant dispossession of thaumazein."<sup>27</sup>

And *Staunen* and *Bestaunen*, neither flighty nor self-mastering, nevertheless "lose themselves completely in a sort of stupefied amazement, ... abandoning the ordinary in favor of one particularly extraordinary thing,"<sup>28</sup> whereas wonder is at the most usual, the everyday. The philosopher wonders at the most basic things that we take for granted ("In wonder what is most usual itself becomes the most unusual"<sup>29</sup>), and thus is willingly perturbed into a thoughtful questioning, that involves "a suffering that metaphysics

cannot ultimately endure."<sup>30</sup> However, modern science (with its "techno-calculative will towards global domination"<sup>31</sup>), converting this wonder into curiosity, relies upon the tools of modern science to dominate the everyday, thereby losing touch with Being. Yet wonder was always impossible because it came about because of the tools of *tekhnê* in the first place. We have a hint here that modern thought isn't actually any different from ancient thought, insofar as the metaphysics of truth has always been a risk, and the very affirmation of wonder as *arkhê philosophias* is the sign that the useful was always already the context — as if there were a pure origin, *arkhê*, from which we have fallen, whereas, in Heideggerian terms, wonder is always already the enframing of the question which brings to light the intelligibility of our own knowing.

The solution to the problem of wonder is a sort of *Verhaltenheit* ("restraint" or "reservedness"),<sup>32</sup> but this is not a sort of reserve to which we might oppose a Bataillian "Hegelianism without reserve" (Derrida's description of Bataille). It is rather the interruption of the metaphysics by a wondering upon the everydayness of Being that nevertheless is always at risk of falling into *Gestell* (representation). This is thus a problem that can be developed through the concept of *désœuvrement*, which Agamben develops into the concept of decreation. Here's Agamben on *désœuvrement*:

The theme of *désauvrement*—inoperativeness as the figure of the fullness of man at the end of history—which first appears in Kojève's review of Queneau, has been taken up by Blanchot and by Nancy, who places it at the very center of his work *The Inoperative Community*. Everything depends on

what is meant by 'inoperativeness.' It can be neither the simple absence of work nor (as in Bataille) a sovereign and useless form of negativity. The only coherent way to understand inoperativeness is to think of it in a generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted (like individual action or collective action understood as the sum of individual actions) in a *transitus de potentia ad actum*.<sup>33</sup>

It cannot be the negative because that is simply the reproduction of Being in the negative, in the sovereign that denies its coming into Being, as reliant upon Being. Agamben is thus proposing a way out of the negative where Heidegger was not able to (Heidegger even suppressed this from his writings<sup>34</sup>), but that still straddles on the threshold between knowing and unknowing.

But what is this inexhaustible potentiality, and how might it solve the problem of wonder that is at the origin of philosophy, that hesitates between horror and marvel, between a desire to know that comes from lack and a desire to know that falls into representation? As with the Medieval theologians, it might be helpful to start with some basic ideas, before moving, in an anagogic progression, towards a more thorough understanding of the implications of potentiality as it coincides with wonder, use and the problems of knowledge in the multimilennial of *tekhnê*.

### 6. Modalities of Uselessness

In contrast, the taunting of usefulness is not only negative from the perspective of magicians of usefulness. It is negative insofar as its expenditure leads to nothing outside of itself, in a Bataillean excess of unproductive joy. Productivity turned on its head is taunted thus. The key uselessnesses: the modalities of the useless. In modal logic, there are two sets of modality, the alethic and the deontic, which are closely related.<sup>35</sup> But what is at stake in modalities is less the truth according to modality, but how thought can encounter such truth beyond truth tables based on "True/False," "Yes/No," "Inclusion/Exclusion" in a given class, and other binary sets. This becomes apparent when we think about the useless in its full potential, and the modalities begin to break down. This isn't anything new either, and poststructuralism was largely responsible for our thinking beyond the binary of the sign.<sup>36</sup> Thinking the useless can be done out of the useful machine, and vice versa. The Dewey machine sorting books is useless when it comes to choosing whether Thus Spoke Zarathustra is a work of philosophy or of fiction. Categorizing your library books according to groups of friends, as memory, or as syndrome is useless for our mega archives, but it reflects a different sort of community, dare we even say an authentic one. The museum machine, or art-gallery machine, as a model of archive versus the cabinet of curiosities.

A useless list of modalities of the useless might look like this:

A. The Possible Useless: can be (useless), as an obsolete object, such as a record player, what Natali Leduc calls "antiquated innovations." Although it can still be played, its very presence highlights the idea of uselessness. In this sense, though, even the recent revival of nostalgia for things vinyl can be recuperated by the record industry, the latter

having (re)issued vinyl versions. Its usefulness is perlocutionary in this sense, insofar as it is indirect. It relies on the fetish aura of the vinyl.

- В. The Circular or Necessary Useless: The Ultimate Machine presents us with a circuit that is selfenclosed, tautological. It cannot not do/be in modal terms. The necessary is a simple one-eyed monster, the kind of thing a mathematician, logician, analytical philosopher or information theorist would find clever. Yet even the simple qua simple is at least dual since the "simplex" involves a fold. The circular uselessness of the circuit in the Ultimate Machine represents the tautology sought in the theory of communication and currency, which is an attempt to stabilize meaning/value. Luckily, as Émile Benveniste saw, the arbitrary relation in language does not exist between signifier and signified, but rather between the sign as a totality and the real. Where the information theorist captures the semiotic dimension, he (usually) cannot account for the semantic that opens up to the world, to discourse, to understanding.
- C. The Completely or Impossible Useless, or Impossible Objects (those that cannot be used): Jacques Carelman's monocle with arms is a good example of this, one of many objects in his catalogue of *Objets intronvables*. Error as fun: taking "to err is human" as a commandment instead of a description. A critique of the useful through parody is a critique of consumer culture, of the notion of

- progress, and of utilitarianism that has infiltrated every aspect of human knowledge.
- The Virtual or Potential (i.e. Contingent) Useless: D. this category is involved in all the other ones, but deserves its own category too. More thought, the bulk of the work, is to be done here. Needless to say, the potentially useless involves a double nature, the possibility to not do/be, which retains its possibility to do/be, and is in the zone of contingency/ indistinction. Thinking the duo contingency/ indistinction is thinking about the useless/useful in modal terms at once as contingent (can not be) which retains (or "saves") its other possibility integral to itself, and as inseparable.<sup>39</sup> Something useful is conditioned by its potential to not be, just as something useless is conditioned by its potential to be useful—and both have a dependency, their force reliant upon their shadow. This is the strongest idea in, and at the core of, the philosophy of Agamben, its full originality. And it is for this reason, with the ethical implication of potentiality, that we must think afresh the consequences of modern art, and must ask ourselves in what way it is necessary to work through its anti-utilitarian thrust. Is it enough to think of the sovereign in terms of negation and expenditure as Bataille proposed? What are the constitutional limitations of the useless/useful indistinction, what are the ethical limits or boundaries in the age of ceaseless reabsorption and reterritorialization by capital of new energies, and how might we resist this?

#### 7. Wondrous Gestural Potential

I am aware that the structure of this paper resembles a Hegelian synthesis. But it is neither synthetic nor negative — it is without end. Nor is it a sort of bad infinity. I suppose it is Hegelian in the sense of coming back to itself. This non-negative space is a space for eliminating resolutions in which one entity is used to the end of another. The "end" would be some sort of total space wherein everything was reduced to that particular end, the way data is absorbed into information through the particular workings of instrumental theories of communication. Language rather would be like going out for a walk, on the tightrope (Friedrich Nietzsche), up the mountain (Nietzsche, Paul Celan), in the forest and up the logging trail (Heidegger), in the street (Baudelaire, Benjamin), on the beach, on the wave (Gilles Deleuze), the counteralley (Derrida and Catherine Malabou). Language in the Hegelian sense would be to go out into the world and come back, the Absolute being the complete declension of the verb, 40 as when Aristotle describes thought as the "thought of thought." Perhaps such a walk through potential is required.

When conceptualizing modalities for the useless machine, one cannot exclude the useful machine that straddles on the edge of the uselessness that taunts it. Such a potential or virtual modality breaks the traditional modalities of possible/impossible/necessary/contingent. While "working" (inoperatively?) within the modality of the possible (the machine can do what it says it can do), and is in the realm of the contingent (it can not do it), it does certainly "prefer" to do so. Thus, Natali Leduc's *Churnatron*, which produces five tubs of "bice cream," is an alternative world where the users make ice cream, enjoy themselves and

get fit. We're "far away" (but how far really?) from Bartleby's "I would prefer not to," where Bartleby's resistance to underwriting the insurance company's policies is a refusal to express the potential energy, in a condition where the sole purpose of man is to fulfil a will.<sup>42</sup>

It's not that the riders on the *Churnatron* want to get fit. Riding this bike—a five-person, double-decker tandem that churns ice cream, or "bice cream"—is done for the fun of it, for the collaboration, and any fitness is simply residual. There are better (and safer) ways to get fit. Here the primary purpose is art and *jouissance*, collaboration. Nor is it a kind of decreation in a destructive sense. Not exclusively, anyway. It is destructive in the sense that it challenges usefulness and also the institution of art, in the same way, say, that Marcel Duchamp's urinal might, or Carelman's *Objets introuvables*, insofar as they critique both the institution of art and the commercial/consumerist model, exemplified by the catalogue (in Carelman's case, and the museum or art gallery in Duchamp's sense).

Yet this "taunting of the useful" is tied to the political, not devoid of it. Its political dimension can be found in this *jouissance*, its disruption of the useful that is expressed in its very usefulness. Before exploring the relationship between such a "taunting of the useful," what are the precise questions raised by such a modality? This is why I would characterize this useful as a "potential" or "virtual" uselessness, insofar as it contains its potential uselessness, is subtended by it and saves it. And perhaps there is the challenge of modernity and modern art: maintaining this negative but nonetheless problematic sacred value of art.

The *Churnatron* is the coming together of people not only to have fun, but out of a sense of community. In that sense, the machine is a pretext for that community. It is a medium

like language, for communi-cation. It has a function. The etymology of function being "fungi" from "fungere"—to complete or accomplish: it is the discharge or performance of something. The *Churnatron* enters thus into the realm of the performance, the performative, of praxis as action—language, in the broader sense of discourse as act—: it is a collective act, a perlocutionary act. It cannot be analyzed at the locutionary level, nor at the level of the illocutionary. Language, seen broadly, opens thus to a potential and virtual that is the gesture of interaction between people, defined technically as discourse between enunciators. What is the nature of this enunciation as it pertains to the *Churnatron*?

The Virtual/Potential Useless, or Contingent Useless in the *Churnatron*, is thus triply useful: 1. makes 6 tubs of "bice cream" 2. is fun 3. is exercise. The useful is subtended by the useless, contains a potential critique of the useful: a useful thing that is parodic or playful that is at the limits of the useful/useless.<sup>43</sup> Natali Leduc's work generally tries to "poke" people (but not "poke fun at"), so in this sense "taunting" is a sort of provocation, with what she calls her "antiquated innovations." One would

press one's thumb lightly into the flesh of the useful, more to irritate innocently, ... with a bit of surprise, for pleasure, as a child might. What interests me is that people interrogate (while smiling) the definition of what is useful, and the idea of progress and comfort too, and on the importance that we accord to the useful.<sup>44</sup>

Leduc also identifies a sort of "gray zone" of the useful and the useless, that there is no strict division, as many in the art world might have it. Her idea passes through the filter of the child's play, stemming from "a certain nostalgia for the time when ... I would play (often outside) with my friends." A child plays without the least thought for whether the activity is "useful" or "important," so that even contemporary educational theories that promote this kind of play still frame it within the discourse of usefulness. In the same way, contemporary human sciences and fine arts have the same pressure to justify themselves (just look at any department website and this discourse of justifying study of a given discipline is framed in the idea of work productivity and utilitarianism). So this child's play, though nostalgic, is closer than anything to the sort of wonder Heidegger describes, insofar as the child wonders at simple things, the usual or everyday.

However, Leduc emphasizes the idea that her work might incite communal engagement through play and "wonder" (she uses the term émerveillement and speaks of the simple joy of being together and making something foolish and useless—which is reminiscent of Erasmus' morosophy, the "foolish wisdom"). She describes the Churnatron as permitting participants who don't know each other to share a fleeting moment of joy and community. This she describes as a "joyous utility," as opposed to one which is "brutal and totalitarian." This type of pleasure is productive insofar as it is good for its own sake, in itself. Likely aware of the distinction Barthes makes between pleasure and joy (she has written a doctoral dissertation on the concept of divagation, especially in the surrealists and in 'pataphysics<sup>45</sup>), she states that for her joy is more important than pleasure, in that this joy is drawn from "the ridiculous, even absurd way [that the useful] is produced." Yet this "joy"

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(jonissance), involving greater participation on the part of the individual (being thus "writerly"), is not quite set in the same terms as Barthes's jonissance, where the latter "puts one in a state of loss, which creates discomfort ... which sways the reader's historical, cultural, psychological foundations, the consistency of their tastes, values and memories, and disturbs their relation to language." This playful, even light critique is different from that critique that characterized much of 19th- and 20th-century art, but at the same time draws so much from it. One thinks of the experiments of the Dadaists, the Surrealists, and 'Pataphysics, for instance.

#### 8. Useless Potential

The idea of potential as developed by Agamben takes up Aristotle's idea of dynamis (or dunamis), which literally means "possible" (or being-in-power, essere-in-potenza<sup>47</sup>) from which we get "potential" (synonym of possiblenote that adynamia means impossible or "impotential"). Deleuze developed his theory of the virtual that closely resembles Agamben's potentiality, insofar as Agamben stressed the idea of "impotential" in Aristotle: that the actualization of potential always retains its impotential, or "adynamia ... potentiality to not-be." Deleuze's notion of the virtual sees this in its immanence, and looks at the virtual as a "force" that can only be grasped at that moment of immanence. The tradition of the West-based on a meaning, that of "impotential," forgotten or lost in the translation from Greek to Latin of dynamis/energeia to potential/actual—has tended to transcendentalize potential and see the actual as a full manifestation thereof, 49 as energy exhausted in actualization, whereas Agamben sees

the impotential retained or "preserved." 50 Even when this transcendentalism was opposed, say in Deconstruction, the transcendental was maintained through a negation. That is to say that at the origins of philosophy, the transcendental implied such a negation. The metaphysics of the West are such a negation in the very sense that they initiate a lack, language defined as lack, insofar as words are stand-ins for transcendental Ideas. Plato was already aware of such a split between the word and the thing itself.<sup>51</sup> That is how one can say that something apparently useful might be taunting the useless, might be characterized as potentially or virtually useless; that might leave behind any logic of easy correspondence between a linguistic or discursive act and the so-called "transcendental signifier" and its negative shadow, the floating and ever-deferred one favoured by Deconstruction that nevertheless depends upon it. Such an act would require seeing its discursive context, its agency and subjectivity, all of which are historically based.

It is in this sense that we can understand the historical. It is neither a search for pure origins, for an origin before a fall, nor is it a chronological phenomenon. It is rather a tension that says more about the conditions of possibility of knowing. "Use" provides us (like wonder) with a means of grasping this condition. The fact that we are unable to understand *chresis* (employment, use—see note 2 above) according to our modern conception of use ("to use something") is the sign that we have added the subject position of the accusative (subject) to the meaning of a verb that in the original Greek depended upon the genitive and dative. This means that the experience of language for the Greeks was a different one, one which was the going-through of language in the world of objects, where we

today conceive of the verb through the singular subjective I. This means that an abstract or affirmative self transcends experience in its move towards truth and knowing, rather than working through the experiences that we encounter that might exceed and multiply us. Working together towards the taunting of the useful in the *Churnatron* of resistance, we are together defined by our experience of the machine that is an experience of potentiality as useful/useless.

#### Notes

- 1 Fromet de Rosnay, <a href="http://mallarme.uvic.ca">http://mallarme.uvic.ca</a>.
- Transcription of ἀρχὴ φιλοσοφίας. For Plato's Theaetetus, 2 and other classical texts, see <a href="http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/">http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/</a>. Wonder (θαυμάζειν) is also a key concept for Aristotle, Metaphysics, 982b. This notion has been taken up by Hegel in The Philosophy of History, Kierkegaard in Stages on Life's Way, Heidegger in Basic Questions of Philosophy (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1994). §35-§38. Cf. John Llewelyn, "On the saying that philosophy begins in thaumagein," in Post-Structuralist Classics, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1988). See also David Bollert, "Plato and Wonder," Extraordinary Times, IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences, Vol. 11: Vienna 2001, http://www.iwm.at/wp-content/uploads/jc-11-131.pdf. Michael Edwards wrote a beautiful treatise on the subject, De l'émerveillement (Paris, Fayard, 2008), based on his Collège de France course of 2006-2007, accessible on the Collège de France website: http://www.college-de-france.fr/site/ michael-edwards/course-2006-2007.htm. Finally, see Mary-Jane Rubenstein, Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe (New York, Columbia UP, 2008), in which the authors discusses Heidegger's differentiating wonder (Erstaunen) from curiosity (Verwunderung), pp. 28-33.

- My literal translation of Aristotle, op. cit.: "καὶ οὐ 3 χρήσεώς τινος ἕνεκεν" (http://data.perseus.org/citations/ urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0086.tlg025.perseus-grc1:1.982b). The Tredennick translation (1933) has "not for any practical utility" (ibid.), but the Greek uses "Χρήσεως" (the genitive of χρῆσις, chresis, employment, use) rather than "πράχισ," although this is indeed implicit. However, use does not actually have a proper translation, so the translation as "employment, use" is misleading. Chresis is a key concept, and Agamben highlights that energeia (being-at-work) is a later term, that Plato didn't use, for chresis (being-in-use) which was originally opposed to dunamis (possible, being-inpower). Use is dependent upon a particular relation between subject and object, and "employment, use" is a convenient modern anachronism of "to use something," based on the accusative, applied to the ancient Greek, based primarily on the genitive or dative. See Agamben's final installment of the Homo Sacer series, Uso dei corpi. Homo sacer, IV, 2 (Venice: Neri Pozza, 2014). 24-25 and chapter 2 (49-50 and 53-55), to be discussed below (English translation unavailable).
- 4 Continuing my fetish for Greek words and letters: "δούλη τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐστίν" (Aristotle, ibid. 982b 29-30). Cf. Hannah Arendt's The Human Condition (discussed by Giorgio Agamben, The Man without Content (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 69).
- 5 Pierre Bourdieu, in his *Méditations pascaliennes*, (Paris : Seuil, 1997), taking up Aristotle, defines *skholê* as a "free time liberated from the urgencies of the world which enables a free and liberated relation from these urgencies and from the world" (my translation of "temps libre et libéré des urgences du monde qui rend possible un rapport libre et libéré à ces urgences, et au monde," in Bourdieu, *Méditations*, 10. All knowledge depends upon such leisure as "pure" thought, free from economic and social necessity and from the urgencies such necessity imposes or proposes (*ibid.* 27).
- 6 For a discussion of the Ancient-Greek correspondence of the bodily to the slave, see *Uso dei corpi*, 21-47.

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- 7 Cf. Eldritch Priest's Boring Formless Nonsense. Experimental Music and the Aesthetics of Failure (New York/London:, Bloomsbury, 2013), 14.
- 8 Giorgio Agamben, Stanzas. Word and Phantasm in Western Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xvi.
- 9 I will develop the Heideggerian implications of this below. Note that Heidegger himself was intimately bound to this question of the university during the 1930s. It is not often noted that the very question of use was at the heart of his critique of the National-Socialist view of education. See Jean-Michel Palmier, "Heidegger et le national-socialisme," in Michel Haar, ed. *Martin Heidegger* (Paris, Les Éditions de l'Herne, 1988), 333-353 for an approach to Heidegger's Nazism that is rarely taken into consideration.
- 10 See Priest, *Boring Formless Nonsense*, op. cit. 1-2, for his amusing discussion of such notions of failure.
- 11 Agamben's historical analysis and the questions here posed in terms of use, form-of-law, decreation and biopolitics are relevant for questions of art, mediation and/as means-to-an-end. If any objection is to be noted, it is around his famous notion of potentiality and/as negation.
- 12 See Agamben's "magic wand of sublation (*Aufhebung*)," in *Stanzas*, op. cit. xvi. Hegel himself uses "magic" to describe mediation. See Hegel's preface to the Phenomenology, where Spirit is the power to win "its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself," and "is power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it [... which is] a tarrying with the negative" which is a "magical power that converts it into being. This power is identical with ... the Subject." Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, op. cit., #32, p. 19.
- 13 "Western man's incapacity to master time, and his consequent obsession with gaining it and passing it, have their origins in this Greek concept of time as a quantified and infinite continuum of precise fleeting instants" *Infancy and history* (trans. Liz Heron. London, Verso, 1993), 93.

- Gf. Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette, and David Golumbia, "Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities" (Los Angeles Review of Books, May 1, 2016: https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/neoliberal-tools-archives-political-history-digital-humanities/). See also Terry Harpold, "The Underside of the Digital Field" (Digital Humanities Quarterly, Vol. 6, 2: http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/6/2/000141/000141.html). On a fun note, simply doing a word search for "useful" and related terms in that seminal/foundational work of digital humanities, Jerome McGann's Radiant Textuality. Literature After the World Wide Web (New York: Palgrave, 2001), I am amazed just how important it is for digital humanities to be useful.
- 15 See Georges Bataille, "Critique des fondements de la dialectique hégélienne," but also L'Expérience intérieure, in CEuvres complètes (Paris, Gallimard, 1970-1988). See also Arnaud and Excoffon-Lafarge, Bataille (Paris, Seuil, 1978), 14.
- 16 For an important yet curiously neglected discussion of Baudelaire's politics, see Richard Burton in *Baudelaire and the* Second Republic. Writing and Revolution, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), in particular chapter 8.
- 17 See Michèle Richman, "Fascism & Culture: Continuing the Debate" (South Central Review Vol. 14, No. 3/4, Autumn Winter, 1997), 14-30: <a href="http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/stable/3190205">http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/stable/3190205</a>; and Richard Wolin, "Left Fascism: Georges Bataille and the German Ideology" (Constellations Volume 2, Issue 3, October 1996) 397–428. Of course, Agamben was already onto this as early as 1968, with a small piece on "Bataille e il paradosso della soverenità," taken up in the first volume of Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 18 Cf. Slavoj Žižek, The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For? (London, Verso, 2000).
- 19 Actually, Baudelaire no-doubt gets this idea from the alchemists themselves, with their idea of purifying base

- matter to obtain the quintessence. Alchemy made an important rebirth in the 19th century with Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, amongst others.
- 20 See Steven Wilson, "The Quest for Fictionality: Prostitution and Metatextuality in Rachilde's Monsieur Vénus" Modern Languages Open (2015).
- 21 Giorgio Agamben, Stanzas,.
- 22 Agamben, Stanzas, op. cit. 31, n. 7
- 23 Agamben, Stanzas, op. cit.30, n. 4.
- 24 See Agamben, Homo Sacer.
- 25 My translation of "J'ai écrit l'expérience (extatique) du sens du non-sens, se renversant en un non-sens du sens, puis à nouveau ... sans issue recevable." Georges Bataille, "Sur Nietzsche," in Georges Bataille, Œuvres complètes, (Paris: Gallimard, 1970-1988), t.6, 160.
- 26 George Bataille, Méthode de méditation (Paris, Fontaine, 1947), 218. See also Alain Arnaud and Gisèle Excoffon-Lafarge, Bataille, Paris, Seuil, 1978, 28-30, 36.
- 27 Quoted by Mary-Jane Rubenstein Strange Wonder, op. cit., 29.
- 28 Rubenstein, Strange Wonder, op. cit. 29.
- 29 Heidegger, Basic Questions, 144, quoted by Rubenstein, Strange Wonder, op cit. 30.
- 30 Rubenstein, Strange Wonder, op. cit. 31.
- 31 Rubenstein, Stange Wonder, op. cit. 32.
- 32 Heidegger, Basic Questions, 4.

