

Cover by Emma (E), Martin (M) and Sara (S)

## Noise & Capitalism

E: I was just thinking - what we've been talking about, I mean I've talked about it with you and with M, about the projection of you as the expert and, just in the first part where M says that the inside should be relatively neutral and the idea that for you, I would assume, or from what I know of other people who work with typography, the idea of design being neutral is a fiction.

M: Yes, yes.

E: But also there is an aim in design that it should be in some cases as undistracting as possible. So the idea is that something should be very easy to read and not distracting to the eye. I think it is an interesting challenge to think within the boundaries of the assignment that you have. The last time I spoke to you S,

you were saying that you weren't sure if this would work in relation to the assignment you've been given, because of the time, and the amount of time that you thought you needed, and the time that this would take.

M: Just one note, on neutrality, it's because of ignorance, I mean the whole thing is about experimental music so if you want to experiment with the format in any far out ways, total freedom, and excuse my ignorance.

E: I just think it's interesting that when we think about our own practice we would scrutinize the form and the means of production, but when we project to another person, engaged in another kind of practice, like design, we don't bring the same amount of critical thinking. But that's



KRITIKA



This is fantastic stuff. Of course, there is a smallish swarm of intellectual activity surrounding the sort of issues discovered here, but more often than not it centres on jazz and American practices. Consequently, discussions tend to get sidelined into the race issue – an issue which is crucial for the development of that music, but which can impose a narrowing of focus when one considers that much noise and free improvisation is created by non-African Americans who are not living in the particular historical context of a racially-oppressive society (though of course one with its own deep networks of imperialism, alienation, &c.). Serious intellectual examination of music, as practiced

by some of the journalists from *Wire* magazine, may also find itself restricted by the necessity of providing a review of a product (whether a live performance or an album) which evaluates that product on aesthetic grounds first and foremost – and whose audience may resist the presence of critical theory: too much politics for them to swallow, an ‘irrelevance’, intruding on their desire for a generalised ‘underground’ freedom to enjoy their niche of generalised musical resistance to the ‘mainstream’ (represented by such easy-target bogeymen as George Bush and...um, Britney Spears).

Not that these are the only intellectual examinations available: fine writing has emerged in recent years from David Borgo, whose book ‘Sync or Swarm’ approaches free improvisation from a primarily scientific perspective (applying fractal and swarm theory to the mental processes involved in making music in this manner), and in the e-pages of the online journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, whose numerous writers approach their topics from any number of different disciplines or models – feminism, queer theory, race, &c.

But this book is different from all that. (NB: refer to footnote before reading further.)<sup>1</sup> Yes, this book *is* different (in a really *useful* way), because its aim is to make politics just as much as its subject as music, and to see the two as fundamentally linked (hence the equal weighting – noise *and* capitalism).

As well being a fine performer, one of the few who really takes the notion of praxis seriously and attempts to apply it in everything he does, Mattin is a fine writer of manifestos, or manifesto-like pieces, one of which, ‘Going Fragile,’ follows the Introduction (and was previously – and is currently – available on his website). Here, he advocates an approach of risk-taking in free improvisation, resisting the trade-marking of one area of sonic activity or mode of approach and being open to those moments when failure seems most likely, when crisis prompts the human to be most resourceful. This idea of risk is a crucial one in the book as a whole – perhaps unsurprising given Mattin’s involvement. For instance, the cover consists of a transcript of a conversation between the three designers (one of whom is Mattin himself) as to how the binding might reflect ideological biases relating to the words within. Such a concern with the tiniest material details of production and their relation to socio-political issues might seem, to some, like overkill, but it is surely evidence of a very deep commitment and a rigorous refusal of easy realities and comforts, in the pursuit of a deeper and more complete sense of what it means to be human and to live in the modern world.

---

<sup>1</sup> Yes, the old reviewer’s tactic: lay out the product’s uniqueness and everyone will rush to get hold of it to satisfy some new thrill, just another object in the production line manufacturing desires and wants.

The collection's different authors have – healthily – different views on issues musical and political, even though they might be put broadly into the camp of leftist advocates of musical experimentation as a form of praxis: frequent reference points are Guy Debord and, perhaps more surprisingly, Karl Marx (whose popularity has slipped with the growing trend of politically-minded music critics to draw on post-modernist theory (witness the big hoo-hah over the music of Tricky, Burial, etc being a form of 'hauntology')).<sup>2</sup>

Eddie Prévost's essay treads lines familiar to those who have read his two full-length books, 'No Sound Is Innocent' and 'Minute Particulars', but remains a deft and succinct history lesson/ negotiation of positions. Prévost posits free improvisation as a practice which contains the possibility for a genuine social interaction (through music) which might evade the otherwise ever-present clutches of capitalist relations; an alternative system, something with the inkling of an alternative social reality (on which, see also George Lewis' 'A Power Stronger Than Itself', Mike Heffley's 'A Composed Theory of Free Improvisation', and Anthony Braxton's ongoing large-group projects in the field of Ghost Trance Music and Diamond Curtain Wall Music). Prévost is not arguing that free improvisation is some sort of utopian realm in which that alternative social reality can actually exist as a totality, for, as he admits: "[Free improvisation's] practitioners are not immune from the basic requirements of existence (within capitalism) which enables them to continue living. Certain material conditions have to be met before any music can be made." (p.41) Nonetheless, free improvisation remains a form (or, perhaps more accurately, process) in which unmediated, direct dialogue can take place, and in which specialisation and elitism can be reduced: for, while many free players are intensely dedicated musicians with rigorous practice regimes, free improvisation is nonetheless an activity open to anyone. This may break down the traditional barriers between a passive, non-specialist audience and a separated, elevated performer (think the People Band handing out percussion instruments at gigs, or even Roland Kirk's distribution of whistles to the audience at Ronnie Scott's).

Free improvisation, in Prévost's argument, is also made to steer a course between the other major avant-garde alternatives in twentieth-century (classical) music. The first of these is the rigorously scientific approach of the Darmstadt School, wherein results fairly similar to those which could be achieved in free improvisation were solely the province of the composer, conceived as a specialist with utterly rigorous and time-consuming methods. But, as Prévost points out with regard to

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Hauntology>

Stockhausen's 'Mikrofonie I' (a detailed exploration of the myriad complex and unusual sonorities to be coaxed out of a tam-tam), such arguments frequently went against what actually happened in the realisation of these compositions as sound, as music, rather than as theoretical exercises on paper (scores): "Reading Karlheinz Stockhausen talking about the development of this 'composition' it becomes very clear that his own explorations with the tam-tam proved to be difficult to notate or even to repeat with any hope of accuracy. The question one has to ask is, why not let the musicians themselves make these sonic enquiries?, Why do Stockhausen's supporters maintain the idea that unpredictable sounds emerging this way, i.e. by the performers, constitute his 'composition'? As a long-standing tam-tam player myself, I know and rejoice in the uncertainties of the instrument. I am always amazed that different people using the same kind of instrument seem to manage to produce such a diversity of sounds. All this, to me, seems to be a signifier and a celebration of humanity and not at all scientific, even though a playful sense of enquiry is at the heart of the exercise. The interface between materials and the person has a special individual imprint. Such a free and spontaneous approach, which is the general *modus vivendi* of an improviser, is an unmediated and an