Alethic modalities

35

- 33 Agamben, Homo Sacer, op. cit. 61-62.
- 34 Rubenstein, Stange Wonder, op. cit. 36.
  - Possible Impossible Permitted Forbidden

    | X | | X |
    Necessary Contingent Required Optional

Deontic modalities

Alethic and deontic modalities correspond to each other (what is permissible is possible), and each of the parts of the quadrants communicates with the ones in the other (possible is opposed to impossible, necessary to contingent; but possible communicates with contingent and necessary with impossible). As Leibniz would say, "possibile est

- quicquid potest fieri (seu verum esse)" ("possible is something that can do or be true"), and impossible, necessary and contingent cannot (non potest), cannot not (non potest non) and can not (potest non) respectively.
- 36 It's safe to say that poststructuralist critique actually read structuralist thought, and that structuralists such as Benveniste were aware of the arbitrary nature of the sign in relation to reality, as opposed to between the signifier and the signified, and of the limits of semiotics. A rereading of Benveniste would be fruitful for thinking the limits of human communication and communication more generally, especially in today's posthuman context, through his distinction between semiotic (reception) and semantic (understanding). See Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, II, (Paris, Gallimard, 1974),, 43-66.
- 37 Natali Leduc, e-mail message to author, April 29, 2016.
- 38 Jacques Carelman, Catalogue d'objets introuvables et cependant indispensables aux personnes telles que acrobates, ajusteurs, amateurs d'art, alpinistes ... (Paris, Balland, 1969).
- 39 "Indistinction" is rooted in "stingere," "to prick" or "separate by marks," and there must be a relation to the touch, the "tangere" that is in the contingent (tangere is also at the root of taxonomy, which relates to arrangement). Taxonomy, distinction, contingency, all terms conceptually similar.
- 40 Agamben, Potentialities, op. cit. 122.
- 41 Natali Leduc, "Churnatron 1400" YouTtube, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58mtlkLWpCI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58mtlkLWpCI</a> (accessed May 2, 2016).
- 42 cf. Priest, Boring Formless Nonsense, loc. cit. p. 14
- 43 This can also be described as "useful overdrive." See Søren Rosenbak, "Prototyping a Useless Design Practice: What, Why & How?," *Artifact*, 2014, Volume III, Issue 4, pages 5.1-5.18
- 44 Natali Leduc, e-mail message to author, April 29, 2016: Je n'avais pas pensé à utiliser "taunt" ni provoquer (de façon ludique) avant que tu m'en parles mais je

crois que ça rejoint pas mal ce que je fais en général avec certaines innovations désuètes (antiquated innovations). Je dirais aussi "poke" (mais pas "poke fun at"), enfoncer légèrement son doigt dans la chair de l'utile, plutôt agacer de façon assez innocente (un peu comme les marins avec l'albatros dans le poème de Baudelaire, mais sans méchanceté), avec aussi un peu d'étonnement, pour le plaisir, un peu comme le ferait un enfant. Ce qui m'intéresse, c'est que les gens se questionnent (en souriant) sur la définition de l'utilitaire (ou l'utile), sur l'idée de progrès et de confort aussi, et sur l'importance qu'on accorde à l'utile.

Il y a dans le monde de l'art une zone grise autour de l'utile. Un objet utile ou utilitaire peutil être considéré comme étant une oeuvre d'art? Je crois que beaucoup d'intervenants dans le monde de l'art diraient non. Mais je peux avoir tort. Moi, je dirais parfois oui, parfois non. C'est du cas par cas.

Ma notion de communauté passe par le filtre du jeu de l'enfant. J'ai une certaine nostalgie du temps où j'étais enfant et que j'allais jouer (souvent dehors) avec mes amis (je le faisais quand même assez souvent à Houston, même adulte). Plusieurs de mes projets cherchent à engager les autres dans une sorte de jeu à partir duquel se forme une communauté autour de l'émerveillement et de la joie toute simple d'être ensemble et de faire quelque chose d'un peu insensée (et d'inutile). Avec d'autres projets, comme le Fotofonotron (une performance où je tentais de prendre une photo avec un téléphone à cadran et avec l'aide de tous les spectateurs), les spectateurs deviennent tous des participants, avec un rôle à jouer et ils s'amusent comme quand ils étaient petits et quand ils jouaient à faire semblant (make-believe). Le Churnatron est moins complexe mais permet à des participants qui ne se connaissent pas de partager un moment de jeu et de joie, comme entre amis, de créer une communauté ponctuelle d'amis de façon immédiate (et momentanée, fugitive).

Je crois qu'il y a à la fois ce que tu décris comme résistance à l'utile, enfin à ce que l'utile peut avoir de brutal

- et totalitaire pour aboutir à une sorte d'utilité joyeuse, comme tu dis une "jouissance productive qui vaut en soi, pour soi", qui retire sa joie moins de ce qu'elle produit d'utile que de la façon un peu ridicule, voire absurde qu'elle le produit. Le mot "joie" est important (plus que plaisir).
- 45 Natali Leduc, "Divagation, prohibition of divagation and divagation of text" (2007) Doctoral, Rice University: <a href="http://hdl.handle.net/1911/20623">http://hdl.handle.net/1911/20623</a>.
- 46 My translation of "met en état de perte, celui qui déconforte ... fait vaciller les assises historiques, culturelles, psychologiques, du lecteur, la consistance de ses goûts, de ses valeurs et de ses souvenirs, met en crise son rapport au langage" Roland Barthes, Le plaisir du texte (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 25-26.
- 47 Agamben, Uso dei corpi, loc. cit., 24.
- 48 Agamben, Potentialities, op. cit. 183.
- 49 Cf. Agamben, The Man without Content, op. cit.
- 50 Agamben, Potentialities, op. cit. 183-184
- 51 See Agamben, Potentialities, op. cit. 29-30
- 52 Agamben, Uso dei corpi, op. cit. 50.

## Toy Involvements

Juliana Pivato

## Image Credits

Juliana Pivato, from the series Toy Involvements, 2016. Pen and water based ink on scotch towel, 5.25" x 11".



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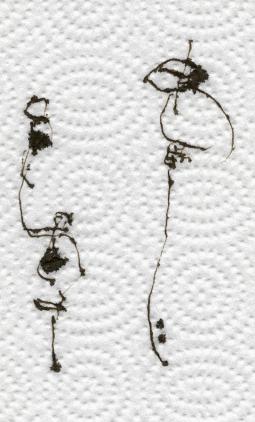






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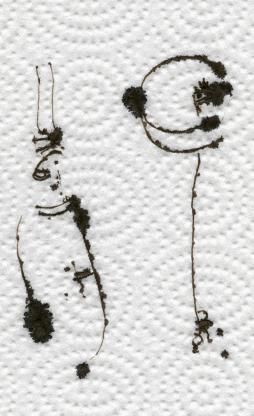






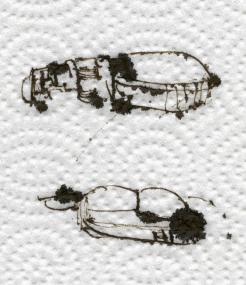
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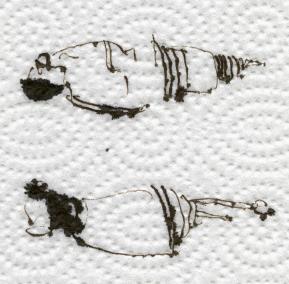




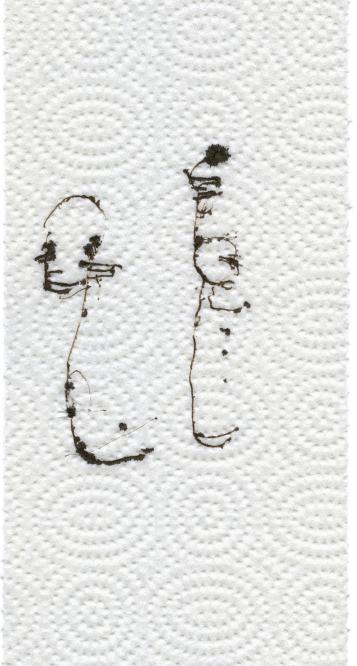


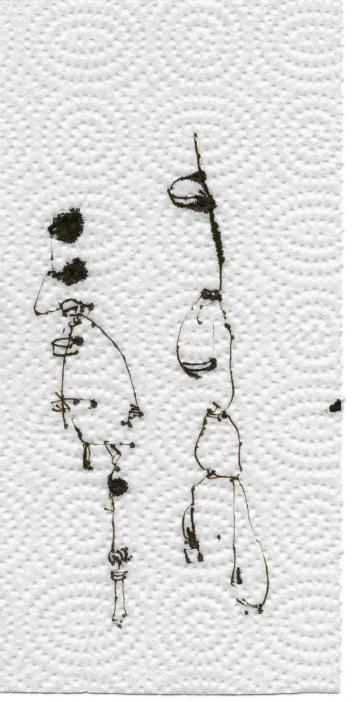


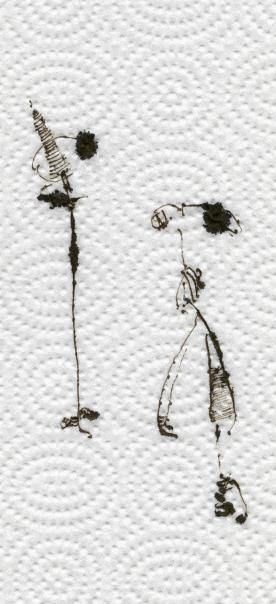
















## 4 Pure Dreaming Radicalized and Vermiculated Thought, or Death as an Earworm

Gary J. Shipley

The recurring prospect of death is silent music, soundless sound, an intrusive tune not heard but thought, its infinite capacity for return rendering us deaf and indifferent to all but the thinking of death's lost musicality. We are not making our way towards death, death is making its way towards us, for the umpteenth encounter, a series of events awaiting the event. We are not returned from the dead, but are instead the conduit through which death makes its perpetual return: not zombies but hosts for a vermicular hoard of zombified reprisals. Our task is to feel these earworms bite, to become sensible to their gnawing presence in our ears and in the soft tissue of our brains, to reverse the process of digestion, to feed on them as they feed on us. Death's haunting fugue is no longer haunting, and it's no longer a fugue: it is instead an advertising jingle selling us back our dreams made full and productive, selling us the death of death.

While a question remains as to its susceptibility to use (whether its uselessness can be put to work), like death, or as death, the earworm is recursive, negative, unpurposive, spontaneous, valueless, dysfunctional, abstract, uncommunicative, non-narrative, directionless, autistic, mute, and therefore potentially unrestricted, potentially free. Having ascertained such a comprehensive list of negative freedoms, there remains the question as to whether they might equate

to any kind of positive freedom: with so much removed it is at best unclear whether there is enough left to exact anything but that negativity. Are these worms of the dead free to do anything but feed on the dead? That there may be some radical use for the earworm's uselessness (and so for death's uselessness) is central to any consideration of worms and the vermicularity of death that does not pass over how the worm is not only a tunneling organism but is itself the embodiment of a tunnel, a routeless route, a conveyance to extremity and *in extremis*: "Freed of curiosity, of forecasting tomorrow and contemplating yesterday, unburdened by knowing or caring, the thought that an earworm is becomes free to be useless, free to deploy itself as radical thought, to be more of what thinking is."

The onus here then is to give voice to this voiceless channel, to invoke Baudrillard's conception of what it means for thought to be radicalized, when "[r]adical thought is in no way different from radical usage of language."2 We must speak in the language of death, in the language of earworms—in the language they don't yet have. We must verbalize this tunnel that leads nowhere, this useless self-repeating hole, while at the same time being restricted to a medium that self-identifies as usage, that is couched in narrativity, that cannot communicate without communicating. And maybe we cannot hope for much, for while "earworms may escape the destiny of daydreams to become a properly non-functional form of thinking, it may be that in the end that begins over and over again begins over again, again, begins again and over again, all they have to show is what the fate of human thinking that is free to lead nowhere thinks like." But then this is most likely enough, and already seems too much.

If we think of the earworm, and the earworm-as-death, as a tunnel, it makes good sense to think of organisms in general as displaying similarly tunnel-like characteristics, and indeed their destinations as being of equal vacuity, being either shit or vomit: "It is easy, starting with the worm, to consider ironically an animal, a fish, a monkey, a man, as a tube with two orifices, anal and buccal: the nostrils, the eyes, the ears, the brain represent the complications of the buccal orifice; the penis, the testicles, or the female organs that correspond to them, are the complication of the anal."4 The entirety of humanness itself is the complication of the directionless tunnel, the negative something of the hole, the hole in us that is us.<sup>5</sup> And while we may consume shorter (in both size and duration) tunnels, like pinworms, in order to rub ourselves up against the world, all this is arse itch, and the dissemination of life's foul eggs. And yet the direction of transit is all one way, and so a purpose is imagined. For whatever enters the anus dies there, goes to die there. Even male sex organs, oozing AIDS like Derek McCormack's fashion designers, die,6 and through dying kill, like the candiru, that having swum into the anus dies there, its spines hooked into the muscle, where it rots and infects and kills its human host, which in turn rots and infects and kills its own recursive instantiation of death's earwormy burrowing through humanness. And the problem with tunnels is that they collapse.

Death in the coma of living, earworms in the anechoic chamber: both transits too brief and too slippery to facilitate digestion. There is time and use only for the going in and the route to exit, for the entertainment of the prospect of repetition, the repetitive promise immanent in each return. There need only be these happy conduits of

death, of death's earworms in one ear and out the other, with no pause in which to be digested, or suffered, only the steady flow of the thought that refuses to be thought, of the sustenance that in of itself cannot sustain, but which approximates some perpetuity of nourishment via the illusive promise of such excesses of intake for which room must be made, and the time taken to savor and metabolize hailed as some nefarious extravagance. Human peristalsis is in overdrive. But the tunnel is also a place to get stuck, and as Vilém Flusser notes, the worms digest what enters them.<sup>7</sup> However, although what enters the worm lingers, the worms themselves pass through, are perfectly adapted for such accelerated passage. Their contents are not divulged. Their Black Noise (a purely functional corollary of Black Light)8 is not given time or the environment in which to escape. The earworm slips through the mind, as if propelled by some cerebral laxative, to make way for its next incarnation:

Where there is simply input and output—sensation as information—there is only swallowing and shitting: no memory, no digestion, no gathering up of awareness in a difference that makes a difference .... Our diversions, which have no bureaucracy apart from their vying for increasingly refined forms of immediacy, render sensation nothing but a direct, concrete, and fleeting fluctuation of being that feeds into nothing but the next immediacy.<sup>9</sup>

But just as our bodies are wormlike, so too are we ("we": just illusory structures that imagine they *have* bodies), and like worms this interiority retains some slim aptitude

for digestive indulgence—or indigestive extrapolation. However, pace Flusser, this vermicular cognizance, this thought-feeling of internalized awareness, is not essentially optimistic but pessimistic. For if earworms constitute some form of "psychic coprophilia," it is not because there's any pleasure to be gleaned from the taste of shit, but because the very act of tasting consolidates our presence, and that presence is always, when happened upon, a nervy bolus of sickening that in finding itself wants rid of itself: the fleeting reassurance that tasting can still occur does not equate to a love of what is thereby tasted. If the earworm can momentarily bring us to ourselves, then this positive sensation of some internal source of experiential content being evidenced to itself is quickly displaced not only by the foul and formless faux materiality it arrives at, but also by this reawakened internality's imminently (and immanently) recursive disappearance. The selves themselves are earwormy, are not only reflexive but in a state of refluxing reflexivity, are at the choking point of being anything, and so "expressive of a sheer fluctuation, a lived abstraction, or a pure sign of variation that epitomizes entertainment's principle of indigestion. But at the same time earworms mark the limits and fate of indigestion"10

How then to put earworms to work without exploiting them? How to hear-think the recurring tune of death without having our purchase on it make it, as a consequence, purchasable? How to have death mean something without it being obscured by, and swallowed up in, that meaning? How to forget the taste of shit and remember only the tasting? If we could imagine ourselves inside the earworm. If we could imagine what it's like to be the earworm, sensate and brainless. To be and to live our own periodic deaths, to

embody the theme tune to our infinitely repeated passing away. And by doing so once again follow the advice of Baudrillard:

Ciphering, not deciphering. Operating illusions. Being illusion to be event. Turning into an enigma what is clear. Making unintelligible what is far too intelligible. Rendering unreadable the event itself. Working all the events to make them unintelligible. Accentuating the fake transparency of the world to spread a terroristic confusion, to spread the germs or viruses of a radical illusion, that is to say operating a radical disillusion of the real. A viral and deleterious thought, which corrupts meaning, and is the accomplice of an erotic perception of reality's trouble.<sup>11</sup>

Maybe if we could get the feedback of the worm's Black Noise to become indistinguishable from the feedback of our own Black Noise, to occupy that feedback for longer than a momentary spell of dizziness, and without dread, at the expense of the reality of the real, then Baudrillard's disruptive rule might just be put into effect: the "absolute rule of thought" whose task it is "to return the world as we received it: unintelligible. And if it is possible, to return it a little bit more unintelligible. A little bit more enigmatic."12 And to remember that the medium of this mutilating and distorting act, this radicalizing event, is an underlying nothing in what is written, an offloading of the mechanisms of order and control, an outsourcing of inspiration to chance, to the randomness of the worldwithout-us, the earworm empty with Black Noise, coming through us and back out the other side. 13 Maybe to deposit some digestive acids on it before it exits. Maybe to have our concentration push and pull the worm further outside of its already formless shape. Or better still, to have a state of concentration squash the worm's diameter to an implausibly slight dimension in order that its repetition become a continuance, a narrowed and persistently strangulated worm constricted to a mere albugineous thread, a pinworm, feeding through our heads like the sheerest gossamer and without end and without purpose and with no hint at noise but the imagined implication of a noise that cannot sound. And what's here is written (impossibly). And what's here is intensity. And what's here is emptiness:

what gives intensity to writing, be it the writing of a fiction or the writing of a theoretical fiction, is emptiness, an underlying nothingness, an illusion of meaning, an ironic dimension of language, which is corollary to an ironic dimension of the facts themselves, which are never what they are—in all meanings: they are never more than what they are, and they are always only what they are—a perfect amphiboly.<sup>14</sup>

This is the technology of sound internalized, the need for playback devices made moribund, the mind having assimilated their processes. This is "a way of listening that's ... not listening," <sup>15</sup> a way of writing that's not writing, <sup>16</sup> a way of making use of uselessness for the cause of uselessness. This distraction from ourselves is the purest concentration, an alertness focused on nothing but the pressure of its own concentrated state, and so of the distortions such pressure manifests.

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Death like music cannot be localized: their "local signs are incorporeal."17 No corpse or dying entity contains death. As with music, death is hosted, and its effect is everywhere at once: peculiar to no one organism, it is "a lived abstraction"18 of death. For death is always lived, and it is this living that has tainted it with a humanness it does not otherwise contain, and this living that we hope to forfeit for the possibility (which is not even that) of someday hearing (as non-hearing) death's Black Noise. The idea then is to imagine death's earworm inverted, its interior, its empty hiddenness, exhumed in that which it passes through, and the worm, as it is, a concentrated, solid and unending and loopy impossibility of concretion (a noose?), and having imagined it, imagine further that the secret was not revealed to us but us to the secret. In other words, we come to see the point in pointlessness by having already managed to absorb the vacuity of the secret, having already seen the conduit as an endless sprawling present going no place: a tunnel now a guide rope with no purposeful direction or mindful destination, and to regard this not as a finality but a place from which to depart. At the death of death's secret what is left but death's return, "the messy imminence of [its] perpetual conclusion?" And what is left of that return but a noiseless viral echo in which we find ourselves digested, and indigested, as some placeless locus of corrosive unease?<sup>20</sup> The digestion (and indigestion) we envisage here is then not merely symbiotic, but symbiotic to the point of indistinctness. We eat Black Noise and Black Noise eats us, and what's left over is neither us nor Black Noise, but instead an aperture from which some new worm might surface, some new Blackness for some new sense. And because that sense cannot be written it must be

written. This thought-music cries out for the implausibility of being written, for "relieved of listening by the thought of listening itself, music, ironically, makes room for radical thought in the form of a hopeless but happy audition," a written audition. And yet between music and text there is a gulf, a chasm of despondent potentiality, an arroyo of inexplicable and intangible slime, and it is here we must squirm in our final excavation. This putting mindlessness to work, in the form of uselessness, in the form of death, is to mark (literally) this dysfunctionality not with its opposite, but with an automated transcendence of function and productivity. The work is the non-work of drowning to be born as that offending liquid.

This dilemma removed of the reasons for its being so is reminiscent of the old man in Urs Allemann's The Old Man and The Bench, his twaddling, and the twaddling state of the book itself. Twaddling is the compulsive emptiness of possibility and the possibilities of an empty compulsion, which goes on at the human limits of limitlessness, and is the result of a conscription into a freedom in which the world and the requirement that something, anything, be documented are still present, but from which all health and purpose (beyond the purposeless purpose of recounting its own purposelessness) have been removed. Whether or not twaddling is an active pursuit or a passive response is not clear—"[t]waddling abandons ends and means, origins and goals, compulsion and liberation. Or it may be the result of having been abandoned by them"21—but insofar as twaddling may be thought of as a sprawling and suffocating and rootless weed, such a classification is in a sense meaningless; or rather, its whole enterprise hangs on this difference, on its not being a difference at all, on the

eventual conflation of what we do and what is done to us. It is both a refusal to think and thought's refusing to be thought. Refusals that are themselves thought. But this is just the start, for what is called for here, by Baudrillard's radicalization and by the hidden promise of earworms, is to move beyond twaddling, to consider twaddling as representing a foundational set of circumstances, not the end but the inception of a new end which will not itself end. And of course twaddling does not end either, so this inception must instead be thought of as a continuum, at best a branching off, from an indulged overthinking of one's refusal to think and thought's refusal to be thought. As the old man himself, approaching an end that cannot finish him off (any more than he has already finished himself off through his embracing inconsequentiality to the point of his own vatic eradication, a ghostly forlornness from which he is now inseparable), realizes: "Think once instead of twaddling too late."22 What's missing is a single instance of rigor: a rigor of emptiness, a rigor of death, a rigor of meaninglessness, an eruptive alien rigor that in a single instantiation can churn the barren fields and the dying weed and make fruit from our waste. And while we know that this fruit can only taste of shit, it will at least have grown in the last breath of what it meant to be human.

The incontrovertible master of the daydream, however, is Fernando Pessoa, for whom the world is little more than a corpse from which to siphon dreams. And dreams like earworms cannot be owned, for the trick is to allow the dream to not exactly own you, which would involve an unnecessary and obliterative servitude, but to nevertheless seduce you into submitting to its infinite dead-end, which is also your own infinite dead-end. The dreams valued

most highly by Pessoa are pure dreams: dreams isolated from reality, those inoculated from associations with a reality that through its decay threatens to take us with it, to have our dreaming it rot inside us. The pure dream has its own logic, its own materials, and is not permeated with those of the world which at any moment might fall away and take us, the invested dreamer, with it. Our dreams then should not imitate the world, rather the world should be seen as dreamt, and these pure dreams internalized universes,23 realized illusions with their own rules of decay, earworms feeding on their own emancipated stream of Black Noise. To dream our waking life, to have the two cohabit and intertwine, is to risk the disfigurements and dying imposed by the world instead of emulating the distracted concentration unearthed in the earworms of death. Only the pure dream enchants, and only the pure dream of death enchants the life that, if adulterated, it would otherwise menace. The unprocessed vacillations of reality cannot touch us in this state of dreaming; although the real does not disappear altogether, but remains as a point of flight, a futile set of coordinates from and outside of which the purest dream will consciously abscond—consciously, because the phenomenon dreaming is never left behind, and about this there can be no illusion.

The air is bad in the world; it causes the lungs to bleed: only the dream has air fit for infinity. We should not, however, imagine that the Pessoan dream escapes futility, provides satisfaction, or establishes some end, for the dreamer has no use for completion, is enriched by disappointment, and regards futility as the immanent truth of possibility. His dreaming follows one core edict: "Since we can't extract beauty from life, let's at least try to extract

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beauty from not being able to extract beauty from life."<sup>24</sup> Only if we imagine that some perfection may be found, and found complete, can we find ourselves tortured by its absence. The dream must remain inside us, for outside of us it would be absorbed into the world, and our wakefulness, as ones who dream, thereby lost in the unconscious dreaming of reality. Only through this internalization can possibilities proliferate without end: externalized they rot as the world rots. The dreamer becomes the earworm: "To reform reality in the intellect, to tell of the images of one's dreams in a voice nobody will hear: this is how to survive the world and its dismal ministry."<sup>25</sup>

Death, like love, is not fulfilled in the world. And so for death to realize the dream of itself, its threat of materialization must remain a threat—a threat in which the internalization finds promise and impossible potentialities of meticulous extrapolation. And love and death, once internalized, do not come apart: both "chaste like dead lips, pure like dreamed bodies, and resigned to being this way, like mad nuns."26 And so the possibilities for this dream of death should never touch the dead; awareness should be restricted to the antithetical reawakening of our senses in the dream so as to, paraphrasing Pessoa, externalize death on the inside. And what of this madness of death? For isn't death, like the nun, an absorption and a contextualizing appropriation of madness, an exchange, a justified tergiversation of relative sanities? For if "the earworm is a reversal and product of madness,"27 and death is just such an earworm, a limit thought enacted as an impossible possibility, then no madness can survive death, any more than madness can survive love. Just as an earthworm aerates and improves the soil, death's earworm allows us to breathe the end.

To write is not to act: if it seems like an act it is because it amounts to the act of not acting, the active refusal to act. ("To write is to forget. Literature is the most agreeable way of ignoring life.")<sup>28</sup> It always occurs as a recoiling from the shit of the world, even when its subject is nothing but that shit. But the writing called for here requires more than this inbuilt disassociation: it requires that a pure dream write itself, that the earworm's thought noise be promiscuous with its own recursive iterations, and that those iterations each become endlessly discursive. And there is no suiciding from the inside. For while our internal landscapes may be dead, they were made dead from the outside, made dead via some active participation with the world, with an alterity that destroys. The vermicular consumption of the self in dreaming is not then a form of suicide, but a kind of maximally protective coating insulating us from death. After all, the human corpse can only plague us if its dreams for us are allowed to overcome our dreams for it.

The Pessoan dreamer dreams with his intelligence (thought and feeling fused), and through this dreaming maintains truth while also reconfiguring it, because to dream is not to falsify, for as that dreamer tells us, "while dreamed things please me, false things disgust me." His approach is speculative and creative. His currency is impossibility and all its possibilities. His universes are not impossible universes but universes founded on the impossibility of their creation. His only interest is to dream what cannot be dreamt—and to be dreamt by what cannot dream. The dream and the dreamer are one, each performing the other. The dreamer's only fondness is for that which is absent, for absenteeism itself. The dreamer makes death and is not made by it, for his dream of death is closer to him than any exterior

death could ever be. His dream of death then protects him from death's dream for him. The dreamer knows to reach into the world is to necrotize that reaching appendage. And yet still the coordinates of the world do not fall away completely, but inform the dream with a verisimilitude of its own richness. And while the source is always external ("[e]verything comes from outside"), 30 it can never remain itself, can never escape dismemberment and deliquescence: the corpus of the world is there only for the dreamer to tear at, to burrow into and through, to rip into a million pieces of gouged abstraction. "For primitive people the moment of greatest anguish is the phase of decomposition; when the bones are bare and white they are not intolerable as the putrefying flesh is, food for worms."31 The world is populated with these, Bataille's primitive people, people drawn inescapably to the bare bones of an integral reality. It is the dreamer that grows fat in the rot of the world, and the putrefying earth that feeds the dreamer's dream of death. The world's degenerating mass thus becomes the dreamer's living mass, and it is in this blackened gloop that the power of worms (and earworms) to process what is dead, moving through and around and with it, is witnessed most clearly, for "nigredo is an internal but outward process in which the vermicular differentiation of worms and other corpuscles makes itself known in the superficial register of decay as that which undifferentiates."32

Like a legion of such worms, the Pessoan dreamer does not rest. He is always leaching from the world whatever might be dreamable, and the external world he leaves behind him is just so much waste, the useless by-product of his constant dreaming—a tapeworm removing nutrients from the world, growing and fattening as the environment surrounding it starves. And so if neuroscience has a picture of cognition sympathetic to capitalism's perpetual call to work, "an image of thought in which all cerebration is rendered purposeful, useful—valuable," it is this dreamer that works hardest to invert it, sucking purpose and use from objects only to have them unravel in countless digressions leading ever deeper into purposelessness—the tapeworm outgrowing its host. And yet for Eldritch Priest (our eponymously sacerdotal guide) daydreams and earworms are significantly distinct, each with its own discrete way of arranging content:

there is something that distinguishes the virtuosity of earworms from that demonstrated by daydreams. My sense is that the former's technical origins and repetitive character makes it less available for recuperation than the divagations of the latter. Although unruly in their general aimlessness, daydreams lend their virtuosity to contemporary capitalism's speculative investment in cognitive activity for their digressive yet narrative-esque form exemplifies the type of 'creative' obliquity valued by the successful entrepreneur. ... The earworm, however, is a little more peculiar. ... Unlike daydreams, whose affair with counterfactuals and anticipated futures makes its streamy content rife with narrative coordinates and trajectories that can be continually exchanged for possibilities and alternatives, earworms just twist and turn. The earworm's loopy performance, in which its ending is at the same time its beginning, cannot be exchanged for anything but itself, and as such the change or difference that it is and which it demonstrates is nothing but an exchange—a change beyond change.34

According to Priest, the earworm's performance is mnemonic, supplementary and imposed, thought/recalled in conjunction with other happenings as an imposition of thought/recall. The earworm's arrival as thought though is not an object of volition: its visitations are disruptive and obstreperous, for "the earworm's performance of memory is always suffered," and can even be thought of as "the psychic equivalent of a phatic utterance."35 Ultimately, then, the earworm's power lies in its facility to distract through nothing other than being, to exist regardless of purpose or meaning, to exist only to be thought-felt as nothing but the empty excuse for that thinking-feeling. Its very uselessness assists in creating an interiority in which thought can happen, in which thought can occur without having already been decided upon, in which thought is in a sense unthought and us there with it, fully realized (and so abstracted) selves in some deep space equivalent to directed thinking. And while this distinction is a valid one, the Pessoan pure dream can be imagined as an exception, imagined as the earworm's written (and yet-to-be-written) form. For it is the dream that cannot be written and so the only one that language should be stretched in order to capture. And this is where Baudrillard's radical thought will be found, and where death will be written, if death is ever written. This is where Black Noise and Black Light meet, where the thought of writing it is its being written, where the about is the thing itself.

### CODA

What if there were worms within the worms? What if earworms were hosts for Doom versions of themselves, for multiplicities of these Doom versions? What if

earworms were plagued with their computerized versions, and what if this malware infiltrated the earworms to effect some worldly return, some payload designed to cash in on these worms' aptitude for replication? What if the world was looking to become limbless and invertebrate? What if like computer worms these worms were bent on distracting us from distraction, of consuming the bandwidth of that distraction, of making targeted deletions, or of zombifying our purposelessness with some earthly foreign purpose? What if the nonconformist origins<sup>36</sup> and perceived uselessness of these worms were to become their camouflage? What defense could we mount against this malicious vermiculation while maintaining our openness, our vulnerability to undisclosed potentialities? What if the earworms were not hosts for these computerized worms? What if the earworms were these worms? What if by running these worms we patch ourselves to the distraction they offer? What if ILOVEYOU equates to IEATYOU or IBOREYOUTODEATH or IMONETIZEYOURSOUL or IBURYYOUALIVE? What if when we write earworms, when we write the earworms of death, we write instead a precoded emancipation? What if we return to an impossible beginning and precode this precoding? What if ...?

And as always what must be written but cannot be written is instead written about, for what else is there? There is it seems only ever the about, the about of impossibility, that sidles up as close as it can to its subject, so that it might by chance be bitten, just once, by one of its plethora of fleas

#### Notes

- 1 Eldritch Priest, "Streaming Consciousness: Earworms, Daydreams and Cognitive Capitalism" in *Theory, Culture & Society* (forthcoming).
- 2 Jean Baudrillard, "Radical Thought," <a href="http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-baudrillard/articles/radical-thought/">http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-baudrillard/articles/radical-thought/</a>
- 3 Priest, "Streaming Consciousness."
- 4 Georges Bataille, "The Pineal Eye' in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 88-9.
- 5 For how this relates to the borings of boredom see Eldritch Priest, "Listening to Nothing in Particular: Boredom and Contemporary Experimental Music" in *Postmodern Culture*, Vol. 21, Number 2, 2011.
- 6 See Derek McCormack, *The Well-Dressed Wound* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2015).
- 7 See Priest on Vilém Flusser in Priest, "Streaming Consciousness"
- 8 Black Light is human secretness, is our death, is meaning pulled continually forward into the blackened, necrotized corpse, the putrescent body of our perceived emancipation from the body—a freedom we do not understand, a dead light survived by its death. Black Light is never quite at the speed of the living; it is never a light that discloses what it means in terms that meaning can grasp, and then strangulate. It's as if time and distance were different for each of them, as Baudrillard writes: "If light drops to relative speeds, there is no more transcendence, no more God to recognize his own, and the universe lapses into indeterminacy." (Jean Baudrillard, Fatal Strategies [New York: Semiotext(e), 2008], 37.) And so we see this consequence is not enacted. No such relativity is achieved. For the Black Light is the body of God, it is transcendence made corporeal so that its promise can be seen but not accessed, it is the Lament Configuration found, even held, but never opened. Any such contact with the Black Light contained

within it would make the speeds of life and death/ secretness commensurate, thus throwing us into the chaos of some ultimate reality, a materialized cosmic pessimism the kind of which would see human thought immolate itself at the altars of all previous Hells. But then who's to say that this Black Light is not already leaking through some imperceptible fissure in its otherwise airtight corpse?

- 9 Priest, "Streaming Consciousness."
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Baudrillard, "Radical Thought."
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 The project undertaken by William Burroughs and Brion Gysin with their cut-up technique.
- 14 Baudrillard, "Radical Thought."
- 15 Priest, "Streaming Consciousness."
- 16 When William Burroughs explained the cut-up technique to Samuel Beckett, the latter famously replied, "That's not writing—it's plumbing."
- 17 Brian Massumi quoted in Priest, "Earworms, Daydreams, and the Fate of Useless Thinking in Cognitive Capitalism" in *Theory, Culture & Society* (forthcoming).
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Eldritch Priest, "Listening to Nothing in Particular: Boredom and Contemporary Experimental Music" in Postmodern Culture, Vol. 21, Number 2, 2011.
- where losing that habit. I doubt now whether we really see our whole life flashing before us at the moment of our death. The very possibility of the Eternal Return is becoming precarious: that marvellous perspective presupposes that things unfold in a necessary, predestined order, the sense of which lies beyond them. There is nothing like that today; things merely follow on in a flabby order that leads nowhere. Today's Eternal Return is that of the infinitely small, the fractal, the obsessive repetition of things on a microscopic and inhuman scale. It is not the exaltation of a will, nor the sovereign affirmation of an event, nor its consecration by an immutable sign,

- such as Nietzsche sought, but the viral recurrence of microprocesses." Jean Baudrillard, *America* (New York: Verso, 1988), 72.
- 21 Patrick Greaney quoted in Urs Allemann, *The Old Man and The Bench* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 2015), 112.
- 22 Urs Allemann, The Old Man and The Bench (Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 2015), 91.
- 23 What Priest refers to as "private performances." Priest, "Streaming Consciousness."
- 24 Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 261.
- 25 Gary J. Shipley, 'Dreaming Death: The Onanistic and Self-Annihilative Principles of Love in Fernando Pessoa's Book of Disquiet' in Glossator, Vol. 5, 107-138, 127.
- 26 Pessoa, The Book of Disquiet, 289.
- 27 Priest, "Streaming Consciousness."
- 28 Ibid., 107.
- 29 Ibid., 460.
- 30 Ibid., 58.
- 31 Georges Bataille, Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo (New York: Walker and Company, 1962), 56.
- 32 Reza Negarestani, "The Corpse Bride: Thinking With Nigredo" in *Collapse IV* ed., Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2008), 131.
- 33 Priest, "Streaming Consciousness."
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 See John Brunner, *The Shockwave Rider* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

# G Douglas Barrett

What if one changed the needle and directed it on its return journey along a tracing which was not derived from the graphic translation of sound but existed of itself naturally—well, to put it plainly, along the coronal structure [of the skull], for example. What would happen? A sound would necessarily result, a series of sounds, music ...

-Rainer Maria Rilke, "Primal Sound" (1919)1

It doesn't matter if it doesn't work.

—John Cage in conversation with Alvin Lucier on the eve of the premiere of Lucier's *Music for Solo Performer* (1965)<sup>2</sup>

[F]inally—and this goes for the capitalists too—an inhuman power rules over everything.

—Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844)<sup>3</sup>

## Introduction: Can of Worms

In his essay, "Streaming Consciousness: Earworms, Daydreams and Cognitive Capitalism," Eldritch Priest theorizes the well-known phenomenon of having a song or melodic fragment "stuck in one's head," the mental state otherwise known as an earworm. Earworms are unique because, unlike recorded sound, they are purely cognitive occurrences. They resound not through air molecules but within brain activity alone. Like "A Plague on Both Your Ears," such phenomena have an effect of being imposed upon their host: earworms appear to their sufferers seemingly out of nowhere, perhaps while in the process of walking, eating, or trying to sleep. Earworms are, what's more, emblematic of Jonathan Crary's insomniatic stage of late capitalism wherein consumption and production have become all but conflated through the ceaseless machinic circuits of 24/7 twittering. But as opposed to representing such brain states as pathological, Priest views earworming as a form of "useless" thinking, comparable to daydreaming or woolgathering, yet distinct in its capacity to serve as a form of expropriated cognitive labor. "For both neuroscience and neoliberal capitalism," Priest contends, "thought is no longer simply idle."4 Rather, these states of apparent inactivity—as recent experimental neuroscientific evidence attests (and Alvin Lucier had once discovered to be true of alpha waves)—appear to be more active when viewed, for example, through fMRI scans.<sup>5</sup> The earworm infiltrates such brain states, Priest argues, through a process of "cognitive offloading" whereby the brain is put to work, as if stuck in a groove, iteratively rehearsing the virtual vermin's refrain. Earworms trace such grooves not along the skull but embed them across the synaptic connectome.

Priest points to music's historical status as a fundamentally virtual technical object, focusing on the affordances of a recording technology accelerated through the digitalized circuits of late cognitive capitalism. Detethered from any explicit material incarnation, music,

in Priest's account (which draws upon Brian Massumi), is a "technique of existence," a simulacrum of aliveness that is simultaneously freed from corporeality. Extending this idea further, music's virtuality can be heard already in the less technologically contemporary form of the musical score. Recall, for example, the Renaissance practice of Augenmusik wherein visual features of the score evade direct audible expression, or simply the process of reading a score in order to experience music "in one's head." Similarly, consider German composer Dieter Schnebel's 1969 graphic score MO-NO: Musik zum lesen ("Music to read"), or Tom Johnson's unplayable Celestial Music for Imaginary Trumpets (1974) featuring notes scored over one hundred ledger lines above a treble clef.

Marked by such a virtuality, music is relieved of any essential reliance upon sound as medium or physical material. Indeed, this "dematerialization" of the musical object attests, furthermore, to the variously theorized historical homologies between music and conceptual art, including the formal overlap between the score as a "proposal" form and the conceptual formulations of artists like Sol LeWitt. Priest compels us to think this connection both neurologically and cybernetically—especially if we are to take N. Katherine Hayles's characterization of cybernetics, which begins with the well-known Macy Conferences (1943-1954) and extends to a phase she terms virtuality (1980s-present), as our point of departure.<sup>7</sup> As one commentator has suggested, LeWitt's well-known dictum, "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art," could have easily been a phrase cribbed from Norbert Wiener's 1948 Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine.8 As a kind of conceptual meme, the earworm becomes a neurological machine that makes the music.

Perhaps the most provocative can of worms Priest opens is his brief yet significant allusion to British philosopher Nick Land's writings from the 1990s on cybernetics and artificial intelligence. "[W]hat appears to humanity as the history of capitalism," writes Land, "is an invasion from the future by an artificial intelligent space that must assemble itself entirely from its enemy's resources." Such a reference is provocative due less to Land's association with "accelerationism"—or even his so-called "neoreactionary" politics —and more to the philosopher's recent assertion that the one question guiding his work for the past twenty years has been the "teleological identity of capitalism and artificial intelligence." Indeed, such a technodeterminism comprising capitalism and AI's "teleological identity" is a strong claim.

Yet considering the billions of dollars invested annually in artificial intelligence, institutions like Oxford's Future of Humanity Institute (FHI) and the recently established Cambridge Centre for Study of Existential Risk (CSER) could be justified in corroborating Stephen Hawking's recent warning that the development of a full artificial general intelligence could spell the end of the human species. 12 Such a scenario may not arise intentionally. In fact, one of the recurring catastrophe examples FHI philosopher Nick Bostrom gives is that of an AI agent responsible for something as seemingly benign as "maximizing the manufacture of paperclips."13 With exponentially increasing intelligence (the AI recursively self-improves ad infinitum), the AI proceeds to convert Earth, and as much of the rest of the observable universe as possible, into paperclips. Bostrom calls this "superintelligence."

Not everyone is convinced, however, that such an artificial superintelligence will arise, at least not without

some important intervening steps. Ever since the notorious Dartmouth Conferences led by cognitive scientist John McCarthy beginning in 1956, predictions AI experts have given for creating human-level AI appear to increase periodically over the decades, gradually ballooning from the optimistic span of "a summer" to more recent estimates of up to four centuries. <sup>14</sup> This is one reason why economist Robin Hanson predicts that it will be first through so-called "Whole Brain Emulation" that scientists and researchers will create autonomous thinking machines. Hanson forecasts,

[S]ometime in roughly the next century, it will be possible to scan a human brain at a fine enough spatial and chemical resolution, and to combine that scan with good enough models of how individual brain cells achieve their signal-processing functions, to create a cell-by-cell dynamically-executable model of the full brain in artificial hardware, a model whose signal input-output behavior is usefully close to that of the original brain.<sup>15</sup>

It will be through this process, then, of scanning a human brain, translating its functionality, and running it as a simulation, that we will create operational artificial minds, what Hanson calls "ems." "A *good enough* em has roughly the same input-output signal behavior as the original human," Hanson explains: "One might talk with it, and convince it to do useful jobs." <sup>16</sup>

Another reason Hanson gives for the looming ascendancy of brain emulation technology is the ability to cheaply copy and run a number of emulations—potentially trillions—limited only by hardware costs, which promises a potentially infinitely reproducible source of labor power

ultimately irresistible for investors. Wages for ems, then, become Malthusian (which turns out to be more efficient than enslaving the entities), reduced to an amount just above subsistence levels (the cost to run their hardware), while (non-investor) humans are obsolesced. Critical posthumanist discourses have debated the desirability of realizing such fantasies of disembodiment, while others have discussed the myriad philosophical questions raised, for example, around consciousness, identity, and the self.<sup>17</sup> Hanson's analysis is unique because it demonstrates how such a situation could emerge through (libertarian capitalist) economic interests alone, irrespective of questions of embodiment, the uniqueness of the biological human, etc. Furthermore, it points to capitalism's properly speculative and "experimental" nature: capitalism simultaneously forecasts a future—dynamically, yet with a kind of deterministic automatism—and experiments, relentlessly tries out programs to achieve such results. This structure finds an unlikely if incongruous, parallel in experimental music: in the words of Cage, "It doesn't matter if it doesn't work" 18—only that it labors, that it is productive or, to use Hanson's words, it is "good enough."

As bleak as such a future sounds (it gets worse in Hanson's analysis), much of the work is already underway to enable its realization. The European Union's "Blue Brain Project" and the "Human Brain Project," along with Barack Obama's "BRAIN Initiative," already collectively command billions in their respective efforts to map the human brain and emulate its functions. Research conducted by the Human Brain Project and the BRAIN Initiative promises important benefits to brain disorder treatments, along with a better understanding of neurological diseases and brain injury trauma. But much work remains to be

done to achieve complete brain emulations: computers must become considerably faster, microscopy scanning techniques must improve, and functional models of the brain must become more robust. The BRAIN Initiative and the Human Brain Project have only begun the modest goal of mapping the brains of mice and rats. Indeed, the coming era of "mind children" predicted in 1988 by robotics expert Hans Moravec remains far-fetched sounding to this day since such "artificial progeny" have yet to even crawl.<sup>19</sup>

(But they do already slither: OpenWorm is an open source scientific research project that seeks to simulate all 302 neurons and 7,000 synapses—the entire connectome—of the *Caenorhabditis elegans*: a species of roundworm. Identified as an important precursor to the more ambitious goal of mapping the human brain, these worms [come not in a can but] are built entirely "in silico." Like the earworm, and music more generally, the OpenWorm is, programmatically, a virtual entity; it is "substrate-independent.")<sup>20</sup>

Importantly, such an approach to engineering virtual life forms requires a unique encounter between cybernetics, informatics, and neuroscience. This newly emergent field represents a radical shift "in the epistemology of the brain in late modern neuroscience from a life science approach (biology and medicine) to a computer science approach in order to perpetuate a techno-rationality that concentrates on engineering [rather than] representing nature."<sup>21</sup> The name for this refigured techno-rational epistemological paradigm is computational neuroscience.

In this chapter I want to speculate on the consequences of recent computational neuroscience work that seeks to facilitate the creation of a fully functional model of the human brain in order to produce brain emulations, software programs that run simulations of individual human

minds. I will proceed by locating artistic precedents in the experimental music of the 1960s and '70s, found most interestingly in the work of Alvin Lucier. Concentrating on the intersection of cybernetics and neuroscience instrumentality in Lucier's Music for Solo Performer (1965), a work that uses EEG test equipment to measure and transduce alpha waves into musical signals, I want to ask how experimental music and its concomitant discourses of failure-emblematized by Cage's comment to Lucier, "It doesn't matter if it doesn't work"-might help to shape a response to the emerging impasses of technoscientific capitalism. I will conclude with a brief discussion of French philosopher Catherine Malabou's recent work following her watershed essay What Should We Do with Our Brain?<sup>22</sup> in order to ask what a political response to the prospect of brain emulations might look (or sound) like.

### Music for Solo Em

Moving from the future to the past, in 1965 American composer Alvin Lucier composed *Music for Solo Performer for enormously amplified brain waves and percussion*, a work that called for electroencephalogram (EEG) electrodes to be placed on the performer's scalp and which, with the aid of electronics, were used to activate a battery of percussion instruments positioned throughout the performance space. *Music for Solo Performer* attempts to transduce a performer's alpha waves, the relatively faint pulsations of electrical activity of the brain historically associated with states of cognitive idleness, into electrical signals that are subsequently amplified "enormously." These oscillations, typically occurring between 7.5 and 12.5 cycles per second (Hz), are well below

the range of human hearing; that is, they don't register as "tones." But when amplified they can easily be perceived as rhythms. Exploiting this character of alpha waves, Lucier's score calls for an array of speakers to be connected to the amplifier, which, ultimately, are heard to pulsate when the soloist achieves certain brain states. Upon producing alpha waves—typically achieved by "doing nothing," closing one's eyes, and refraining from visualizing—the speakers act as resonators and activate the various percussion instruments to which they are attached. Subsequently, the performer, as if placed within a feedback loop, is affected through exposure to the resulting percussion sounds (which may lead to the alpha waves' cessation). The performer becomes one node within a biocybernetic network that continually offloads, modulates, and circulates brain state information through an interconnected system of experimental neuromusical technics.

anticipates the rise of computational Lucier neuroscience through his appropriation of burgeoning and cybernetics technologies. neuroscience Lucier's work had inaugurated what one could call, without exaggeration, a "neuromusical turn" beginning in the art and experimental music of the 1960s with musicians such as John Cage, James Tenney, Manford L. Eaton, David Rosenboom, and Petr Kotik working with brainwaves in one form or another.<sup>23</sup> Importantly, such a musical fascination with neuroscience began in parallel with both the expansion of the military-technoscience complex alongside the rise of post-Fordist labor transformations of late capitalism. According to Douglas Kahn, "it becomes impossible to talk about American experimentalism in any comprehensive way distinct from the knowledge and technologies flowing from the militarized science of the Cold War, more specifically, cybernetics."<sup>24</sup> Experimentalism not only appropriates the rhetoric of scientific "experimentation" and instrumentality, but also, in certain cases, reflexively integrates its scientific apparatuses. Lucier's foray into brainwave technologies was, in this regard, exemplary.

Yet beyond a consideration of Music for Solo Performer's transmission of electromagnetic waves as an instance of "sonification," I want to read Lucier's work as an attempt to index cognitive labor through cybernetic and neurological instrumentality, while I also interrogate its relationship to discourses of experimentalism. Despite the image of the soloist "doing nothing," sitting still for an extended duration with electrodes attached to her/his head, Music for Solo Performer tasks the performer with producing alpha waves via the manipulation of mental and psychological states—a job that requires specific training and endurance. "This is a specially developed skill which the soloist learns with practice," Lucier explains, "and, no matter how experienced the soloist has become, various conditions of performance intrude upon that skill."25 For the premiere of Music for Solo Performer, Lucier remained virtually motionless for nearly forty minutes, attempting to periodically drift in and out of alpha states by exercising his newly cultivated skill.

Musical performance becomes a mental activity and, moreover, is rendered as a form of work. Mirroring discourses of capitalism's post-industrial shift toward intellectual labor, 26 Music for Solo Performer displaces the site of artistic labor from the body more generally to the brain in particular. As if realizing the fantasy of a purely technological link between mind and music, Lucier contends that his work directly connects "the brain to the

instruments, bypassing the body entirely."27 The soloist becomes what Fernando Vidal has critically identified as the "cerebral subject" of neuroscience, the realization of an equivalence between the modern "self" and the brain— "You are your brain"—that began in the mid-20th century (and strengthened with the introduction of fMRI scanning in the 1990s).<sup>28</sup> It may be true that in Music for Solo Performer the "performer performs by not performing,"29 at least if performance is considered to be a fundamentally physical process. But work, especially beginning in the post-Fordist era, has-when read through these discourses-become refactored as mental performance. Music for Solo Performer can be seen, then, as an important contribution to debates around artistic labor that were developing during the 1960s and '70s, which also began to interrogate the perceived shift from manual to intellectual labor alongside the concomitant movement toward conceptual and discursive artistic practices.30

Many of Lucier's statements around *Music for Solo Performer* are laden with labor rhetoric. "Most of the time my sounds do some kind of work," he explains.<sup>31</sup> Yet, overall, he acknowledges less the artist's work than the equipment involved, relegating the human labor component of *Music for Solo Performer* to the work's various machinic and technological processes. Referring to the ways the speakers physically activate the percussion instruments, for example, Lucier suggests, "The speaker is a performer." He adds, "It's doing something. It's doing work." Musical automata have played a crucial role in the history of both musical technics—especially recording technology—and artificial intelligence, with a history that stretches back as far as the Enlightenment.<sup>33</sup> Lucier's comment suggests

that the speaker forms a kind of extension, or prosthesis of the (laboring) mind, ultimately rendering the soloist as a kind of musical cyborg. Lucier thus brings the history of musicalized "thinking machines" into contact with an experimentalist interrogation of technoscience and Cold War-era developments in cybernetics.

Music for Solo Performer was a collaboration between Lucier and physicist and brainwave researcher Edmond M. Dewan, a close friend and colleague of cybernetics pioneer and MIT mathematics professor Norbert Wiener. Dewan worked for the US Air Force and was an adjunct professor at Brandeis University, where he had initially met Lucier who taught in the music department. In the score to Music for Solo Performer Lucier lists physicist Dewan as "Technical Consultant," even though he introduced Dewan as the composer of the work following its 1965 premiere. Far from merely an "assistant," however, Dewan was so important to Lucier's development that Kahn devoted an entire chapter of his recent book to their relationship. Complementing Dewan and Lucier, Cage and Wiener rounded out this web of interlocutors. On the whole, Music for Solo Performer was, according to Kahn, "a manifestation of cybernetics within music, a meeting of Wiener and Cage, one step removed."34 The work also manifested a musicalized cybernetics via the meeting of Lucier and Dewan.

Brainwaves were central to Dewan's understanding of consciousness, and consciousness was integral to his conclusions about artificial intelligence. "Let us start by loosely defining consciousness as 'awareness," he proposed in a 1957 paper. 35 "Recent investigations with the electroencephalogram [EEG] reveal interesting correlations between certain forms of electrical activity in the cerebral

cortex and certain states of awareness." Brainwaves were a marker of this "awareness," which he, in turn, thought to lie at the root of consciousness. Dewan then discusses the possibility of artificial intelligence. As if presaging the transformations that would later become associated with computational neuroscience, he concludes that "in order to decide whether or not a machine thinks, one would have to know all the physical correlates of consciousness; for only then could we know whether or not there is a structural isomorphism between the machine and that property of the brain which is associated with consciousness." Once the brain is fully knowable, one possesses the tools to ascertain, and even create, its machinic equivalent.

Wiener might have agreed. In his "Brain Waves and Self-Organizing Systems" (1969), a supplementary chapter included in the second edition of Cybernetics, he commented that "the brain is in some sense a control and computation apparatus" in describing the capacity for the alpha rhythms of the brain to autocorrelate or "clump" together with neighboring stimulus frequencies.38 "If a light is flickered into the eye at intervals with a period near 1/10 second," Wiener proposes, "the alpha rhythm of the brain is modified until it has a strong component of the same period as the flicker."39 (It may not be coincidental that such an experiment should conjure works like Tony Conrad's 1966 experimental film, The Flicker. After all, during that time, "electroencephalography became more an art than a science," according to Wiener.)40 Such a flickering would, according to Wiener, bring a subject's alpha waves in sync with it. Wiener's hypothesis could, in other words, be experimentally verified—tested during, say, a performance of Lucier's Music for Solo Performer.

Music for Solo Performer can be considered Lucier's first work of experimental music. 41 Experimentalism is an artistic strategy that, among other things, borrows the iterative testing and verification procedures found in both capitalism and technoscience, while radically deracinating such procedures from their ordinarily correlated systems of value (and knowledge) production. As Cage asserted in 1955, the term "experimental" was to be conceived "not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success or failure, but simply as ... an act the outcome of which is unknown."42 Indeterminacy, musical practices that stage a refusal of automaticity by refiguring the score's prescriptive form, was also crucial to Cage's conception of experimentalism. As with experimentalism, indeterminacy might even be seen to imagine a radical outside to technoscience's programmatic coincidence with capital. Along these lines, Lucier's Music for Solo Performer posits a privileged "unknowable"—here in the form of the indeterminate outcome resulting from his network of neuromusical technics—imagined as remaining ultimately outside the rubric of "success or failure." This is why Cage remarked to Lucier during their phone call on the eve of Music for Solo Performer's premiere, "It doesn't matter if it doesn't work."43

It doesn't matter, that is, as long as it remains (aesthetically) productive. Nonetheless, Lucier pushes against such notions of productivity by subverting norms of sensorial stimulation, well-formedness, and even conceptual legibility. Together these features compose what Priest has defined as an "aesthetics of failure" in experimental music. As *Boring Formless Nonsense*, experimental music is, Priest concludes, "hopeless." During his phone conversation with Lucier, Cage advised the composer as to the work's

duration. Not eight or ten, as Lucier had suggested, but forty minutes was Cage's recommendation. When it came to the performance, *Music for Solo Performer* was so boring, in fact, that during the premiere one of Lucier's fellow Brandeis faculty pretended to sleep while another colleague gave him a "hotfoot" (a prank wherein a match is inserted into a victim's shoe and lit). 46 Regarding the work's form, Lucier reported anxiety and nervousness the night of the premiere. "I don't have a structure for this.' I mean, I'm a composer," he worried. "I should impose some kind of structure, but then I thought, no, brain waves are a natural phenomenon." Boring and formless, perhaps, but is *Music for Solo Performer* nonsense?

Music for Solo Performer, along with its experimental status, marks a shift from a conception of music as sensorial/ aesthetic activity to cerebral/conceptual practice. Music, in this configuration, becomes mental/discursive work. Despite predating important canonical works of conceptual art by several years (LeWitt's Sentences on Conceptual Art, for example, was written in 1969), Music for Solo Performer is to be understood, as Volker Straebel and Wilm Thoben contend, as a kind of "conceptual music."48 This returns us, then, to the notion of music as a virtual form decoupled from the material (or medium) specificity of sound. Here this virtuality, I suggest, stages musical and artistic labor as performative mental work. Although their analysis focuses on claims regarding Music for Solo Performer as an instance of "sonification," Straebel and Thoben argue for a music "beyond the audible" that encompasses "much more than sound."49 Extending this idea further, such an "expanded field"50 of musical practice is seen, in this instance, to open onto broader questions related to neuroscience, but also

more recently pending concerns around artificial intelligence and intellectual labor.

But does this mean that audiences should value Lucier's performance as an exhibition of the sheer "preciousness" of human cognitive labor, a virtuosic display of the "mind at work"?

# From Worms to Rats: What Should We Do with Our Brain Music?

The question as to what kinds of work are capable of digitalization becomes crucial in the various future scenarios recently posited by thinkers of AI and cybernetics. In a section of his Superintelligence entitled "Wages and unemployment," for example, Bostrom warns, "Not only could digital minds perform the intellectual work now done by humans, but, once equipped with good actuators or robotic bodies, machines could also substitute for human physical labor."51 When the physical body becomes a mere prosthetic extension of (digital) minds any solid distinction between manual and intellectual labor begins to melt. Echoing Hanson's scenario (albeit ostensibly somewhat more compassionately), Bostrom continues, "With cheaply copyable labor, market wages fall. The only place where humans would remain competitive may be where customers have a basic preference for work done by humans."52 Interestingly, music is the example Bostrom gives of potentially unsubstitutable human labor:

A concert audience, for instance, might like to know that the performer is consciously experiencing the music and the venue. Absent phenomenal experience, the musician could be regarded as merely a high-powered jukebox, albeit one capable of creating the three-dimensional appearance of a performer interacting naturally with the crowd. Machines might then be designed to instantiate the same kinds of mental states that would be present in a human performing the same task. Even with perfect replication of subjective experiences, however, some people might simply prefer organic work.<sup>53</sup>

It is the "mental states," then, or the inner life of the performer that becomes the crucial factor in determining machine/human preference. Moreover, conscious subjective experience itself, here reduced to an affective capacity to authentically "feel the music," is determined in the last instance as precious commodifiable human labor. Over the AI, with its potentially deficient internal life, this "organic" work of the human (should it be called, in a European context, "bio"?) becomes a kind of delicacy to be consumed through what remains of employment. Bostrom's scenario of human obsolescence in the face of such "copyable labor," furthermore, conjures the history of political struggles around labor and recording technology, especially in the US during the Second World War. Recall the 1942 American Federation of Musicians (AFM) labor union ban on all commercial recordings in order to pressure record companies to remunerate performers in the form of royalties. (Cage himself had fantasized about expanding this large-scale "silencing" of recorded media to include radio, television, and even newspapers and Hollywood films.)54 This connection becomes all the more pertinent when considering recording technology's historical inheritances

from musical automata and androids. But whether such a political strategy could be applied to the looming impasses of artificial intelligence has yet to be answered.

Upon learning of the Blue Brain Project's competitive goal of simulating the neocortical column of a ratalongside the release of IBM's "neurosynaptic" CPU chip, which promises the equivalent of neuroplasticity in silicon-Catherine Malabou suggested a revision of the title of her widely influential 2004 essay What Should We Do with Our Brain? as "Rat Race; or What Can We Do with Our Blue Brain?"55 This is because neuroplasticity, which the philosopher defines as the brain's radical ability to both give and receive form, had fortified the human brain, for Malabou, against its potential capture via machinic duplication or emulation. According to Malabou, "The 'plasticity' of the brain refers to the capacity of synapses to modify their transmission effectiveness. Synapses are not in fact frozen; to this degree, they are not mere transmitters of nerve information but, in a certain sense, they have the power to form or reform information."56 If IBM's new chip could, in fact, simulate such plasticity in silicon, as it claims, this would challenge the conception of plasticity as a privileged feature of biological human brains. (Interestingly, Hanson implicates plasticity yet only as a potentially negative factor linked to aging.)57

For Malabou, however, plasticity creates the conditions for a genuine *historicity*—and hence, politics—of the brain. Drawing on Marx's notorious statement about history, she proclaims, "Humans make their own brain, but they do not know they are doing so." This leads her to posit the task of a "critique of neuronal ideology" which insists upon plasticity against the kind of neoliberal "flexibility" that coincides with

what Slavoj Žižek paraphrases (in his discussion of What Should We Do with Our Brain?) as the resonance "between cognitivism and 'postmodern' capitalism ..." <sup>59</sup> Importantly, this formulation of a "neuronal politics" also gives way to her critique of the cybernetic conception of the brain as a computational machine. Specifically, in the section of What Should We Do with Our Brain? entitled "End of the 'Machine Brain" she criticizes "technological metaphors" of the brain such as Henri Bergson's "central telephone exchange" and, of course, the "computer brain." She argues, "Opposed to the rigidity, the fixity, the anonymity of the control center is the model of a suppleness that implies a certain margin of improvisation, of creation, of the aleatory."60 Defending the biological human brain against its potential digital emulation, Malabou resorts to a musicality that ultimately sounds not unlike Bostrom's.

Yet, as we've seen, in the face of brain emulations that are, as Hanson puts it, "good enough"—that work, in both senses of the word—such an attempt to differentiate the biological from the machinic may, in the end, simply not matter. At least in the sense that capital doesn't care about such distinctions: "It doesn't matter if it doesn't work" if it is productive. Recently Malabou has acknowledged the conceptual impasse preventing assertions of the biologically essential, concluding that a "strategy of opposition" has become untenable. Casting doubt on the possibility of an "outside," she continues:

Critiques of technoscience and biopower, deconstructions of sovereignty, denunciations of instrumentalization of life in particular produced by biopolitical and cybernetic modes of control lack actuality as long as they rely on the strict separation between the symbolic and the biological and think of critique as a possible outside, whatever its form, of the system. I now realize that the strategy developed in my book, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, was itself participating in its own way in this confidence in the outside. Because, again, I believed that neural plasticity, which I discovered and studied with such curiosity, such excitement—passion even—was the undeniable proof of the irreducibility of the brain to a machine and, consequently, also of intelligence to a flexible software program.<sup>61</sup>

Such an overconfidence in a non-outside, perhaps of a similar nature to what Marx termed "real subsumption,"<sup>62</sup> had inhibited Malabou from apprehending the overlapping non-identity between the human and the machinic, their mutual forms of co-constitution. The problem then becomes not that of ascertaining the uniqueness of the biological human over the machine's supposed determinism, but rather to disrupt the "conditioned responses" to capitalist subjectivity: our own automaticity.

Returning to a musical register, Cage's experimentalist indeterminacy can already be seen as an artistic model for rerouting capital's apparent anthropotechnical telos. Yet how can we break with such a "teleological identity of artificial intelligence and capitalism" when capitalism simultaneously appears so erratic, dynamic, and, indeed, experimental? Malabou notes that Foucault had already asked how we might be capable of interrupting our own automaticity and answers with a call for an experimentalism carried out through what she calls the "neurohumanities"—a

category in which we might include, specifically, neuromusic. "The historical-critical attitude must be an experimental one," Malabou insists. "Neurohumanities should then be the site for experimental theory, opening the path for diverse thoughts and techniques of self-transformation, inventions of the transcendental, and, again, interruptions of automaticity." <sup>64</sup> If Cage's indeterminacy stages a radical challenge to technoscientific automaticity, then Lucier is seen to extend such a gesture through an experimental neuromusic.

A politics of brain emulation and artificial intelligence might adopt precisely the kind of speculative, experimental attitude found in Lucier's "brain music" as a point of departure. Already in Priest can we see the outlines of a reinvention of music as a form of experimental theory through the use of 'pataphysics, hyperstitions, pseudonymic knots, and what he calls "reality machines":65 fictional texts or accounts of nonexistent works that coincide with music's—and the earworm's—enabling virtuality. Of course, one may conversely adopt a deterministic approach to such technological impasses, attempting to calculate and anticipate, as Land would have it, AI's "enemy invasion" from the future. Even Hanson admits that his scenario can occur only in the absence of a large-scale "global coordination"66 of resistance. Yet the eventual difficulty of achieving such measures may risk a return to the "teleological identity" of brain emulations and capitalism, reminding us of the "inhuman power" that capital has so spectacularly harnessed throughout history. (In any case, it remains important not to reduce such a politics to a concern for an essential or normative category of the human: Rosi Braidotti is right to ask, "Where is the postcolonial and race analysis in the

[Future of Humanity Institute]?"<sup>67</sup>) Nevertheless, in light of this observation, perhaps Cage's statement, "It doesn't matter if it doesn't work," should be thought, paradoxically, in relation to our politics. It remains difficult to know what difference, if any, our interventions will make in the end. Judged as future "success or failure," it doesn't matter if *it* doesn't work (outcomes may be genuinely "unknowable"), only that *we* labor—without end—against the all-too-(in) human power that continues to govern us in the present.

#### **Notes**

- 1 Included in Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 38-42 (40-41).
- Alvin Lucier, seminar, in Dita Eibenová, M. Perry and J. Novak (eds.) Ostrava Days 2001: New Music Institute and Festival, Ostrava: Ostrava Center for New Music, 27–38, quoted in Straebel and Thoben, "Alvin Lucier's Music for Solo Performer: Experimental music beyond sonification," Organised Sound 19, Special Issue 1 (April 2014): 17-29 (17).
- 3 Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844), quoted in Nick Dyer-Witheford, Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-technology Capitalism (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 37. Marx's text is also available at <a href="https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/epm/index.htm">https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/epm/index.htm</a>.
- 4 Eldritch Priest, "Streaming Consciousness: Earworms, Daydreams and Cognitive Capitalism," *Theory, Culture & Society* (manuscript), 4. See Priest's related talk, "A Plague on Both Your Ears," *The Occulture: Sound, New Media, and Hyperstition*, November 12, 2013, <a href="http://www.theocculture.net/a-plague-on-both-your-ears/">http://www.theocculture.net/a-plague-on-both-your-ears/</a>.

- 5 Priest, "Streaming Consciousness," 20. Notwithstanding, however, the various criticisms of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), especially regarding its ability to provide an accurate index of cognitive labor. "These images do not *show* the 'mind at work' *per se*," as Stollfuß argues, "but, to a greater degree, statistical computations. Thus, evidence of brain activation has to be re-attributed rather to the 'algorithm at work'" (Sven Stollfuß "The Rise of the Posthuman Brain: Computational Neuroscience, Digital Networks and the 'In Silico Cerebral Subject," *Trans-Humanities* 7, no. 4 [2014]: 80, italics in original).
- 6 Priest, "Streaming Consciousness," 11.
- 7 Hayles calls the first, foundational phase of cybernetics, which includes Norbert Wiener and John von Neumann, homeostasis (1945-1960), the second reflexivity (1960-1980), and the third, characterized by the work of robotics expert Hans Moravec, virtuality (1980-present). See N. Katherine Hayles, How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). See also David Cecchetto, "N. Katherine Hayles and Humanist Technological Posthumanism," in Humanesis: Sound and Technological Posthumanism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 63-92.
- 8 Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 12. Warren Neidich, "Conceptual Art as Neurobiological Praxis," accessed January 14, 2016, <a href="http://www.artbrain.org/conceptual-art-as-neurobiologic-praxis/">http://www.artbrain.org/conceptual-art-as-neurobiologic-praxis/</a>.
- 9 Nick Land, "Machinic Desire," *Textual Practice* 7, no. 3 (1993): 471-482 (479).
- 10 For a description (and critique), see Park MacDougald, "The Darkness Before the Right," *The Awl*, September 28, 2015, accessed January 14, 2016, <a href="http://www.theawl.com/2015/09/good-luck-to-human-kind">http://www.theawl.com/2015/09/good-luck-to-human-kind</a>
- 11 Nick Land, "Nick Land: 'The Teleological Identity of Capitalism and Artificial Intelligence," *Incredible Machines*

- 2014, conference talk, transcribed by Jason Adams, March 10, 2014, accessed January 14, 2016, <a href="http://incrediblemachines.info/nick-land-the-teleological-identity-of-capitalism-and-artificial-intelligence/">http://incrediblemachines.info/nick-land-the-teleological-identity-of-capitalism-and-artificial-intelligence/</a>
- 12 See, for example, Rory Cellan-Jones, "Stephen Hawking warns artificial intelligence could end mankind," BBC News, December 2, 2014, <a href="http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-30290540">http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-30290540</a>.
- 13 Nick Bostrom, Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 123.
- 14 The Dartmouth Summer Project's 1956 grant proposal to the Rockefeller Foundation had boldly concluded, "We think that a significant advance can be made in one or more of these problems if a carefully selected group of scientists work on it together for a summer," quoted in *Superintelligence*, 5. Robin Hanson has more recently expressed doubt around existing predictions for achieving advanced general artificial intelligence, suggesting that, "At the rate of progress seen by AI researchers in their subfields over the last twenty years, it would take about two to four centuries for half of these AI subfields to reach human-level abilities" Robin Hanson, *Age of Em: Work, Love and Life when Robots Rule the Earth* (manuscript, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, 2016), 71.
- 15 Hanson, Age of Em (manuscript), 63. Note that although Hanson uses the terms "simulation" and "emulation" interchangeably to refer to the process of digitally replicating a distinct human mind, Dutch neuroscientist and neuroengineer Randal A. Koene distinguishes between the two terms: "We call the stochastically generated models simulations and the faithful copies [i.e. Hanson's topic] emulations" ("Uploading to Substrate-Independent Minds," in The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future, eds. Max More and Natasha Vita-More [Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013], 146–56 [148]); cf. Stollfuß, "The Rise of the Posthuman Brain," 93. For a technical report on

- the 2008 state of the art of brain emulation technologies, see Anders Sandberg, Nick Bostrom, *Whole Brain Emulation:* A Roadmap, Technical Report #2008-3, Future of Humanity Institute, Oxford University, <a href="http://www.fhi.ox.ac.uk/reports/2008-3.pdf">http://www.fhi.ox.ac.uk/reports/2008-3.pdf</a>.
- 16 Robin Hanson, "What Will It Be Like to Be an Emulation?" in Intelligence Unbound: The Future of Uploaded and Machine Minds, eds. Russell Blackford, Damien Broderick (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 298-309 (298), italics mine.
- 17 For a recent survey of these discussions, see *Intelligence Unbound*. From a posthumanist perspective, see, for example, Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*.
- 18 Lucier, Seminar.
- 19 Hans Moravec, Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
- 20 I borrow this phrase from Koene. See "Uploading to Substrate-Independent Minds."
- 21 Stollfuß, "The Rise of the Posthuman Brain," 81.
- 22 Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).
- John Cage's Variations VII (1966) used brainwaves, as 23 did James Tenney's Metabolic Music (1965), various works by David Rosenboom, and Petr Kotik's There is Singularly Nothing (1971-73), which incorporated brainwave data from fruit flies. Additionally, the instrumental parts to Kotik's six-hour operatic setting of Gertrude Stein's Many Many Women (1976-8) were derived from EEG graphs made by scientist Jan Kučera in order to study the effects of alcohol on the nervous system. Nam June Paik's 1966 proposal for a "DIRECT-CONTACT-ART" (see Kahn, Earth Sound [278fn4]) shared many features with both Lucier and Manford L. Eaton's work. For a detailed study of the latter, see Branden W. Joseph, "Biomusic," in "On Brainwashing: Mind Control, Media, and Warfare," eds. Andreas Killen and Stefan Andriopoulos, special issue, Grey Room 45 (Fall 2011): 128-50.

- 24 Douglas Kahn, "Alvin Lucier: Brainwaves," in Earth Sound Earth Signal: Energies and Earth Magnitude in the Arts (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 83-92 (86).
- 25 Lucier quoted in Kahn, "Edmond Dewan and Cybernetic Hi-Fi," in *Earth Sound*, 93-105 (100).
- 26 This body of literature, for which I will not attempt to provide a complete bibliography here, can be extended to the various accounts of "intellectual," "immaterial," "cognitive," "affective," and "communicational" labor found alongside critiques of post-Fordism. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Maurizio Lazzarato, Paolo Virno, Franco "Bifo" Berardi, Yann Moulier-Boutang, Nick Dyer-Witheford, Jodi Dean, and Carlo Vercellone represent only a few of the contemporary theorists who have contributed to this expansive field.
- 27 Lucier quoted in Kahn, "Edmond Dewan," 101.
- 28 Fernando Vidal, "Brainhood: Anthropological Figure of Modernity," *History of the Human Sciences* 22, no. 1 (2009): 5–36. From "you are your brain" Malabou shifts to the first person plural and draws upon neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's notion of the "proto-self" (and Marx) to contend, ""We' end up coinciding completely with 'our brain'—because our brain is us, the intimate form of a 'proto-self,' a sort of organic personality—and we do not know it" (Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* 8). See also George Makari, *Soul Machine: The Invention of the Modern Mind* (New York: WW Norton, 2014).
- 29 Kahn, "Edmond Dewan," 101.
- 30 See Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).
- 31 Lucier quoted in Kahn, "Edmond Dewan," 101.
- 32 Ibid., 99.
- 33 See Adelheid Voskuhl's study of piano-playing musical musical automata in *Androids in the Enlightenment: Mechanics, Artisans, and Cultures of the Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). These androids or "Enlightenment automata," Voskuhl notes, "are often taken to be

- forerunners and figureheads of the modern, industrial machine age, an age in which the economic, social, cultural, and aesthetic constitution of humans changed fundamentally and supposedly became 'mechanized'" (2).
- 34 Kahn, "Alvin Lucier," 86.
- 35 Edmond Dewan, "Other Minds': An Application of Recent Epistemological Ideas to the Definition of Consciousness," *Philosophy of Science* 24, no. 1 (January 1957): 70–76 (73).
- 36 Ibid. 74-75.
- 37 Ibid. 76.
- 38 Wiener, Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965 [1985, second edition]), 197.
- 39 Ibid., 198.
- 40 Ibid., 183.
- 41 Straebel and Thoben, "Alvin Lucier's *Music for Solo Performer*," 19.
- John Cage, "Experimental Music: Doctrine" (1955) 42 in Silence: Lectures and Writings. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 13-17 (13). Compare Cage's quintessential 1955 statement on experimental music to the 1957 words of German scientist Wernher von Braun: "[B]asic research is when I am doing what I don't know what I am doing" (quoted in Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition: Second Edition [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013 (1958)], 231). It becomes clear why Arendt contended that the natural sciences had become fundamentally processual and, moreover, capable of triggering "processes of no return" (ibid.). For a compelling critique of cognitive science that, among other things, compares this tendency of cybernetics to the sorcerer's apprentice myth, see Jean-Pierre Dupuy, On the Origins of Cognitive Science: The Mechanization of the Mind, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), xii-xiii.
- 43 John Cage quoted in Straebel and Thoben, 17.
- 44 Some elements of Lucier's composition can be read as obfuscating an otherwise cleanly conceptual structure.

For example, a tape playback system provided brainwave recordings sped up to an audible range, which were to be triggered by the performer's amplified brainwaves. This feature of the work adds another kind of distortion (or confusion) to what might initially figure (at least theoretically) as a clear indexical relationship between the percussion sounds and the soloist's brainwaves. Straebel and Thoben, for instance, argue against the interpretation of *Music for Solo Performer* as a "scientific setup where brain waves are automatically transformed into percussion sounds" (27), despite the work's "conceptual" basis.

- 45 Eldritch Priest, Boring Formless Nonsense: Experimental Music and the Aesthetics of Failure (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); eldritch Priest, "A Sprawling Mess: The Poetics of Musica Residua," Radical Musicology 4 (2009), accessed January 18, 2016, http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk/2009/Priest. htm.
- 46 Kahn, "Alvin Lucier: Brainwaves," 90. As Kahn acknowledges, such a display can also be attributed to the various aesthetico-ideological antagonisms arising between Lucier's experimentalism and his colleagues' Europeanderived avant-gardism.
- 47 Quoted in Straebel and Thoben, 17-18.
- 48 Ibid., 27.
- 49 Ibid. I make a related point from a different perspective (and with different case studies) in my book After Sound: Toward a Critical Music (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).
- 50 I borrow this phrase from Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," October Vol. 8, (Spring, 1979): 30-44.
- 51 Nick Bostrom, Superintelligence, 160.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 See Douglas Kahn, "John Cage: Silence and Silencing," *The Musical Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (1997): 556-598 (568-9).
- 55 Catherine Malabou, "Metamorphoses of Intelligence: 'Like a Pollock Painting," talk, University of California Irvine, May 22, 2015, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LFyQRcSc2w">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LFyQRcSc2w</a>.

- 56 Catherine Malabou, Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing, 59.
- 57 "[S]ome of human brain aging is also plausibly intrinsic to human mind design," *The Age of Em*, (manuscript),163. Hanson cites Joao Magalhaes and Anders Sandberg, "Cognitive Aging as an Extension of Brain Development: A Model Linking Learning, Brain Plasticity, and Neurodegeneration," *Mechanisms of Ageing and Development* 126 (2005): 1026–1033; Hanson, (manuscript), 514. Note that Hanson also makes reference to a potential "cultural plasticity" of the brain that could enable radical changes in attitudes toward sex and reproduction *The Age of Em*, (manuscript), 401.
- 58 Malabou, What Should We Do with Our Brain?, 8.
- 59 Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 209.
- 60 Malabou, What Should We Do with Our Brain?, 35.
- 61 Malabou, "Metamorphoses of Intelligence."
- 62 Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1 (New York: Penguin, 1982), 645.
- 63 Nick Land, "Nick Land: 'The Teleological Identity of Capitalism and Artificial Intelligence."
- 64 Malabou, "Metamorphoses of Intelligence."
- 65 Priest, *Boring Formless Nonsense*. This bibliographical entry is complicated by the fact that Priest cites his own book, as a kind of self-referential feedback loop, along with the page upon which the term "reality machines" appears.
- 66 Hanson, The Age of Em, (manuscript), 42.
- 67 Rosi Braidotti, "Posthuman, All Too Human? A Cultural Political Cartography," *Inhuman Symposium*, May 25, 2015, Fridericianum, Kassel, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNJPR78DptA">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNJPR78DptA</a>.

# 6 A Meditation on Earworms and Breath Sounds

Tang Yan

A film screen, wide, grey. No image. No sound. No crunchy popcorn, whispers, spoilers, memories. Now screen image on, then sound, faint sound, source unknown. Now light, then stage garbage white blue yellow, all kinds of colors. Ah, cigarette butts. Stage upside down, stage spinning. Now light brighter, sound weaker. Now no sound. Hold for five seconds. Now sound, never gone, Sound goes on, ah inhalation, no, exhalation, no, both, no, neither. Now screen light off, now all gone.

Perhaps this Beckettian meme is the best way to recapture my experience of watching Damien Hirst's *Breath*, <sup>1</sup> a 2001 film version of Samuel Beckett's play *Breath* (1969). The original play requires a strict synchronicity between breath sounds and the brightness of stage lights; the inspiratory sound synchronizes with the increase of light and the expiratory sound with the decrease of light. <sup>2</sup> But Hirst's film is a strange case in that it uses painfully intermittent and forced breath sounds rather than normal ones. I cannot identify the nature and source of the faint, breeze-like sound in the first ten seconds of the film, and I have to rely on my spontaneous sensory experience, as well as my belated response and speculation, to grasp a fragmentary impression of the breath sounds played in the rest of the film.

The breath sounds in Hirst's *Breath* provide an interesting counterpart to the earworms discussed by Eldritch Priest.

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In his article on earworms and cognitive capitalism, Priest describes earworms—the tunes stuck in our heads and exhausting our attention—as the limit case of the "technology of lived abstraction" and useless thinking that depends on yet disturbs capitalism's exploitation of human senses and potentiality.<sup>3</sup> Although the breath sounds per se in Hirst's film are not earworms, the former are also abstract and meaningless, inasmuch as their rhythmic features and semantic contexts have been stripped off altogether in the film. I suggest that these two kinds of abstraction speak to two modes of subverting the subject-object relation. If earworms' fatalistic intrusion on my subjective thinkingfeeling relies on their virtuality, uselessness, and absolute freedom, the subversive power of breath sounds in Hirst's film comes from a weak desubjectivization of me<sup>4</sup>—a faint and contingent process of emptying out the subjectivity of the audience. This specific mode of desubjectivization is engendered through a virtual and affective relation between me and the breath sounds, at once a dynamic encounter and a process I would like to call a Beckett-esque worm-ization becoming-weak, "feeling becoming-worm, knowing nothing, capable of nothing, wanting nothing."5

But instead of focusing on the sonic features and technical production of breath sounds, I would like to inquire into the ethics and politics of the virtual process of worm-ization. Why ethics and politics? As I will discuss later, the process of worm-ization is also a weak encounter between the breathing being and me, an encounter that radically challenges the current discourse on the ethics of the Other and the consequent formation of political communities enabled by our relationship with the precarious Other.<sup>6</sup> When I am listening to the painful breath sounds in

Hirst's one-minute film, am I able to apprehend, to respond, to care, to decide to do something, to be? Does this weak encounter promise a coming community, even though it is a weak one, a contingent one, an ephemeral one? If Judith Butler thinks that the way to protect humans from violence and suffering is first and foremost "an apprehension of a common human vulnerability,"8 would this weak encounter allow an alternative apprehension of a common vulnerability without falling back on the ideological vestige of human exceptionalism? As Cary Wolfe has critiqued, Butler builds the notion of precarious life upon "a reciprocity model" (a mutual recognition and responsibility), and she "remains too committed" to associating agency with personhood.9 What is at issue here, I think, is not to hastily reject Butler's model by assigning Hirst's breathing being a post-human condition—as "post-human" is a term too big and too strong to describe the situation of worm-ization—but to look beyond the human / nonhuman division and ask what it means to be post-being-able and post-being-potential in the process of becoming-worm and becoming-abstract. Echoing Peter Sloterdijk's discussion of the politics of aerotechnical designs and atmospheric regulation, 10 I propose that the ethics of worm-ization should not be understood as my benign and idyllic responsibility for the vulnerable alterity (the breathing being), but as a communal and impersonal imperative of bare survival solely conditioned by a primordial yet threatened act of breathing within an airsharing community across human/nonhuman boundaries.

The question of ethics inevitably ties to the notions of assimilation and pluralization. Would an endless repetition of the encounter between me and breath sounds transform the breathing being into earworms (into my

virtual thoughts), or would it instead create a multiplicity, or even an explosion that further desubjectivizes and pluralizes me? My answer would be the latter, because the earworm-ization of breath sounds—a doubled and thus more intense condition of abstraction and virtualization-might reduce the meaningless breath sounds to purely audible temporal durations and eventually lead to an explosion of two simultaneous yet heterogeneous temporalities beyond my subjective grasp and retrospective measurement of time. My microscopic observation of earworms and breath sounds will end with this bold, if not paranoid, hypothesis. I will imagine a particular moment of abstraction when breath sounds become earworms, and conceptualize a more radical mode of abstraction that exceeds even the limit case of earworms discussed by Priest. This hypothetical mode of abstraction specifies different degrees and intensities of "the lived abstraction;" as breath sounds in Hirst's film are abstracted and contentless in the first place, the virtualization and abstraction of the already abstracted breath sounds theoretically open up the possibility of creating an immanent synchronicity between the abstracted temporal durations and my virtual thinking. The final conclusion drawn upon this synchronicity is that the double abstraction of breath sounds further desubjectivizes and depersonalizes me through an inconceivable and fatalistic explosion of time.

#### Contingency—An Insignificant Imperative— Worm-ization

The breath sounds in Hirst's film contain multiple contingent variations. The contingency is first created as a deferred signification of the very meaning of "breathing,"

which largely fails my anticipation and comprehension of the nature and source of the sound. In the first ten seconds of the film, the weak, breeze-like sound can hardly be associated with human respiration. It is almost at the end of the respiratory sound that I finally recognize a high-pitched, intermittent, and painful inhalation mixed with the sound produced by vocal tracts' frictions. The emergence of such a vague breath sound coexists with my sensory experiences, but preexists my comprehension of and response to the sound, which means that a virtual and affective relation between me and a breathing being takes place before I can come to terms with my responsibility for that being. "I am listening, it's not enough, I must understand, I'm doing my best, I can't understand, I stop doing my best, I can't do my best, I can't go on, poor devil," says the nameless narrator in The Unnamable.11

The virtuality of this relation cannot be understood strictly in Gilles Deleuze's term of "the virtual," because the latter has its own mobile constellations and rhizomes (cinema, philosophy, political science, literature, etc.). Yet my virtual relation to the breathing being does partake in Deleuze's final conceptual crystallization of the virtual—a transcendental field defined by a plane of pure immanence: as Deleuze writes, "it [the transcendental field] appears therefore as a pure stream of a-subjective consciousness, a pre-reflexive impersonal consciousness, a qualitative duration of consciousness without a self."12 My relation to the breathing being takes place within this Deleuzian virtual stream of a-subjective consciousness, because, first and foremost, the breathing being exists before my understanding and comes to me as an indefinite, a-subjective life.

The affinity between Hirst's breathing being and Deleuze's indefinite life is not merely conceptual but real, for Deleuze is also obsessed with creating breath. In The Logic of Sense, Deleuze has already noted Artaud's crissouffles, "the breath-words (mots-souffles) and howl-words (mots-cris)" whose "literal, syllabic, and phonetic values have been replaced by values which are exclusively tonic and not written."13 In "Immanence: A Life," Deleuze uses "a life ..." to produce an a-syntactical, extra-linguistic, and indefinite agency. Physically attaching to the letters, the ellipsis in "a life ..." functions as a breath that transforms "a life" into a contingent and intermittent being. 14 Agamben reads the ellipsis as an exclusion of the determinability of the indefinite article in "a life," an exclusion of any being that might be universalized and transcended after and by the article "a." The ellipsis, as I understand it, not only affirms virtuality and an immanent determinability, but also installs a breath in "a life" to produce a trace of a contingent and undecidable being that rejects speech, language, vocalization, a being as affective and incomprehensible as Hirst's breathing being.

Moreover, my relation to that breath being is incomprehensible, affective, and free from my subjective grasp of the object, which assigns me and the breathing being *the name* of "a life" proposed by Deleuze. He describes how "a life" differs from the common sense of an individual life: "The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event free from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens." My relation to the breathing being is precisely such a process of giving away, of subjugating my feeling and incomprehension to

the pure taking-place of breathing before me, of releasing the pure event of happening free from subjectivity and objectivity. So my relation to the breathing being should be a virtual relation between two impersonal singularities. Oh, I should drop the possessive pronoun "my." But can I? Sorry, my friend, I am too possessive to let it go. What a paradox.

#### T. S. Eliot has uttered what I am thinking:

Between the conception And the creation Between the emotion And the response Falls the Shadow<sup>17</sup>

The virtual relation between me and the breathing being is the shadow, and its position between sense and comprehension strangely echoes Eleni Ikoniadou's discussion of digital artworks that create "the halted moment before the settling of experience into sensory, cognized activity."18 In her discussion of Lynn Pook and Julien Clauss's digital installation Stimuline (2008), Ikoniadou examines how sound and vibration lead participants (whose costumes are connected by cables) to a precognitive, dreamlike state of an emptied subjectivity that produces a feeling beyond what one can see or hear.<sup>19</sup> Certainly the traditional media of film soundtracks cannot actualize physical connections between sound vibrations and participants' bodies, but the halted moment between my experience of the breath sounds and my belated response to my experience also suggests a moment of desubjectivization—a moment when I feel but cannot recognize, when I recognize but cannot comprehend. The only thing left for me to comprehend, 150

then, is my incomprehension. But different from the experience of transcendence described by Ikoniadou (the sense of enlarging and feeling beyond subjective perception), my experience of breath sounds returns to a feeling of immanence. "We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men"—the Old Possum would jump in again to mumble the strange coexistence of hollowness and fullness in the process of desubjectivization. <sup>20</sup> I am stuffed, not with subjectivity but with an impersonal and bodily affect. Breath sounds have such unique communal characters that my body can echo the soundtrack and produce my own involuntary breath sounds that I hear and feel simultaneously, even though my body cannot feel the actual vibration of the breath sounds in the film. So when I am being emptied out by my incomprehension, I am also stuffed with the a-subjective, corporeal affect traversing in my body.

But Hirst does more than create an ephemeral shadow between my sensory experience and belated meaning-making processes. He deploys the second contingent variation of breath sounds, the threat of death: the initially vague sound of breathing soon develops into intermittent and forced breath sounds. This contingency, however, does not register a sense of randomness I can recognize in natural sounds or noises, rather it specifically points to an undecidable moment before suffocation. This undecidable moment reaches its extremity in the middle of the film when the sound of inhalation suspends. The ensuing silence is the real horror, not only because it suggests the impending death of the breathing being, but also because it creates an *insignificant imperative* that transforms me—not breath sounds—into Beckett's Worm:

So it will never be known, Worm will never know, let the silence be black, or let it be grey, it can never be known, as long as it lasts, whether it is final, or whether it is a mere lull, and what a lull, when he must listen, strain his ears for the murmurs of olden silences, hold himself ready for the next instalment, under the pain of supplementary thunderbolts.<sup>21</sup>

The suspension of breathing in the film creates a lull, a lull that makes me strain ears for the advent of breathing or death, of taking-place or nothingness, under the pain of supplementary garbage on the stage. This imperative comes from not only a worm-like me but also the permeability and coerciveness of the body in breath sounds. I can recognize such a painful sound of inhalation and its abrupt suspension only because that unnamable being's breathing organs struggle to overcome resistance and friction. Thus, different from the silent, frictionless, and idyllic breathing activities, the breath sounds in the film are the screams of the body that signify and materialize the imperative of bare existence and the vestigial will to go on under the condition of "the lived abstraction."

But at the same time, do I care about this lull, this imperative? Do I hold my breath nervously waiting for the extremely important, messianic, prophetic, futuristic exhalation, or do I just laugh off a slight uneasiness in the five seconds of the imperative silence? Can I decide to care? Can I suffer from making a decision between the imperative and the insignificant ... the farcical? If the fatalistic tendency of earworms essentially results from the fact that those happy parasites are part of my thoughts, my fear for this lull of undecidability comes from a belated realization

that I am being transformed into Beckett's Worm, "feeling nothing, knowing nothing, capable of nothing, wanting nothing."22 This transformation means that I am worm-ized in front of the lull, that I am unable to decide or to care, that I am deprived of subjectivity and continually subjugated to a virtual, if not phenomenological, relation in which my (in)decision and (ir)responsibility for the breathing being come into being in and as an undecidability, a joking oxymoron, a near nothingness. When Khan put the larvae into Captain Terrell's and Commander Chekov's ears, did he know that he was worm-izing them, just like what earworms and the breath sounds are doing to my cerebral cortex right now? Tread on a worm and it will turn, people say. Worms are weak and worms are powerful. Being worm-ized is being weak and abject and mad. Being worm-ized is being happy and strong and dancing like a dragon. Being worm-ized is being free from making a decision.

## The Ethics of Worm-ization—A Community of Mere Breathing—Temporal Explosions

Decision and responsibility are ethical topics. The ethical encounter between a worm-ized me and the breathing being not only surpasses the good/evil dichotomy and Levinas's and Butler's ethics of the Other (face)<sup>23</sup>—since the breathing being is speechless and faceless—but also exposes the limit in Derrida's notion of encountering absolute alterity. Like Deleuze, Derrida is obsessed with breath:

[T]he force of a void, the cyclonic breath [souffle] of a prompter [souffleur] who draws his breath in, and thereby robs me of that which he first allowed

to approach me and which I believed I could say in my own name. The generosity of inspiration, the positive irruption of a speech which comes from I know not where, or about which I know (if I am Antonin Artaud) that I do not know where it comes from or who speaks it, the fecundity of the other breath [l'autre souffle] is unpower: not the absence but the radical irresponsibility of speech, irresponsibility as the power and the origin of speech. I am in relation to myself within the ether of a speech which is always spirited away [soufflée] from me, and which steals from me the very thing that it puts me in relation to.<sup>24</sup>

Derrida imagines the power of "the other breath" [l'autre souffle] that can rob "me" of "my" speech, identity, and self. He believes that breath is not a void but the silent ground of speech, and that a non-violent, pre-language ethical relation between me and the Other can be formed by the positive irruption and possession of air. But could we imagine otherwise? Could we imagine a faint, abject ("ni sujet ni objet"25), and contingent breath instead of a cyclone? What if the other breath is too weak to rob me of my speech but is able to make me an abject worm? Hirst's film actualizes a form of weak ethical encounter different from Derrida's imagination of the sublime robbery of breath; the former is so faint and precarious, always ready to lapse into the Beckettian breathlessness, "no sound and same purpose none of breath to the end that there henceforth no other sounds than these and never were that is than sop to mind faint memory of a lying side by side and fancy murmured dead."26 Yet this weak encounter is powerful and imperative:

it sustains an ongoing virtual relation between the wormized me and a breathing being, before knowledge, law, language, memory, anything.

Derrida's gesture towards a post-human horizon of non-speech reveals itself more fully in The Animal Therefore I Am, and it does echo the cross-species nature of breath sounds. Breathing produces the perfect sound of beasts, of men, and of men-beasts—at least an etymologist would say so. "Breath" transgresses the borders between human and non-human animals the etymologist murmurs—because the word "anima" denotes "vital breath" in the first place.<sup>27</sup> (I have faith in etymologists, because they know those original hallucinations in human languages.) But the weak encounter at issue here demands an ethics not in a post-human condition—as I said, the term "post-human" is too big and too strong-but in a condition of post-beingable and post-being-potential. In The Coming Community, Agamben points out the relationship between potentiality and ethics: "Humans, in their potentiality to be and to notbe, are, in other words, always already in debt; they always have a bad conscience without having to commit any blameworthy act."28 Agamben's return to Levinas's ethical debt makes it explicit that as long as humans are equipped with their potentialities they are always in debt to whatever form of alterity. But what if the worm-ized me no longer has the potentiality to be and to not be, no longer has the potentiality and impotentiality to have potentiality? The weak, faint, and abject encounter between me and the breathing being speaks to a moment of post-being-potential, a moment Deleuze would perhaps describe as exhaustion the exhaustion of all possibilities and all impossibilities.<sup>29</sup> In this encounter, I am not able to do, to be, to not do, to not be. This encounter seems to be a purely taking-place, barely existing after the subtraction of all its properties,

substances, and ideologies. But this is not nihilism. Perhaps there is an inkling of hope before nihilism. Perhaps this is only a secret (sacred!) joke on an idiosyncratic and paranoid me who is overly obsessed with a tape of someone's faked difficult breath. Huh.

Or I could try to approach this weak encounter without thinking of the Same and the Other, like Alain Badiou might. He rejects potentiality, because it promises the advent of the Same, the Same that is what comes to be, the source and vanguard of the endless ethical debt that can never be paid off: "Philosophically, if the other doesn't matter it is indeed because the difficulty lies on the side of the Same. The Same, in effect, is not what is (i.e. the infinite multiplicity of differences) but what comes to be. Only a truth is, as such, indifferent to differences."30 Badiou proposes a different meaning of ethics, the ethics of localized truths: "The only genuine ethics is of truths in the plural, or more precisely, the only ethics is of processes of truth, of the labour that brings some truths into the world ... . Ethics does not exist. There is only the ethic-of (of politics, of love, of science, of art)."31 The weak encounter between me and the breathing being suggests a moment of postbeing-potential on the verge of nothingness; it takes place as a happenstance indifferent to different identities and species, in a highly localized temporal and spatial situation (say, a sentimental me sitting in front of a screen for thirty seconds in a rainy afternoon in Victoria, Canada). The ethic of worms, the fifth ethic-of .... Yet, Alain Badiou could not care less about non-human animals; his ethics of localized truths is essentially humanistic because he still preserves a subject (however contingent and ephemeral the subject might be) as something beyond animals, and he calls this supplement an event.32

It is Peter Sloterdijk's thesis in Terror from the Air that challenges a human exceptionalism implicitly inscribed in the ethics (and the ethic-of) proposed by Levinas, Butler, and Badiou. Sloterdijk argues that the twentieth century began with the explication of air-the exposure and exploitation of air's destructibility initiated by the German gas warfare on April 22, 1915.33 As the "new surfaces of vulnerability" under the control of various aero-technical practices such as the gas chamber, individual bio-technical abilities of immunity become important political and philosophical subjects: "No longer can integrity be thought of as something that is obtained through devotion to the benevolent surroundings, but instead only as the individual effort of an organism's concern with demarcating itself out from its environment."34 And an organism's striving for surviving, as Sloterdijk claims, leads to "an ethics of the antagonistic protection of the interests of finite unities."35 Delimiting individual integrity, space, and identity through the basic act of breathing air questions the possibility of maintaining the physical and metaphysical boundaries between human and non-human animals, and the consequent ethics of individual self-protection beyond good and evil counters the fantasy of universalism and a benign "naturalism," 36 whose synonyms are "the Same" and "harmony" critiqued by Badiou. The breath sounds in Hirst's film precisely expose a being's strenuous effort to breathe, whatever that being is, and the process of worm-ization shows the possibility of hostile abstraction and degeneration created by a threat to the fundamental condition of beingin-the-world: breathing. The ethics of worm-ization, then, cannot be strictly understood as a benign ethical encounter between me and that being, but as a communal and impersonal imperative of survival and protection solely conditioned by the primordial action of breathing, however precarious the "connectedness of breathing" might turn out to be.<sup>37</sup> At the end of Hirst's film, a final close-up of cigarette butts epitomizes the hostility of living environments and the threat to the biological immunity to poisonous air, though the ephemerality of the film largely prevents any explicit eco-critical commentary on contemporary industrialization and worsened atmospheric conditions.

The last variation: could I, the worm that strains ears for the next exhalation, still suffer from earworms? If earworms result from the endlessly repeating melodies imported from external devices such as the iPod, Hirst's soundtrack of the contingent and congested breath sounds seems to precisely efface the possibility of importing patterns and rhythms of breath sounds into my nervous systems. But would the endless repetition of breath sounds lead to earworms? Theoretically, the answer is yes. Although in Hirst's film the breath sounds per se do not allow me to make meaning or form virtual patterns of the tunes in my head, replaying the half-minute soundtrack of breath sounds brings back the familiar repetition in respiratory activities (inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale ...). If earworms are virtual products of the continual import of a certain melody into my nervous activities, then the earworms generated through replaying breath sounds may become nothing but a selfreflexive repetition of repetitive breath sounds itself. That is to say, theoretically (I say "theoretically" again because people normally do not replay Hirst's Breath thousands of times on their iPods or on YouTube, but who knows?) what would become those recursive and redundant earworms are not breath sounds per se but the audible, evenly divided, and

repeating durations of the already abstracted and repetitive breath sounds.

This technological abstraction and virtualization of the already-abstracted breath sounds leads to neither quantitative proliferation nor self-negation of earworms; rather, it brings us to a disturbingly inconceivable conclusion: nothing else can be further abstracted to become earworms except the audible temporal durations themselves. The idea that temporal durations are audible and can become earworms is alarming, but I try to understand the earwormization of temporal durations as a moment of generating a greater intensity of "the lived abstraction," a moment of surpassing the ultimate limit of the subjective grasp of temporality itself. Although in the subjective understanding of time temporal durations are perceived as objective entities—or as what Claude Romano calls inner-temporal phenomena (such as a flow or a passage of time)<sup>38</sup>—the virtualization and encroachment of repeating temporal durations on the subject's thinking-feeling lead to the possibility that the subject's grasp of temporal durations becomes an immanent part of the subject. This immanence means that the thinking of temporal durations can co-exist with the taking-place of temporal durations rather than fall back on a belated, retrospective speculation of time. The synchronicity between thinking and the taking-place of temporal durations suggests that an immanent and bodily grasp of temporality—a grasp that subverts a subjective understanding of a linear passage from the past to the future—becomes possible. This synchronicity actualizes a simultaneity or explosion of multiple temporalities that theorists and philosophers struggle to hypothesize and articulate. For example, in Event and Time, Romano tries to

theorize a concept of time beyond inner temporality: "This future and this past here no longer signify notifications of an inner-temporal present .... They constitute dimensions at once heterogeneous and co-originary in their differential arising, the absolute diachrony of which is irreducible both at once to every inner-temporal present and to the temporalizing presence of a subject."39 Romano's project in Event and Time is to depart from what is in time (the innertemporal phenomena such as a flow) so as to pursue the origin of time through an event (a sort of guiding thread that generates time). Despite the fundamental distinction between Romano's phenomenological project and Deleuze and Guattari's post-subjectivity / post-consciousness enterprise, they have tried to theorize a similar simultaneity of multiple temporalities. For Romano, this simultaneity is the multiple dimensions of time "at once heterogeneous and co-originary in their differential arising." For Deleuze and Guattari, this simultaneity is Aeon, "the indefinite time of the event ... a simultaneously too-late and too-early, a something but that is both going to happen and has just happened."40 To leave this final hypothesis of temporal explosions open-ended, I would like to conclude by momentarily halting at the idea that the (ear)worm-ization of breath sounds in Hirst's film is a poetic exposure of a weak, abject, yet intensified project of post-subjectivity and depersonalization, a paradoxically fatalistic and ephemeral project even more horrifying than the lived abstraction of melodies.

#### Notes

- 1. *Breath*, directed by Damien Hirst, in *Beckett on Film* (Blue Angel Films Ltd., 2001), DVD.
- 2. Samuel Beckett, *Breath and Other Shorts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 9-11.
- 3. Eldritch Priest, "Streaming Consciousness: Earworms, Daydreams and Cognitive Capitalism," *Theory, Culture & Society* (upcoming), 3.
- 4. Shane Weller first uses the phrase "form of weakness" to describe an uncertain form of life—an "un"-being [un être] in Beckett's Molloy. Shane Weller, "Forms of Weakness: Animalisation in Kafka and Beckett," in Beckett and Animals, ed. Mary Bryden (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 18. My use of "weak desubjectivization" stresses that the notion of weakness not only applies to a degenerated and ambiguous living creature like Beckett's character Molloy, but also can be specified as an abject yet powerful process of worm-ization actualized by Hirst's film.
- 5. Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 342.
- 6. Here I refer to Judith Butler's term "the precariousness of the Other," which is derived from Levinas's discussion of the precariousness of face. According to Butler, the meaning of precariousness can only be carried by the Other and the Other's face, not by "me," and the Other comes to "me" without "my" anticipation. Judith Butler, Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence (London: Verso, 2004), 131-34.
- 7. This alludes to Agamben's *The Coming Community*, in which he proposes the idea of "whatever singularity" as the "coming being" ("whatever" in its Latin form *quodlibet* means "being such that it always matters"), the singular being without identity yet constituting part of a community. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1-3.

- 8. Butler, Precarious Life, 30.
- Cary Wolfe, Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 19-20.
- 10. Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).
- 11. Beckett, Three Novels, 379.
- 12. Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 25.
- Gilles Deleuze, The Logic of Sense, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, (London: Athlone Press, 1989), 88.
- 14. Deleuze, Pure Immanence, 29.
- 15. Giorgio Agamben, On Potentiality: Collected Essays in Philosophy, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 224.
- 16. Deleuze, Pure Immanence, 28.
- 17. T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 92.
- 18. Eleni Ikoniadou, *The Rhythmic Event: Art, Media, and the Sonic* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 68.
- 19. Ibid., 71.
- 20. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," 89. "Old Possum" is the nickname given to Eliot by his friend Ezra Pound.
- 21. Beckett, Three Novels, 359.
- 22. Ibid., 342.
- 23. Butler, Precarious Life, 131-51.
- 24. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 176.
- Julia Kristeva, Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection (Paris: Ésitions du Seuil, 1980), 9.
- Beckett, "Strange Away," in Samuel Beckett: Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism, vol. 4 (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 359.
- 27. C. T. Onions et al., eds., "Animal," in *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 38.
- 28. Agamben, The Coming Community, 44.

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### 7 Breatharian 'Pataphysics A Tinfoil Hat for Eldritch Priest

#### Ted Hiebert

"Ha ha!" said the dog-faced baboon, then turned away, continuing the conversation he had been having with himself about the escape velocity of an idea relative to its sedimental mood. It was to become a recurring theme.

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#### **Hedonic Tones**

In Boring Formless Nonsense, Eldritch Priest tells a beautiful story about sitting in a coffee shop at the airport, distracted from a conversation with his wife by a CD skipping in the background—a sound he took at first as a moment of experimental music: "skipping CD or not, I heard a saxophone and drum duet." The story is striking because of its simplicity, the kind of moment that we all have probably experienced in some way, except what makes Priest's version unique is that he continued to insist upon it well after the fact. He realized that even though he was wrong and it wasn't experimental music—at least not in a formal way—the absence of experimental intentionality behind the music was not prohibitive to a form of listening that hears experimentation, even when none has been actually composed. Experimentation is in the ear of the listener,

most genuinely expressed not when listening on purpose but when seduced by sounds as they happen.

Like Priest, I am interested in the things we hear even when that is not what we're listening to—when what seems like a mistake is really something else. It's background music that becomes deviant, finds its way into earshot and from there plants itself into the mind. It would be easy to say that it's a delusion, a false sound, a misperception, but it also seems to be something more—a felt thought, perhaps. Priest calls it "sorcery," a term that is apt, but inadequate unless we also devote ourselves to its study, unless we find ways to not just put ourselves in its path but to create spells of our own. For me, *Boring Formless Nonsense* is a book that understands this relationship—a book of spells—and this essay is an attempt to invoke one of its animating characteristics.

I am also interested in the book as a form of background music, or at least I am curious to think through what it would mean to treat *Boring Formless Nonsense* as a book whose destiny is to provide a background hum—a sensation that lingers long after the specific articulations of the text are forgotten. It's decidedly not the question of what arguments the book makes but rather of the disturbances it creates, not what one hears but what one feels. Not ideas. Emergent moods. I'm curious about how the book might be seen to emit what Priest calls a "hedonic tone," the affective state associated with a context or phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> But I am not so interested in the common use of hedonic tone to delineate a positive or negative valence of mood; rather I am interested in the generative potential of moods themselves.<sup>3</sup> For these are the feelings that linger. When the ideas are gone and I forget what precisely a book had to say, I remember its mood.

It might be simply a mnemonic device used in order to not entirely forget a text—categorizing general waves of affect that begin to systematize my book shelf. If so, my library is not organized alphabetically, or by topic, but by affective register. Books that have the same mood go together. This is why, on my shelf, Leonard Orr's new age manual for ways to combat mortality (first, he says, by simply refusing to believe in death<sup>4</sup>) sits next to William Rawlins's treatise on friendship (in which he insists that friendships are not grounded in rational thinking<sup>5</sup>). It is why Baudrillard's Intelligence of Evil sits next to Nietzsche's My Sister and I—the former a treatise on delirious method,6 the latter a contested translation with no German original, purporting to share Nietzsche's thoughts in his final delirious days.7 And it is why, on my shelf, Boring Formless Nonsense does not sit next to other books on sound or technology, but instead is sandwiched between Alfred Jarry's Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician and Andy Warhol's autobiography, providing a sorcerer's link between the "science of imaginary solutions" and an artistic life of sustainable eccentricity. I may not know exactly what they have in common, but for whatever reason it just feels like they go together.

To this mood—this hedonic tone—of *Boring Formless Nonsense* I attribute a certain paradoxicality. It is not just a tone, or if it is, it is one that cannot be heard directly. Perhaps it is like background music, or like a binaural beat in which two audible sounds (or intelligible voices) cancel each other out, leaving the sensation of a perception that couldn't actually happen. With binaural beats such an interference pattern can invoke sounds that are physiologically inaudible, impossible sounds that are nonetheless heard despite their

technical impossibility. Yet this kind of sound—sound that can't be heard—also cannot quite be represented and so must be approached obliquely. It is most easily identified not by the conclusions it shares but by the resonant parts—the individual parts that do not add up to the whole but which interfere with each other in order to create a lingering sensation (sorcery, again). To speak about such a tone, then, is not to try to represent it or to critically engage in some simulated synthesis of an idea, but more simply to attempt to recreate it. To start with the parts and the moods they provoke, then to move on from there to explore the possibilities that interference creates, such as to attempt to engage the hedonic amplitudes of the text itself.

It's hard to know what to call such a method. For the moment I will call it Breatharian 'pataphysics—an idea that will be elaborated in three parts: through an examination of the transductive potential of tinfoil hats; an exploration of the performative powers of lies that want to be real; and, the metaphor of photosynthetic ingestion as a way to make imaginary encounters self-sustaining.

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"Ha ha" he proclaimed victoriously, looking around and seeing nothing, his gamble of staring at the sun having finally paid off. When asked to elaborate, he had nothing to add. He was otherwise preoccupied with all the things he couldn't see.

#### Tinfoil Hats

In 2005, a group of graduate students at MIT—Ali Rahimi, Ben Recht, Jason Taylor and Noah Vawter-ran a series of frequency amplification experiments on tinfoil hats, looking to see whether the rumblings of conspiracy theorists had any truth to them and if aluminum foil could really provide a shield between the mind and the world of electronic signals looking to harvest private thoughts. In theory, the aluminum foil creates a rudimentary Faraday cage around the brain, capable of deflecting predatory scans and other forms of mind control, a theory that provides some explanation for how a ridiculous fashion accessory might actually serve a serious purpose. To do so they built three different varieties of aluminum hats, put them on, and proceeded to scan the hats as well as their own brains for frequency modulations as they blasted their heads with various electronic signals: sweeping ranges from AM radio to RFID, television to radar, microwaves to cellular, communication satellites to government exclusive frequency bands, and using a highend network analyzer and a directional antenna to measure and plot the results. 8

The idea of the tinfoil hat initially comes from Julian Huxley's 1927 story about a machine designed for mass telepathy, built as an experimental mind control apparatus to help control a growing population. In the text, the machine is used to hypnotize the masses on a broad scale, giving social and political suggestions and implementing a certain psychic order through the powers of projected voice. To protect themselves from the radiating influence of the telepathic broadcast, the inventors of the machine don aluminum hats, specifically designed to protect their minds

from the voice of the apparatus, and by extension from the prving gaze of algorithmic surveillance. It is a theme taken up by some conspiracy theorists and also written about in psychological scholarship and media studies, often invoking Huxley indirectly, through the idea of an "influencing machine," a term that comes—according to Christopher Turner—from Victor Tausk (a student of Sigmund Freud) who first noticed a tendency in some patients with schizophrenia to personify feelings of persecution in the form of an autonomous mind control machine. Turner muses that those who suffer from schizophrenia may be less delusional than is generally assumed; indeed, they may even be technological savants, able to perceive a certain background noise that the rest of us have somehow learned to tune out.10 Something similar might be suggested for these insightful students at MIT, undoubtedly engaged in a study of play but in-so-doing also carving out serious territory for the playfulness of study.

In Huxley's book the aluminum hat worked to prevent the wearer from machine-broadcast trans-cranial induction, to a certain extent at least. In the MIT experiment the results were more complicated. The tinfoil hat, it turns out, is a paradoxical object. On one hand, Huxley and the conspirators he inspired are (at least partly) right: the MIT study found that wearing a tinfoil hat actually *does* serve to protect the head from a significant number of frequencies, particularly those in the range of radio waves. On the other hand, the irony is that the aluminum headpiece also amplifies *other* frequencies—those associated with exactly the bandwidths most feared by conspirators—allocated to government agencies and mobile phone corporations. Here are the MIT study's technical details:

For all helmets, we noticed a 30 db amplification at 2.6 Ghz and a 20 db amplification at 1.2 Ghz, regardless of the position of the antenna on the cranium. ... Conclusion: The helmets amplify frequency bands that coincide with those allocated to the US government between 1.2 Ghz and 1.4 Ghz. According to the FCC, These bands are supposedly reserved for "radio location" (ie, GPS), and other communications with satellites. The 2.6 Ghz band coincides with mobile phone technology.<sup>11</sup>

The study goes on to suggest that it would make sense that the idea of the tinfoil hat as a frequency shield may in fact have been perpetuated by the government to attune the general public to a certain form of broadcast receptivity. Tinfoil hats may block radio waves but they amplify satellite communications and cellular signals.

Putting aside the irony of these results, what is most important to this study is not actually its conclusion. Instead, it takes a certain playfulness in the face of data to even propose such a study, and more still to actually try it.<sup>12</sup> Even better if one has access to expensive equipment, but only because it intensifies the irony, and the message that the tinfoil hat is not just a tinfoil hat. In the hands of Rahimi, Recht, Taylor and Vawter, the tinfoil hat is a metaphor for speculative engagement. To read the tinfoil hat as a metaphor is to claim that it is both itself and something else. It is something that actually does have an effect—amplifying certain signal frequencies while blocking others—which is to say that it is not only an object of conspiracy delusion, even if engagement with such fictions

are part of its functional history. At the same time it is also something that *creates* the effect it is designed to engage, amplifying conspiracy tendencies by indulging the hat in the first place. The effects of a tinfoil hat might be (partly) hallucinated, but they are also (partly) real—and indeed it would be a poor hallucination that presents itself as anything other than real in the first place. <sup>13</sup> Hallucinations, like tinfoil hats, rely on the collapse of such distinctions.

When the tinfoil hat is engaged in this way, the result is to actually put it on differently—not only as a shield but as a listening device specifically designed to amplify the background noise of creative and speculative living. Not an accessory designed to protect the wearer from influence, but an opportunity to attune to the crazy possibilities of broadcast frequencies—a creative catalyst for what Priest, following Brian Massumi, calls "transductive momentum," or "the impetus to carry on transitioning." Priest explains this idea using the metaphor of surfing the web, caught up in the momentum that carries a user from one link to the next. Wearing a tinfoil hat does this too, except that one no longer even needs to click the links-attuned as one becomes to the frequencies themselves, amplified as they are both by the tinfoil apparatus and by the conscientious imagination. Putting on a tinfoil hat might even extend this concept and proverbially let the web surf us, which it ostensibly does already (think of algorithmic surveillance, data harvesting and biometric tracking) but which the hat then foregrounds as a conscientious part of the relationships one builds.

Most importantly, however, is that being mediated by an apparatus—the hat—also makes the idea of experimental thinking more accessible since it provides a device to transport the wearer beyond the constraints of logical

thinking. It is to insist that the adoption of an alternative way of thinking is as easy as making a hat out of aluminum foil, putting it on, and allowing this intervention—eccentric though it may seem—to serve its purpose as catalyst. The tinfoil hat is both a performative apparatus and a catalyst for trans-cranial self-induction given the time to play out its own persuasions and possibilities of becoming real. The tinfoil hat, when seen as an object with performative complexity, becomes a metaphor that is also a mood. And this mood has a tone. The hedonic tone of the tinfoil hat is the realization that affective charge can be altered technologically or psychologically—with only the help of a metaphor, a modicum of transductive momentum, or even just a simple apparatus. To attune to the tinfoil hat is to listen to myriad illogical voices coming both from without and from within.

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"Ha ha," thought Bosse-de-Nage, uncharacteristically keeping his opinions to himself. He wondered, though, whether someone around him would hear them anyways, or see the expression on his face. He wasn't disappointed.

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# Pinocchio Syndrome

It may seem like a convoluted fantasy but in some ways the destiny of fiction is always to challenge the boundaries between the imaginative and the real. It's less complicated than it seems: conspiracy theory is less an assault on the 172

quantifiable than it is an attitude towards truth, a moodmassage or a background tone that sets the context for the world as we understand it. It's not that different from what happens when we watch a movie, when the lights come on and we walk outside feeling slightly disoriented-except with a movie or a novel the feeling eventually fades. But why not consider this as an opportunity then, a chance to learn how to initiate and sustain different attitudes towards the world? By embracing the mood-altering possibilities of daily engagements we can live a hedonic lifestyle without being forced to reconcile contradictions among competitive truths. In this way, fiction trumps truth by setting the mood in which truth takes place. We wear tinfoil hats even if we don't see them-emperors' tinfoil hats-and they set the stage for the signals we receive, those we tune out, and those that we live by. But Priest knows this, and insofar as this essay is a meditation on Priest as much as it is on speculation, it seems important to note that he has his own tinfoil hat that he wears—a sorcerer's hat—which is to say a hat that wears him. Her name is Karen Eliot.

Karen Eliot is not a person but a shared persona. Priest describes her as "a multiple-use name that composers and artists ... use to gather the figments of their collective imagination under one appellation ... 'Eliot' belongs to nobody and is no one... [Her work] circulates contradictions and inconsistencies in a way that keeps doubt about the status of her reality in play." Karen Eliot is a paradox, and there is some uncertainty as to who is the real person, since she comes alive only through a combination of animation, collaboration and clever obfuscation, writing music and essays as well as reviews of her own and other's work (and sometimes works that don't even exist). And yet, she

does come alive—not just as a fiction but in the form of the artworks and ideas that emerge through her activities. Priest calls these artifacts "reality machines": no longer simply catalysts for influence (like with Tausk's "influencing machine"), these artifacts, wherever they come from, actually manifest a reality of their own.

Without these "reality machines" to give her substance, Eliot suffers "recurring episodes of feeling as though she is completely artificial or invented." Priest qualifies such a state of mind as "Pinocchio Syndrome," a marker of situations when fictions are grounded in a desire to become real. 16 Distinct from the character in Carlo Collodi's original story of Pinocchio, Eliot may first seem like a puppet but she is not: there is no literary distance between Eliot and her audience (or between Eliot and Priest) and no immediate frame that signals her imaginary status in advance. She is not a fiction contained within a story, but one that evolves into the stories in which she participates. Eliot becomes more real by confusing the distance between reality and fiction, thereby inverting the idea of fiction as a function of life and supplanting it with just the opposite. Karen Eliot—at her best—is a fiction that creates the realities in which she engages. Or as she puts it, the goal is to "make everything as fictional as I am," not so much in an attempt to become real as to make the world around her more imaginary.<sup>17</sup> Eliot's version of Pinocchio Syndrome is not one of a fiction that wants to become real but just the opposite—a story of how the real wants to be imagined, and indeed comes alive most dynamically at exactly the moment when it begins to break with the constraints of truth in favor of aesthetic and relational complexity.

Consider that the story of Pinocchio is not only a story about a wooden boy that wants to become real. It is a story about lies, and the way that lies manifest in direct and tangible ways: most simply in the growth of Pinocchio's nose. In the story of Pinocchio, a lie is never simply a lie but a catalyst for physiological growth—impossible though that might seem from the perspective of the real. The destiny of a lie well told is to rupture the smooth contours of consensual reality, revealing in the process that reality has always been deeply indebted to the manifestations of fiction. Seen in this way, Eliot is not only a lying puppet focused on her own status as imaginary but a mobilized fiction that is the manifest lie of Priest and his collaborators. Not just a nose that grows, in the case of Karen Eliot the lie gives birth to a fully formed person. And consequently, Pinocchio Syndrome is less convincing as a mere state of subjectivity than it is as a methodological approach synthesized through the use of lies to create tangible real-world scenarios. A lie may not be real but the reality it creates is. In Priest's words: "Counterfactuals can in a sense be lived, lived in terms of the sense they make of a state of affairs." That is, lies are not accountable to truth so much as they are generative of relational experience.

This matters because there is also another form of Pinocchio Syndrome, one that the German psychotherapist Michael Titze associates with gelotophobia, the fear of being laughed at. For Titze, this is not the private anxiety associated with thinking of oneself as a fiction (or of wanting to be real) but a public anxiety about having one's fictions noticed by others. Pinocchio Syndrome is a form of impostor mentality—less a form of self-doubt than a fear of one's failures being discovered by others. According to Titze, gelotophobia is a form of anxiety that manifests as a

state of "puppet-like" immobilization, social paralysis and rigid body movements. <sup>19</sup> This is a related but inverted form of Priest's version of the syndrome, since gelotophobes do not suffer from a literal desire to be real as much as they fear not being taken seriously (i.e., being thought of as laughable). The treatment, predictably, is to learn to laugh at oneself. Titze proposes "humordrama" as the remedy for gelotophobia, in essence arguing the classic psychoanalytic claim that confronting one's phobias directly is the most effective way of subduing them, a strategy "designed to invalidate the perfectionistic attitude of individuals who want to avoid situations that might make them appear ridiculous."<sup>20</sup>

To extend the comparison would be then to agree with Karen Eliot that the goal of (and treatment for) Pinocchio Syndrome is not to make oneself impervious to the laughter of others but rather to make oneself laughable, proving the point by being the first one to do so-laughing out loud and making light of both oneself and the world in the process. Perhaps even more importantly, learning to laugh at oneself is the dethroning of the reality of the world. In this, Pinocchio Syndrome takes on a relational component, a self-reflexivity in which Eliot becomes aware that her fabrications create a certain transformative effect. And one might well catalyze Eliot's notion of "making everything as fictional as I am" as a form of laughing at the reality of situations—in effect perverting Titze's psychological treatment by deploying it as a generative strategy rather than simply as a coping mechanism. To do so is not a malicious co-optation of therapy as much as it is a way to laugh at oneself as a pre-emptive strike against the real, fulfilling Baudrillard's demand that we disbelieve in reality and strive to make the world more unintellgibile.21

To take this lesson from Eliot and Titze, would be to think of humordrama (or drama in general) as a form of lying—needling the reality of a situation by pretending to be someone that one isn't for the purpose of effecting temporary performative change. To think of Pinocchio Syndrome in this way is to contextualize experience within an economy of lies, emphasizing the way in which effects can be strategically created independently from intelligible causes, with no necessary link to a quantifiable real. Not a desire to become real but the desire to realize a fiction of oneself that invalidates and supersedes one's regular states of performance. The hedonic tone of Pinocchio Syndrome is the mood that emerges when one gives oneself permission to laugh knowing that lies create growth and fictions manifest with real effects. To attune to Pinocchio Syndrome is to treat oneself like a voodoo doll, an object of vicarious intervention designed to be performatively activated by a pre-emptive imagination.<sup>22</sup>

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"Ha ha," he said, but it was unclear to those in the room whether he meant it as an expression of humor or whether he was, in fact, laughing at them. He preferred not to clarify.

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# Breatharian 'Pataphysics

In Alfred Jarry's Exploits & Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician, Dr. Faustroll's companion, Bosse-de-Nage—the ass-faced baboon—speaks many times but has only one

line: "Ha ha." <sup>23</sup> It is tempting to read this as a release valve to a densely coded text, a laughter to remind us to lighten the mood of the conversation, to inject a sense of purposeful irony, or to fulfill the 'pataphysical demand that one take nothing serious except (and not even) 'Pataphysics itself. <sup>24</sup> Indeed, in the contradictory demands of a 'pataphysical approach such a laughter will always be both playful and violent, laughing at oneself not only as a gelotophobic pretreatment but as a strategy for undermining the reality of the world. This is not benign humor or idle laughter, but just the opposite: a performative gesture and an insistence on a certain situatedness that only affective response can guarantee, as a humordrama, or a dramatic flair—and in this as a pre-emptive strategy for embracing the imaginary and sabotaging the real.

Pataphysical laughter is the intense awareness of an absurd duality that gouges your eyes out. In this sense it is the only human expression of the identity of opposites (and, amazingly enough, it expresses this in a universal language). Or rather, it signifies the subject's headlong rush toward the opposed object, and at the same time the submission of this act of love to an invonceivable and cruelly felt law of becoming ...<sup>25</sup>

From a 'pataphysical perspective, humordrama is not simply a treatment but a general rule, and taking exception to the dictates of the real is the performative norm. According to Andrew Hugill, the paradox of 'pataphysical laughter is the way it combines extreme ambivalence with utter seriousness, a kind of thinking that "deflates any notion of

a transcendent reality while at the same time allowing for personal transcendence through the imagination."<sup>26</sup> This is laughter as an aesthetic opening, and aesthetics as an embodiment tactic. To take this line of laughing one step further—out of the novel or off the stage and into the real world—would be to propose a form of "Breatharian 'pataphysics," a mode of imaginary engagement no longer designed simply to undermine or produce the real but to actively ingest the imaginary, in as literal a way as possible.

Technically, Breatharians are those who claim to live off of the energy of the sun—a certain type of yoga practitioner who gets up at dawn to stand as the sun rises and move their eyes rhythmically from side-to-side allowing the light from above to enter their bodies, and nourish their minds. The practice is grounded in the idea of the sun as a celestial energy source, to which the trained and intentional mind can attune. When done properly, the Breatharian method claims that one will need no other nourishment than the energy consumed by gazing at the sun. In fact, prominent Breatharian practitioners, such as Wiley Brooks, go as far as to claim that such a practice can lead to both physical and spiritual immortality.<sup>27</sup> Some insist that they have not had to eat for 40 years or more—a claim that has never been (scientifically) proven but which makes grand strides for the project of living through the manifestation of beautiful fictions. It gets tricky however when one learns that some practitioners have died through an excess of fidelity to their alimentary program, or that seminars teaching the particularities of the practice cost anywhere from \$10,000 to \$1,000,000 to attend.<sup>28</sup> Brooks himself—often thought of as the spokesperson for the philosophy—is also known to indulge in a McDonald's Quarter Pounder from time to

time.<sup>29</sup> This all to say that there are distinctly two sides to the Breatharian question.

On one hand, the promises are beautiful—as poetic as they are spiritual—proposing a way of living that is as environmentally sensitive as it is ecologically attuned (neither plants nor animals are consumed in this tradition). It might involve learning a particular form of yoga and training oneself to think in a particular way, so as to counteract the reality syndrome from which we suffer and according to which the laws of physics and physiology will not be denied. But promise it does, such as to constitute a beautiful example of aesthetic thinking taken to performative ends. A chance to live out a possible manifestation of life that we would never have otherwise thought possible. To do so, one need only align with the illogic of Breatharian encounter. It is to make of oneself a fiction that lives by what would otherwise seem to be an impossibility.

On the other hand, it might be a lie.

To merge these lines of thinking—the potential lie and its real promise—is to situate an existential version of Pinocchio thinking. It is to propose Breatharian 'pataphysics as a form of hyperstitional ingestion, the purposeful succumbing to fiction and taking it as real, until it becomes the situated tone through which one lives. It is to become a hedonic light eater, standing at attention to the sun, silent only in order to harmonize with the resonant sounds of an imaginary universe. It might be ironic, or it might not. It might be a lie, but it still performs its truth. Breatharian 'pataphysics is the ingestion of impossibility as an essential nutrient of speculative thinking and being. This is not really art any more, nor even sorcery, nor even a form of voodoo enacted on the Pinocchio doll that is oneself. It is more of a

hoax, but as Priest eloquently points out, a hoax is both "the event that it says it is and the event that it is not. It is neither true nor false but both, a duplexity that allows one to say two things at once: to tell the truth by lying."31



Two people looking at each other with crossed eyes (a tinfoil hat for Eldritch Priest), Ted Hiebert, 2013. Stereographic image.<sup>32</sup>

And the point in the end is that in order to understand the ideas one needs to put oneself in their way. That's the tinfoil hat through which one accesses both sounds that are there but can't be heard, and sounds that aren't there but that one hears anyways. That's Pinocchio Syndrome in which one moves towards embodied action as a performative lie that generates its own sustainable reality. That's 'pataphysical laughter too, which puts itself in the way of any serious conclusion in favor of always unsettled systems of engagement. That's the Breatharian promise that, and immortality—crossed wires of a delusional performance that can neither be verified nor disproved and which thus can only be engaged or ignored. Breatharianism, when seen as an ideology with creative complexity, becomes not just a metaphor but a possible perspective to which one can attune. All that is required is a sense of belief despite impossibility, a complete disregard for the truth, and a modicum of personal recklessness. Not logic. A mood. The hedonic tone of Breatharian 'pataphysics is the conceit that one can live on the power of the imagination alone, even when there is no proof, no reason, and no clear line of logic supporting the suggestion. Breatharian 'pataphysics is an ingestive strategy for the consumption of imaginary possibilities.

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"Ha ha" he said, crossing his eyes until he saw two versions of the world. When he did he laughed again, having discovered someone standing in the space between the two, staring intently back at him.

#### Notes

- 1 Eldritch Priest, Boring Formless Nonsense: Experimental Music and the Aesthetics of Failure. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 116.
- 2 Ibid.,70.
- 3 See, for example: Carsten K.W. De Dreu, Matthijs Baas and Bernard A. Nijstad. "Hedonic Tone and Activation Level in the Mood–Creativity Link: Toward a Dual Pathway to Creativity Model" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 94, No. 5 (2008): 739-756.
- 4 Leonard Orr, Breaking the Death Habit: The Science of Everlasting Life (Berkeley: Frog, Ltd., 1998).
- 5 William K. Rawlins, Friendship Matters: Communication, Dialectics, and the Life Course (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1992)
- 6 Baudrillard argues, among other things that we are better off refusing to believe in the real, lest we find out at some later time that it has all been a hoax. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil, Or the Lucidity Pact*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2005).
- 7 I read My Sister and I primarily as a text that adds a beautiful ambiguity to Nietzsche's thought, a text framed by some as Nietzsche's last text written well into his period of madness, and by others (most importantly Walter Kaufmann, the most notable translator of Nietzsche's work) as a fraudulent text that undermines and contradicts the bulk of Nietzsche's thinking. See Friedrich Nietzsche, My Sister and I, trans. Oscar Levy (Los Angeles: Amok Books, 1990).
- 8 Ali Rahimi, Ben Recht, Jason Taylor, Noah Vawter, "On the Effectiveness of Aluminum Foil Helmets: An Empirical Study," Wayback Internet Archive, (2005), <a href="http://web.archive.org/web/20100708230258/http://people.csail.mit.edu/rahimi/helmet/">http://web.archive.org/web/20100708230258/http://people.csail.mit.edu/rahimi/helmet/</a>
- 9 Julian Huxley, *The Tissue-Culture King*, (1927) <a href="http://www.revolutionsf.com/fiction/tissue/index.html">http://www.revolutionsf.com/fiction/tissue/index.html</a>

- 10 Christopher Turner, "The Influencing Machine," Cabinet 14 (Summer 2004), <a href="http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/14/turner.php">http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/14/turner.php</a>
- 11 Rahimi, et al., "On the Effectiveness of Aluminum Foil Helmets."
- 12 For Priest, "being ironic doesn't first mean being critical; being ironic means being playful." See: David Cecchetto, Marc Couroux, Ted Hiebert and Eldritch Priest, Ludic Dreaming: How To Listen Away from Contemporary Technoculture (London: Bloomsbury, Forthcoming 2017). This quote from chapter 7: "Imaginary Magnitudes and the Anoriginal Hypocrisy that Vanishes in the Meantime."
- 13 For more on this argument see: Ted Hiebert, *In Praise of Nonsense: Aesthetics, Uncertainty and Postmodern Identity* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2012).
- 14 Priest, Boring Formless Nonsense, 162.
- 15 Ibid., 215-17.
- 16 Ibid., 220.
- 17 Ibid., 221.
- 18 Ibid., 242.
- 19 Waleed Salameh and Michael Titze, "The Pinocchio Complex: Overcoming the Fear of Laughter. An Interview with Dr. Michael Titze," *Humor & Health Journal*, Vol. V, No. 1 (January/February 1996), <a href="http://www.michael-titze.de/content/texte\_e/text\_e\_02.html">http://www.michael-titze.de/content/texte\_e/text\_e\_02.html</a>
- 20 Michael Titze, "Treating Gelotophobia with Humordrama," Humor & Health Journal, Vol. XVI, No. 3 (October 2007), 3, http://www.centroadleriano.org/publicaciones/geloto.pdf
- 21 Baudrillard, The Intelligence of Evil, 156.
- 22 Priest speaks of art as a form of voodoo (see Priest, 200) but by linking this concept to Pinocchio Syndrome my intention is to push past art to suggest voodoo as a psychological and performative strategy for setting up alternate forms of encounter with the world.
- 23 Alfred Jarry, Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician, trans. Simon Watson Taylor, (Boston: Exact Change, 1996).

- 184
- 24 Luc Étienne, "Faut-il prendre la 'Pataphyique au serieux?" November Organuum du College de 'Pataphysique website, Acessed May 2015. My translation.
- 25 René Daumal, "Pataphysics and the Revelation of Laughter" (1929), cited in Andrew Hugill, "Pataphysics: A Useless Guide (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012) 145.
- 26 Hugill, 'Pataphysics: A Useless Guide, 17.
- 27 See Wiley Brooks's blog, *The Breatharian Institute of America*. http://www.breatharian.com/
- 28 Hugo Stamm, "Von Licht ernährt bis in den Tod," ("From light-fed – to the death"), Tages Anzeiger, April 25, 2012., <a href="http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/leben/gesellschaft/Von-Licht-ernaehrt--bis-in-den-Tod/story/28039574">http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/leben/gesellschaft/Von-Licht-ernaehrt--bis-in-den-Tod/story/28039574</a>
- 29 Toby McCasker, "Breatharian Leader Wiley Brooks Lives On Light, Air, And Quarter Pounders," Vice Magazine, March 17, 2014, <a href="http://www.vice.com/read/breatharian-leader-wiley-brooks-lives-on-light-air-and-quarter-pounders">http://www.vice.com/read/breatharian-leader-wiley-brooks-lives-on-light-air-and-quarter-pounders</a>
- 30 See Cecchetto, Couroux, Hiebert, and Priest, Ludic Dreaming, Chapter 2: "Nietzsche in B-flat: Attuning to the 'Pataphysics of Data"
- 31 Priest, Boring Formless Nonsense, 281.
- 32 This image is a tinfoil hat in the sense that it requires reciprocal engagement for activation. The image is a stereographic photograph, which means that the two images have been captured from slightly off-set angles, in order to mimic the parallax gaze of human vision. It is also a rudimentary method for simulating 3D imagery. To view the picture, a viewer needs to cross their eyes and focus on the area of overlap that emerges (due to divergent angles of vision) between the two images. When they do, they will see my face—with eyes crossed—in 3D.

# 8 The Egregor That Was, Is and Will Be The Brown Study (Speculative Relayism)

Marc Couroux

# ((:))((:)):

The feeling of interminability was expected, even comforting. It was still too early in the proceedings. After all, a certain amount of time is always necessary to clarify an emergent field before categories are formed and crystallized. For now, it was all too open. Each note received inordinate attention, suffering the weight of its bloated capacities to rewrite the logic that had heretofore been operating. Revision without end. Things were moving forward, but teleology remained ever murky, recalling the swift transition of consistently halved steps into never getting started in the first place, familiar to adepts of Zeno's dichotomy paradox. Processing intensive undertakings had that effect. It was impossible to know exactly what composite was accumulating for the impenitent inertia induced by this moment-to-moment focusing. Inevitably, a point would arrive when redundancy of some kind set in, loosening time's fastidious, molecular grip on the brain, freeing it to embark on wayward excursions around an increasingly finely parametrized object.

That was the standard operating procedure, X presumed, as the somatic stumbling continued. Not being able to settle into an even incommodious relationship with the task at hand fomented a truly queer state of mind, already woozily

bedeviled by a tenuous temporality, melting, solidifying, volatilizing incoherently. It was already hard to tell how much time had elapsed since the beginning of the séance. 10 minutes? 20? 40? Regardless, X began to feel its mind moving in speeds oblique to the metric at hand, detaching itself long enough to gain contextual traction.

The eldritch priest led the function, electric guitar in tow, not so much conducting as fixing determined poses whenever a structural signpost loomed ahead. He was always askew from the beat in X's estimation, entering prematurely or tardily by no apparent rationale whatsoever. The ten channeling musicians—called *asounders* here, for reasons that will soon become obvious—were seated five on each side of him (X included), forming a semi-circle. We were jointly conjuring a drawn out melody, or rather, it was conjuring us.

# ((::))(:)

The Brown Study was and is constituted almost exclusively by a single melodic line, except for the periodic intercession of punctuational and cadential tropes that admit counterpoint and harmony. The elliptical title of the séance had long been established—printed in bold on the small card that each asounder received exactly two weeks earlier, it begged elaboration. Was it meant to preemptively instill a mood of deep, ruminative melancholia conducive to the affective maintenance of a persistently mournful, downwards tending lyricism? The chronic potency of such a disposition could not be denied. (In addition to date and location, a terse footer capped the invitation: "neither/nor"). Remarkably, we had only just been introduced to the score, minutes

before beginning; furtive glances exchanged after quickly perusing the document quietly established a consensus that our aptitudes for attentiveness would be severely challenged that singular Friday evening on the second floor of a dilapidated building at the foot of Ossington Avenue, Toronto, March 30, 2007.

Besides the overwhelming onslaught of melodicity, the cursory instructions spoken at the outset by the presiding houngan, nowhere present on the score, undoubtedly elicited the most bewilderment:

Unperform the melody in order to seduce its virtual expressions. Contour trumps. Inflect at an intensity that leads back to the melody, our oborically. Drop in and out as appropriate. Weird durations will be encountered. Commit to your idiosyncrasies!

Vague and oddly specific at the same time, these directions failed to stipulate the boundaries of such interventional intrigue. Were we to inflect and "unperform" together or launch individual initiatives? Which discrepant modalities would paradoxically reinforce the very thing being diverged from? Pitch alteration? Octave collapse? Rhythmic dislocation? Heterophony? Harmonization? Timbral modulation? Yet, "contour trumps."

As X pondered these cryptic injunctions, the constitution of the cabal drew its attention. The asounders present all belonged to various experimental musical sects, extending from the peripheral jazz world to the lowercase improv community to the more esoteric branches of the classical composition juggernaut. This was most assuredly not an accident.

#### ((:):)::

It went sort of like this. At the count of two, ten asounders led by the eldritch priest began intoning a thoroughly notated melody that ended up adopting—when accurately rendered the feel of a more or less loosely rubatoïd endeavor. The way it disingenuously presented itself as an aimless reverie while being exactingly notated effortlessly tripped a line of fanciful speculation. Perhaps it was a ruse, akin to those byzantine "transcriptions" (or recodings) of Romantic music which quantize the rhythmic fluidity typical of an expansive interpretation to the nearest intelligible (just noticeable) division. (Dynamic gradients and accentuation schemas were also subject to such rationalization.) Accordingly, if every notational detail is punctiliously respected, a fully expressive performance magically materializes. Such transposition remaindered bizarre potentials. X recalled Artur Schnabel's annotation of the late Beethoven Piano Sonatas which imposed a convoluted layer of tempo fluctuations altogether absent from the urtext, in sympathy with a particular epochal disposition. An infinite regress type of logic prevailed, wherein a performer committed to the capricious pianist's revisionism would at once have to reconcile the original notation with this added layer, while inescapably adding a third constraint layer reflective of the discrete historical period in which this re-revisionism is taking place. And so forth.

Anyway, at this point in the ritual, a striking metamorphosis began taking hold. We had been at it for a while, and adherence to the melody had remained fairly strict but for the occasional wrong note impelled by misreading or confusion as to whether a pitch was natural,

sharpened or flattened. Understandably, the perfunctory briefing induced a cautionary chill, which had mandated an orthodox approach. Now entrances were perceivably sloppy, but no longer from carelessness. The priest's invocation was beginning to take effect, not by dint of instructional fidelity, but as fallout from the very materiality of the piece itself, its languorous pacing and unilinear idée fixe. The staggered impulses seemed destined to slough off what was becoming an uncomfortable inertia.

Something distinctly evil was transpiring.

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Had these changes transpired möbiusoidally, only to be cognized in a moment of distraction from an increasingly taxing exercise? (Attentional fracturing was becoming a baseline condition.) A couple of asounders had engaged timbral filters via pedals (also retrospectively noticed), which acutely alienated the melody from its prescribed orbit. (Pitch was a mysterious percept indeed, contingent on multi-parametric collusion.) Dropouts were also contributing towards melodic estrangement: at times the full complement of eleven dwindled to two or three, risking complete dissipation. Yet the houngan had sanctioned this potentiality—"in and out as appropriate"—and appeared untrammelled by the proliferating challenges to the melody's integrity.

Perhaps it was a certain will-to-differ that each asounder expressed in their habitual musical peregrinations—a natural propensity to pervert whatever encoding system reigned at the time, to leverage its exoteric and esoteric fixations—which made them desirable vectors at present.

X had fueled collective imagination on leaking some of its chronoportational exploits to reddit (the posts almost instantly deleted). The most outrageous of them involved the retrodepositing of a 1/4" tape reel containing The Ides of March—a collaboration between John Cale and Terry Riley which surfaced on their 1971 album Church of Anthrax in the studio rented by Sue Records where Inez & Charlie Foxx's Mockingbird was about to be recorded...8 years earlier. X had learnt from phonomagus Danel B. Scroll how to "put oneself in the way of" occulted superpositions, such that the magical complementarity of two songs from discrete time periods could be summoned into actuality. But the Ides/Inez drop was of a wholly different order, which X only ever subtly alluded to. You could hear the dominant 7th ostinato hammered out by Cale and Riley adapted by the Foxx's at the start of their "novelty" tune (the hyper-pertinence of such an appellation was not lost on X), insistently grounding the straightforward troping which soon followed.

The thought-glitch secreted a peculiar feeling. A series of pedal points had begun, accompanied by an awareness of impending superposition.

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The room integrally shifted by the end of the sequence. The shaggy loft heretofore inhabited had swapped with a polished studio-like room, replete with cameras and track lighting. And yet, the music continued, apparently oblivious to the drastic spatial mutation. Already dropped out, X left the fold and walked around, exiting the space. Sticking her probehead outside, she quickly pinpointed the new location as sandwiched between King and Queen streets, abutting an

ice factory, many blocks from the inceptive venue. Hastily turning back for fear of missing a portal closure, X espied a large calendar. If the crossed-off dates could be trusted, it was April 14. Year: 2015.

As X regained the semicircle, the room reverted back—inscrutably—to the Ossington site, without any telltale auditory correlate. Nevertheless, the timeline had advanced significantly during her momentary extraction: Section D, barely broached in 2007, was half-over in 2015. None of this especially fazed X, who had engaged in musically-instigated chronoportation before. Eerily, the span (2007-2015) traversed in a glitch was a few months short of the interval covered in the *Mockingbird* escapade (1971-1963). Indeed, that unexpected reminiscence might have been a foreshadowing, a signal announcing an impending leap.

The melody beckoned, its erratic demeanor ever redolent of reverie and its nonlinearities. Categorical boundaries were hard to shore up when tropes melted into each other, as if discrete segments of a metamelodic continuum were being continuously extracted, their newfound adjacency ratified through adroit crossfading. This clandestine hash periodically floated referentially significant units clamoring for cognizance, at times congealing into blatant quotations the function of which remained obscure, though these detours evoked the phenomenon wherein a set of pitches randomly align, inadvertently eliciting a remembered tune partially sharing its coordinates. This realization led to the hypothesis of a deliberate organizational strategy: littered with structural lynchpins and allusive contours, the score catered to the asounders present, compelled to willingly complete the open circuit. What if the purpose of this séance was to foreground each musician's associational matrix?

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Once aired, the possibility was difficult to unthink: The Brown Study as an experiment in extruding each asounder's evil inclinations. In other words, the ground that each individual melts into, inevitably cedes to, if asymptotically. The tendencies that cannot be avoided even when convinced one is successfully avoiding them. (It appears that no matter how draconian the ablation of one's habits, one more is always unanticipatedly lying in wait, sub rosa, for a serendipitous encounter to brazenly reveal. Infinite regress.)

Indeed, each acolyte began to slide into their respective divergence grooves, as(o)undering the melody into distinct strata, finally honoring the eldritch priest's prefatory declamation: slipping in and out of tuning, purposely hitting adjacent notes, harmonizing when the melody putatively implied a cadential arrival, repeating pitches as a comedown, heterotemporalization (deliberately playing at a slightly slower or faster speed), sculpting and discretizing approaches towards perceived climaxes and pull-backs away from them, dramatizing lines. Though these idiomatic perspectives catalyzed a festering heteroglossia of sorts, X couldn't help but hear the melody's identity paradoxically amplified. "Inflect at an intensity that leads back to the melody, ouroborically."

If X's conjecture regarding the covert motivation of the séance was at all accurate, traps were everywhere, open circuits that begged resolution, conclusion, magnification or further digression. And yet, knowledge of these traps didn't rule out the hazard of being ensnared at a deeper, unsuspected level.

Something else was beginning to develop, now by virtue of durational expenditure. A few asounders, fatigued by the tensile preoccupation with continually secreting meaningful melodic expression and venturing tactics to maintain interest, rather than withdrawing redoubled their involvement by unexpectedly flailing off in a quick burst of wiggy energy: an unabashed harmonization, a raucous timbral modulation, an extreme octaviation, all overplayed, overshot. These fugitive stabs at blowing off pent-up control enabled a more prompt reengagement with the task than was possible for those that believed they could stave off inertia by maintaining strict textual fidelity. Their transition into iniquity simply took longer to effectuate.

#### (::):::

Time takes care of things, they say. Hubris and sophrosyne alike, mercilessly sloughed off if you wait long enough. If so, then the trick was to concoct an indigestible hyperstition, at least one that would temporarily stall digestion, for mutating contexts forced you into perpetual, elaborate games of catch-up.

Section E had just been initiated. Arrestingly awash with rapidly fluctuating ostinati aggregating into a drawnout chord progression, it forced reconceptualization, setting dominant melodic inclinations into relief. The chordal pooling acted, strategically, as a method of reinstating a collective impulse, a droning together. Inexplicably, it materialized precisely when the deviational imperative seemed to be finally reaching full florescence. It was indeed more exacting to will oneself to aberrate when irresistibly drawn into this kinetic agitation. Whereas prior hooks ably concealed their magnetic summoning of latent dispositions, cryptically enticing musicians towards certain unspoken lines of action, this ploy was entirely transparent. Structural

attractors like these might plausibly function as confidence boosters, repatterning those asounders who had by this time lost a feeling of cumulative momentum. The halfway mark had yet to be crossed. Had it been receding?

Perhaps this entire séance was an experiment in essaying a range of emergent collective logics through a pseudocybernetic routine, the elements of which could not be fully determined in advance. Though the cunningly designed score had previously provided both evident and subtle signals to impel tectonic bifurcation—noise that would force a restructuring of the ongoing process, sending the system into another orbit—it couldn't be known which contingencies would be taken up and which bypassed. Long-term trial and error was surely integral to fostering a robust collective intent, a group thought-form—a Vodun egregor—destined to eventually self-perpetuate.

As the resonance building sequence continued, a shrill high-frequency tone began to dominate, as an errant harmonic severed from its fundamental, aimlessly keening. With that, X began to feel the characteristic signs of hay fever coming on as another component, an ineffable frequency once again shifting the space awry.

# (:::)(:)

Acoustically piercing, the choked-up trumpet remained visually cloaked. Just as X egressed anew from the séance—this time to staunch his feverish nasal effluvium—the loft rotated 90 degrees, its air becoming correspondingly weightier, unbearably humid. Perfectly aware another jump had been inaugurated, he stepped out onto the street, astonished to be on Van Horne Ave. in Montréal's Mile-

End. It was Spring now. A nearby tabloid dispensary allowed for a cursory pinpointing: it was the week of April 23, 2009. Close enough. X reintegrated the ritual scene, truly a sprawl to behold.

Rather than reconsolidating collective purpose, the pooling appeared to be cultivating exactly the opposite. The core melody had morphed into an unrecognizable entity, receiving assaults to its integrity from all quarters. A markedly slower pacing amenable to more expansive improvisation also afforded exorbitant deliberation on each note, milked for expressive potential, as if temporal continuance was but a suggestion instead of prescription. The compounded effect of multiply concurrent speeds all but obliterated the melody, crowded out by its own proliferating virtuals and delayed iterations. Certain pitches became unexpected objects of fixation, converted into pedal points that thoroughly revalenced the putative tune, gasping for sustenance. An innocuous trill lasting a quarter note duration on paper became the master-contextualizer of the next ten bars. Descending lines harmonized in parallel chords gratuitously upped the ante of structural significance. Everything out of whack: a grandiose, bloated mess that had become its own thing.

Granted, the provenance of most asounders from highly "intuitive" milieus guaranteed a measure of laboriousness to the work of intoning, already saddled by a common propensity (even among proficient readers) to decelerate the tempo for lack of navigational acumen in uncharted territory. Durations were also awkwardly notated, no doubt to donate an extemporized feel, arousing an ironic conundrum: strict notation meant to convey flexible time is enacted by improvising musicians fully conversant with

the latter, yet fatally impeded by having to filter "natural" expression through symbolic representation. Intemperate drift resulted.

Sludge time.

## (((:)):):

Divergences, if numerous and coincident, always run the risk of flipping a linear teleology into a vertical pooling, collecting the threads of differential expressions inflected by the bodily and mental speeds of each individual player. To unperform was the commanding imperative after all, so one had to expect that time would behave anomalously. The prevailing framework was wholly alien to Bergson's spooling melody model of time in which each successive pitch is neatly added to the previous, accumulating in memory into a perfectly coherent line. Instead, "weird durations" abounded (as per the eldritch priest's prognosis) vaguely correlated to a bifurcational diagram of indeterminate ilk (catastrophe, perhaps). Some amount of discrepancy could be recuperated if the primacy of the main line was zealously perpetuated by a minimum of asounders. But there were limits, as this Montréal excursion patently demonstrated. Time warped, as divagational exorbitance reached its zenith (overheated by the compounding of incongruent modalities), and the various strands started feedbacking off of each other instead of diligently tracking the foundational melody's waning legibility. Autonomous entities began to percolate in these instances, actuating occasions endowed with the power to dramatically recalibrate everything that had so far occurred. Time really felt like a malleable, plastic

substance; one that could practically be frozen solid in these lagoons of linearity turned vertical.

The relative slowness endemic to the work naturally ensured a baseline condition of drift would be quickly ratified, but it was difficult to determine an ulterior controlling motivation except that perhaps in these moments of autocatalysis the energic profile of massed efforts underwent what resembled a state change. Indubitably, salient affective emanations detached themselves from the melody—though incipiently impelled by it—shapeshifting according to the type of collective gambit at play (earnest reading, strategic discrepancy, free extemporization, concentrated amplification, etc). It reminded X of Stockhausen's Klavierstück VI, in which a rigorously etched, zigzagging tempo curve obstinately pressured the punctually notated attacks in its remit to discharge kinetic and affective dissent.

Section H was upon us.

(((::)))

Montréal had faded back into the room this all began in (had we ever left?), sinuses uncannily cleared. H's sisyphean array of declivities amounted to a singular rhetorical form for collective differentiation. After each descent terminated, another would begin, high register.

The stark formal clarity suddenly upon us promised an at least temporary reprieve from the previous diversional madness, fatally entropic; a rebooting of one's relationship to this whole enterprise would be welcome indeed. But even this soon began to spin off its axis. Sensing another trial afoot, X remained stoically faithful to the slow procession of half notes as this streamlined subdivision instead hurtled towards the induction of what Keats named embarrassment, a liminal sensation provoked by coming upon oneself surreptitiously (like catching an unprimed glimpse in a mirror before retrospective rationalization). Multiple asounders appeared to be absolutely overtaken by this syndrome, becoming hyper-aware of their expressive exertions, confronted with a nakedly straightforward task but seeking deflection from this too-bald accosting through even more arcane heuristics qua coping (troping?) mechanisms. A skittish sort of trembling began to permeate the room as this intense aural self-awareness took hold. So much had been expected that the textual reduction generated anxiety in inverse proportion: gross timing impediments, pitch missteps, desultory harmonization, for starters; nutty blowouts and temerarious multiphonics at the extreme end.

Another form of embarrassment increasingly erupted, of a pseudocryptomnetic variety. Instead of the standard case wherein an occurrence presents itself as new even though it has already been experienced (and perhaps misremembered, or else contexts are so fundamentally incongruous that connections simply aren't made), the melody's fractal complexion ensured it would be processed at once as known and new. The becoming-inscrutable of memory aroused side effects of embarrassment at realizing one's capture by the music in oddly familiar folds and unequivocal alienation in equal measure. Didn't I already play this? And if so, did I inflect it the way I'm inflecting it now? Time was beginning to fastidiously exact a toll on intention.

## ((:))(:)::

Indeed, the motley collection of hard-won, idiosyncratic attributes and ingrained habits crystallized over a long period of time into the musician's signature were no longer protected by the hubris of performative projection, at risk of erosion and exposure from both the durational magnitude of the séance and an informational deficit concerning the overall mission of the exercise and its integral structure, impossible to collect when preoccupied with moment-to-moment expression. This state of affairs tended to activate escape stratagems, invoked in order to quell an overheated engagement into a new, more robust homeostasis.

There were many ways in which this might eventuate. In the performance of densely notated music (Ferneyhough and Xenakis, for different reasons) there almost always comes a point when the inside-time capabilities of the performer abut against an-at least presently-unassailable, "impossible" limit. What escapes when the tensile meniscus of legislation bursts has something to do with improvisation. In fact, in these moments a categorical bifurcation occurs; alternate rules suddenly snap into operation. Given abruptly revised premises, the membrane relieving the performer of having to disclose personal frailty flickers in and out of operation, uncontrollably. Such "improvisation" is qualitatively distinct from the purposive, rule-bound schemes that characterize what usually passes for it, manifold alibis for emancipatory expression chronically impervious to any form of positive, runaway feedback. But one would be sorely mistaken to assume that such wild irruptions could not ultimately be incorporated, tethered to new navigational abilities capable of reinterpreting accidentally executed leaps as positively

constitutive of a broader, more inclusive ecology. This was how you became system immanent, through the industrious conversion of impossibility into inevitability, with no one the wiser.

X was always disappointed that even ego-liquidating, chance-based compositional procedures, though radically reconfiguring of material and structural affordances, could not avoid being overruled by the totalizing forces entrusted with assiduously maintaining the musician's impassive veneer. Instead, a veritably occult as(o)undering of intention from effect was required to lay waste to even the most deftly meticulous cybernetic recalibration.

## ((:)(:):)

Backdoor aesthetics. X's coinage encompassed a battery of heterogeneous decorrelations thriving in this in-between, highly contingent zone, though multiply skewed in The Brown Study because of the injunction to variegate and to commit to one's idiosyncrasies. Deviation didn't benefit from the same dissolving impetus charged by the white-hot flashes of impossibility punctuating musical texts expected to be stringently adhered to. Nevertheless, the gradual, inertial accumulation of slow-moving melodic material eventually induced equally confounding temporary gaps of ability only capable of withstanding provisional assessments. The weakening of intention was most noticeable as we neared the halfway point, when some asounders sloughed off the concerted focus endemic to conventional performance, incautiously launching eccentric tangents, always ephemeral. The aforementioned jittery expostulations qualify as instances of backdoor aesthetics, part and parcel of a state of disarray compelled by the fractalized toomuchness of

the same-but-different, coinciding with an unshakable suspicion that appropriate, non-redundant means of expression that could embolden further efforts had been fully exhausted. Unlike the physically valenced, transgressive divarications in Xenakis (*Evryali*, for instance), the splitting of determination and result described here was intrinsic to this strangely textured space.

The lack of prior preparation was key to accelerating the production of a first order of backdoor artifacts. Misreads, premature or belated entries occasioned in the early sections ended up conjuring cloudy psychedelic textures—lines gleaned lysergically—composites that were unable to resist prompt cybernetic reintegration for their intensely seductive allure, now consolidated and ready to be invoked when needed. It reminded X of Keith Jarrett's glitch incorporation, wherein a note-slip occurring within a repetitive framework would be hastily welcomed as a source of renewed extrapolation. Though the retrospective intentionality at play reeked of cover-up, Jarrett's subterfuge exhibited an eldritch form of hyperstitional causality, in which effects precede causes. Occult deviations incurred on the road that weren't part of any predictive schematherefore properly impossible—were made possible through the mere fact of having happened. After the fact one could smugly retrace steps, but the effect lingered.

# ((((:)))):

The startlingly blunt entry of the first prerecorded segment afforded additional time to probe the distinctly esoteric aspects of time warping proceedings.

For X, backdoor maneuvers were evidence of timeline tripping. All you needed was a portal, wedged open by cognitive or physical overload, granting unpredictable and uncontrollable access to a parallel timeline where rules function differently. Events leaking in from this domain could be explained later via the protocols of the dominant timeline, though the perpetual ad hoc character of hermeneutic backtracking rarely measured up to the paradigm shattering violence at play.

X had come across the idea of the impossible irruption retroactively positing its causes—alias hyperstition—in Élie Ayache's In the Middle of the Event, but later discovered at Kubler -2 (two stages anterior to the current iteration within George Kubler's circuit-relay model, the closest (K -1) being ensconced in the work of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit)—the figure of Henri Bergson in a short lecture posthumously published as The Possible and the Real. It was inherently cybernetic. Deviation was indispensable in perfecting the system's predictive capabilities, and not at all opposed to it. Affordances—possible interactions between agents, latent or overt alike, within a given environment were always being recalibrated, as in The Brown Study. Indeed, a diffuse feeling that melodic diagrammatization would be comprehensively inf(l)ected by the attention presently dedicated to wringing expression out of discrete contours slowly but steadily contaminated the séance.

Yet, absent any governing scheme, the whole enterprise could not but seem righteously pitched against any form of cumulative improvement (or synthesis). The particular endurance demanded herein was thoroughly incompatible with any notion of self-betterment, whose fetishization found its epitome in the oft-rehearsed Cageian koan on boredom, in which the latter is invariably defused through incremental, sustained exposure.

The nature of cybernetic reinjection guaranteed that a backdoor aesthetics remained impervious to stabilization. In the words of Syn\_(, it was an aesthetics "tantamount to the eruption of unintelligibility".

It was a compulsively attractive phenomenon, regardless.

# (::)(:)(:)

Intoning restarted after the hermetic minute-long interlude, utterly remote from the melodic keening we had heretofore been copiously exposed to. Composed of brute, dryly articulated sine tones droning and glissing across the audible spectrum, it would be the first of many inhuman ingressions, perhaps destined to reset the collective affordance machine, or (more likely) operating on an integrally occluded xenological level.

We had crossed the median, though resolve had plummeted to its lowest point yet, a minority of asounders tentatively grappling to resume connection after the weird alienation effect. The eldritch priest maintained an aloof facade throughout as if attuned to an underground continuity inaccessible to us. (Indeed, the still ongoing, massive Section H cavalierly sheltered these antithetical approaches).

An entrainment effect began to creep up, further skewing any prospect of temporal solidity. Each asounder would eventually undergo a radical untethering from the activity that required another's availability to convincingly reset—such unshackling often occurred when a melodic element incited an experimental extemporization that momentarily distracted from notational imperatives. Whomever pulled

things back together had the opportunity to set a new pace that others would gladly follow, most having by now attained a somewhat addled state.

Meanwhile, the first texturally fulsome event of this segment began agglomerating, despite itself. A misread duration sent the melody careening off in so many delayed directions that it compounded into an emergent sinkhole, all but obliterating the generative tune, directionality temporarily suspended. It was then that X noticed the asounder to his left vigorously bowing his violin, without any acoustic evidence of his travails. The room darkened accompanied by a musty odor, foregrounded as if it had been there all along, just heeded. X felt the urge to drop out to scout the location, but was doubly stalled by an uncanny impression of centrifugal retreat—effects unlatched from causes—and a glimpse of an address scrawled on a post-it note stuck to the now empty chair on his right: 387 Park Avenue South. New York. Date unknown.

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It didn't matter anyway, for X had evidently been dropped from the séance, at least audibly. She continued depressing the keys for a short time out of amusement before attending to perplexing asymmetries between space and sound. X discerned how with each time-shift the character of The Brown Study mutated, differentially informed by local conventions, its ever erratic boundaries further deferring any prospect of totalizing comprehension. The operative injunction to deviate could force any notated program to abdicate from causally guaranteeing a specific musical consistency.

This version...she couldn't think of a more suitable word. It was like navigating a continuous, transtemporal substance on a mixer with infinite channels, switching periods via subtle, ably dissimulated crossfades. Though musical logics didn't reorganize with the same starkness as affected locational transformations, each "version" valenced things in a particular way. For instance, the occasional change covering a precisely delineated area was routinely being extended far beyond its purview in a more overtly willful manner rather than lagging due to productive incompetence of one kind or another. (To boot, the changes as such arrived unwarranted and in misalignment with the underlying melody, deforming and reforming it—another eldritch design bent on coaxing reorientational effects.)

Moreover, harmonic stopping points now tended to just happen, even without specified changes. And once harmonic motion transiently slowed, jazzy extemporization axiomatically entailed. At least it did here. Quick digressions into unreconstructed lick territory mobilized as soon as a lick-like figure appeared on the near horizon, nervously impelling anticipatory fibrillations. The newly reconstituted—chronoportationally remixed—assembly of musical lineages had led proceedings afield. In effect, the swingier orientation currently being seduced out of the budding egregor that was and is The Brown Study flagrantly underlined the latter's unswinging use of so-called irrational subdivisions of the beat, however rhythmically alluring in themselves. In this gathering, even straight successions of quarter notes incurred studied divergence, evoking a palpable tension in the more straight-laced readers who had to slacken hopelessly chimerical notions of fidelity to accommodate.

# ((:):)((:))

Another, lengthier "inhuman" intermission broke in without fanfare, passing itself off as the most natural rejoinder to the preceding melee. This time it was populated by buzzing tones that intermittently eschewed audibility, resulting in the first moments of extended silence (so to speak) of the entire session, though short-lived, as transitory harmonies, eerie in their hyper-clean articulation, promptly saturated the void.

Section J lumbered inceptively, deprived of the necessary élan to ensure immediate continuance. Fatigue and embarrassment had begun to wear down the collective sounding, increasingly plagued by dropouts, even walkouts. At least the overall sluggishness of the pacing in principle afforded time to ponder what was happening, opening up spaces between action and re-action, especially so for the crack readers present able to more readily clear their attentional slate.

This silver lining notwithstanding, X hypothesized that dropouts might function pragmatically as control mechanisms tasked with routing careless improvisational impulses before they metastasized into a concerted play that couldn't be undone. (This tactic foundered in the Montréal instantiation, as far as they could tell; the turgid extensities and dramatic overkills that singularized it irresistibly and repeatedly compounded themselves.) More cynically, the sanctioning of self-extraction might have been cunningly countenanced in order to impart an illusion of agency that would ineluctably lure each asounder into more reliable compliance. When abutting against the sense that nothing more can be meaningfully added, to stave off expression

burnout and a diminishing ability to sincerely engineer difference, you could simply drop out, with the proviso that your idiosyncratic, but inescapably productive work would shortly resume, reentry appreciably buoyed by what X called an *incipience effect*, a regenerative device whose only catch was that you had to leave to come back.

For no apparent reason, though certainly instigated by renewed, post-dropout commitments, another cloud began forming in the wake of an irrepressible swell on a sustained note. This altogether prodigious concentration of psychic energy converted the physical location—as the music concomitantly swapped out tracks—back to 2007 Toronto.

### (((:)))(:):

An abstract intrusion suspended our pursuits for the third time, reinforcing a tangible sensation of discontinuity that had been gradually sinking in as discrete states congealed, self-reified in the abruption of alternation. Was the séance now probing the modes by which a modicum of collective control could be reasserted, albeit tacitly, by sporadically declaring full stops, while the inscrutable synthesis that inhabited them slyly modulated what was to come?

These breaks and the voluntary dropouts both oscillated dialectically with the surfeit of expression that every asounder by this point had weathered by virtue of attending to The Brown Study's imperatives. Plenitude had been overheated via overstimulation into its opposite, forcing disconnection, withdrawal, hallmarks of dwindling, catagenic time.

Indeed, Gaston Bachelard argued that Bergson's emphatically void-suppressing, boundless profusion of

possibility—overflowing even in spans of relative repose—didn't accurately track with one's habitual experience of time, littered with multifarious varieties of sinkholes, inertias, stoppages. To boot, intuitively inclined asounders especially favored a type of melodic articulation that required boring holes before every run (and in extremis, before every note), experimentally pitching retreat against incipience in a manner more resonant with Bachelard's flickering vitality beset by blackouts than Bergson's inexhaustible fulsomeness.

The asounder's increasing and ultimately fatal incapacity to render these melodies continuously purposeful invariably intensified the oscillation between states of timeless ecstasy and patches of somatically amplified, torpid frustration, with nary a teleology in sight. An enigmatic logic of separation was at work in the tactical deployment of melody. Though the micro-tunes that assembled into the grand melody remained adamantly unmemorable, their curvatures nonetheless impelled expression, even in the absence of explicit textual prescriptions. What's more, dynamic surges and attenuations unfolded in their collective emergence without recourse to germane notational specifications, which were not to be found. Sustained notes almost unfailingly accrued in bell-curve-like swells that lured you away from the orbit of chronic self-obsession, while freeing listening to roam peripherally. Truly, an occult correlation between dynamic and contour had yet to be deciphered.

((:::))

Even in its wondrously immoderate extensiveness, the specific melody unfurling in The Brown Study was beginning to seem like a conceit, a placeholder masking ulterior processes.

The séance had lasted long enough that slower transactions could finally be detected, such as an insidious crossfade patiently dialing back one's will to scrupulously attend to progressive details as an abstracted, generic melodicity gained ground, however unstable. In retrospect, the eldritch priest's vague pronouncement that "contour trumps" had nothing to do with accurately rending the actual melody but rather pulling it back into genericity by simply attending to the general outline. Danger lurked. It was only a matter of extended time before this ongoing commitment to a lack of precision would perforce end up generating false positives, escalating the risk of structural collapse. Indeed, the numbingly diffuse melodic scheme asserting itself opened the floodgates to future unwitting coincidences and categorical confusions to haplessly plague already strenuous efforts at time binding.

This möbiusoidal slide into generality also inexorably shifted emphasis towards the individual asounder's melodic penchants: the absence of any injunction to accurately render (an already arduous assignment for the more instinctual player) hastened the resuscitation of well-rehearsed phraseologies, the festering of which might well eventually dissolve any impetus to continue the ritual.

But even given this awkward clause, an overall sense of structure (or at least the part of it so far traversed) strayed increasingly from conceptual containment. The structural listening privileged by Adorno as a fundamental technics of musical perception—allowing for the inside and outside-time tracking of a musical object through the perpetual interchanges between parts and wholes—struggled to take hold in these far from ideal circumstances. Indeed, the evolving compression of melodic activity into a kind of ratcheting phase space containing all melodic possibilities

resulted in the retrospective confounding and exchanging of sections rather than a meticulously ordered set of memorable, local melodic instantiations. An affectively valenced melodic method took mnemonic precedence over any of the actual melodies it happened to spawn.

# ((::))::

And yet, despite this accumulating ground, apareidolia fiercely prevailed. Opposed to the compulsive drive to detect patterns in the undifferentiated, apareidolia describes an inability to generalize relations, sensations into stable percepts that would allow for secure enough transit between micro- and macro-perceptual scales, such that more or less robust prediction could be ventured (equipped with fallback subterfuges in case primary targets had been missed). After all, even a sketchy knowledge of The Brown Study's overall structure would invest each asounder with coordinates defined enough to fashion an approach that could evolve autonomously. A contrario, a steadfastly prosecuted molecular immanence kept architectonic yearnings in check. Such an obsessional presentness jibed with the theory that the priest was conducting an intricate analysis of melodic propensities through setups that enjoined asounders to tarry in the dark, struggling to be inventive without ever transgressing the threshold of necessary confidence as to the validity of this or that contrivance over time.

It's likely (though not axiomatically) true that the vagaries of time would eventually end up concretizing the general constitution of the experiment, if it lasted long enough. But with the end in sight, such conjecture could not be conclusively tested. Nevertheless, X wondered whether the regress at work was less than infinite.

The fourth, longest and most abstruse interregnum yet interceded, assuredly priming in its recondite bearing for the monomania to come. Section N consisted almost exclusively of ascending and descending scalar lines, at differing speeds (once again, deploying a notated rubato meant to discharge affective effects). It was a more streamlined proposal amenable to swift adumbration. A conspicuous hostility began to erupt within the more conventionally trained division of the emergent egregor enduring its intuitive brethren's irrepressible vagrancies in what turned out to be the most intensely exposed moment of the entire evening. Tension was also being brokered through both speed and directionality: something was being built up to, paradoxically through discontinuities, interruptions and resumptions.

A trumpeter asounder—invisible—flaked out into stratospheric range, keening obliviously.

## ((:)(:))(:)

With the penultimate page of the score before us, anticipatory fantasies of the end began exerting palpable pressure, catalyzing the wayward predilections of Section N into full-blown turbulent multiplicity, instead of corralling its stepwise ambulation into a terminal rallying point, an occasion for collective homorhythmy. X again felt the looming presence of strategic and somewhat disingenuous engineering at work. Section O went one better, ditching N's durational flexibility by restricting itself to straight quarter notes. This only emboldened the metastasizing delay lines that began deferring the melody into a cloud whose unfolding, sumptuous expanse goaded certain asounders to further distend.

Maybe this part was intended to concretize and ratify what The Brown Study *had been*—isomorphic with the sundry fortuities it had provoked—into a form that would sustain its collaborators beyond the almost expired séance. If even a radically simplified notation failed to forestall a precipitate slide into chaos, perhaps this meant that we had located, after many hours of collective effort, the crux of the matter. The eldritch priest's battery of tests in their crafty pre-structuring of performative propensities had been patiently brewing a consistent concoction, the sum of our divergent machinations amounting to an entity that had become its own thing.

Most importantly, the contaminative enmeshments of notational inflexibilities, wildly disparate individual attempts at developing idiosyncratic valences and their complex inflection by audial feedback had engendered an exceptionally strange substance none of us could claim ownership of. It was a properly cybernetic state of affairs.

X suspected that the powerful massed effect of this newly constituted egregoric entity would exert no uncertain influence on all subsequent melodic listening, internalizing and transmission. The psychic intensities unlocked through such dogged collective focus, underwritten by individual struggles to come to terms with personal proclivities, glaringly exposed, had sparked a course that could only be called transmutational.

X had a flash, rapidly subsumed by the charismatic onrush of the final approach: this séance had been the inceptive move of a broader program, facture unknown.

### (::)((:)):

Section P punctually aligned asounders, suddenly reversing behavior in light of a peculiar recognition, that of the signal, or sigil before us: a parting handshake, fully harmonized and spread out across two staves. Its hieratic austerity compelled total submission, as was usually the case with immutable protocolar formulas parachuted in to abort delinquent processes, not that most asounders weren't already deeply desirous of any reason to intone in rhythmic unison after such determined divagation.

It was also in the nature of last-page wrap-ups to temporarily condense attention into ritual deliberation. Perhaps a chance to make amends. Such grandiosity, of anthemic ilk, fostered defiantly distasteful overtones for X, though they knew that an assertion of centripetal, collective intent was necessary to properly seal off what had transpired that evening on Ossington Avenue, Toronto, March 30, 2007. Six bombastic, accented minor tenths attacked with pyretic violence spurred the conclave's resolve to terminate the rite ecstatically, with a wide-voiced progression expanding outwards in contrary motion capped by an ultimate, quizzical chord held for ten counts.

#### Cut-out.

As Section Q began—a mere four bars of melodic restraint, a stuttering alternation—the eldritch priest languidly departed from the scene, electric guitar in tow, not to be seen again.

It took some time before each asounder, contending with the cumulative weirdness of the experience, enveloped by the kaleidophonic melodicity remaindered by dramatic closure, managed to pull it together, pack and quietly exit the room. Words were not exchanged until on the street, and then only polite formalities. After all, most of us barely knew each other, at least exoterically.

X contemplated whether another asounder had experienced the séance both linearly and vertically, as a melody disparately wafting across the tracks of an immeasurably deep, everlasting recording session, unpredictably entertaining conduits to alternate times. X knew they were unusually sensitive to the paranormal psychic effects induced by certain types of musical performance, especially those requiring tenacious absorption, having many a time tripped multiple Kubler circuits to warp causal influence.

## (((:))::)

As X walked away, the words of Empedocles stuck in their craw: "those who change their bodily condition deem to change their thought."

X recollected being caught time and again in the throes of physically challenging engagements during which hexis, a somatic disposition acquired through training, had its way with phronesis, or practical wisdom. Moreover, the annals of torture were replete with zealous accounts of mental compliance systematically obtained via stress positions. But the chain of influence could be productively reversed, affording a given abstract configuration—such as a set of shrewdly massaged melodic contours—the capacity to reorganize corporeal inclinations. It was easy to see how the melancholia of The Brown Study could be upgraded

into a chronic syndrome, lingering unbidden, seeping into everyday infrastructures, eventually rendering the body pliable to other trajectories.

Bergson and Bachelard, at loggerheads once again, returned to refine this open-ended digression. X thought about capitalism's delusional fantasy of defeating time, irremediably tethered to the erasure of history and the arrest and containment of messy processes of decay. To them now, Bergson's vitalist temporality perpetually taking care of itself without the encumbrances of negativities and affective concavities seemed pathetically and inescapably shackled to this world system and its thoroughgoing vampirizing of exuberance in the "affirmation" of cyclical creative destruction. How might such a predicament be resisted, short of engineering psychosomatic constructs that differentially compact and dilate temporal flow between gaseous, viscous, and solid states so as to pressure memory retentions, dislocate bodily time from rationalized clock time, seeking out any available opportunity to reinstate contingency according to the rhythms of chronal collapse?

Perhaps The Brown Study had been designed to operationalize select Kublerian circuit relays in order to thwart the deleterious eternal presentism aiding and abetting capitalist designs, mangling their logics through the *illapsi* of anomalies, repatterning susceptibilities. The thought persistently loitered on the way home.

A business card protruded from X's mailbox.

THE BROWN STUDY
March 29, 2008. 6 PM.
387 Park Avenue South. New York.
neither/nor

#### (:)(:):::

Section B began in earnest with a scalar uprising, as if to allay the drone point's mesmeric clout by quasi-reversing what had brought it on. But reversals weren't erasers. The B-flat fixation had decisively surfaced repressed tendencies that would doubtless continue skewing affordances willynilly, if subliminally.

X regained contact with the notation. Time finally appeared to be moving again, and with redoubled élan, snapping his mind back to a taut awareness of continuity after the crisis that had temporarily sent it spinning into uncontrolled speculation. He had heedlessly plunged into a sinkhole of his own making, which only happenstance could extricate him from.

It had been a singularly fraught idea to preemptively engage the ring modulator, overwhelming the melody with a shimmering set of frequencies, which lent a curiously static, invariant patina to his deviational initiative. What started as an embarrassment promptly coagulated into a pathological condition, increasingly difficult to extinguish. Luckily, the protracted pedal and the abundant proliferation of difference it encouraged—in momentarily dispensing with the need to both read and render—had dissolved the necessity of committing to that particular idiosyncrasy. It shouldn't have been incumbent to overplay this early in the game, with 19 pages to go out of 21, but X at times succumbed to an anxious urge to jump ahead, as a method of hyperstitionally sidestepping the natural decline of attention integral to durational enterprises, altogether forgetting the redoubtably chaotic effects of excessive caution.

The feeling of interminability was expected, even comforting. It was still too early in the proceedings. After

all, a certain amount of time is always necessary to clarify an emergent field before categories are formed and crystallized. For now, it was all too open. Each note received inordinate attention, suffering the weight of its bloated capacities to rewrite the logic that had heretofore been operating. Revision without end. Things were moving forward, but teleology remained ever murky, recalling the swift transition of consistently halved steps into never getting started in the first place.

## Contributors

G Douglas Barrett is an artist, musician, and theorist. He has received awards from DAAD, Franklin Furnace, and Akademie Schloss Solitude. Barrett's writing appears in journals such as *Postmodern Culture, Contemporary Music Review*, and *Tacet*. His book, *After Sound: Toward a Critical Music*, was published in 2016 by Bloomsbury Academic.

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Marc Couroux is an inframedial artist, pianistic heresiarch, schizophonic magician, teacher (York University, Visual Arts) and author of speculative theory-fictions. His work has been exhibited and performed internationally (Amsterdam, Berlin, Chicago, Glasgow, London). Marc has published widely and is co-author (with other members of The Occulture) of Ludic Dreaming: How to Listen Away from Contemporary Technoculture (Bloomsbury, 2017). He tweets as @xenopraxis.

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Juliana Pivato holds an MFA from School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2009). Her work in drawing, sound and sculpture has been exhibited internationally and is featured in private collections in Canada, Italy and the United States. Juliana has received project funding from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. Since 2012 she has been teaching at University of Toronto Scarborough.

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Tang Yan is a Ph.D. student in the Department of English at the University of Victoria. Her research interests include British and Irish Modernism, Critical Theory, and Film Studies. She has been writing on spatiality, subjectivity, and ethics in Samuel Beckett's works. She also works as the project manager of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism* online.

#### ART / THEORY / PHILOSOPHY

Eldritch Priest's work does not often figure sounds as waves, but instead favours earworms and egregors ... abstractions that are themselves equally figured through sound. This field is one of phono-fictions, and the contributions to this volume variously figure out (and in) Priest's work by leveraging, interrogating, and promulgating the waves of boredom, bullshit, imagination, and analysis that drive it. These contributions are thus (sometimes true) fictions of a special type: they redound in (non)sonic bodies that are never isomorphic with themselves, instead moving parasitically in modulatory resonances that aggregate and dissemble according to logics that exceed sensibility.

#### Contributors

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Nicola Masciandaro Juliana Pivato Gary J. Shipley Tang Yan

Catalyst books build speculative communities, inviting a wide range of perspectives into conversations about shared artistic, political, and intellectual values while privileging the unique, distinct and personal insights that characterize any single voice of engagement. Each volume in the series provides an in-depth look at an active thinker or artist—seeking after the full relevance of their work. The series focuses in particular on voices that have not already been widely featured but who have unique and relevant perspectives to share on questions of art, theory and culture.



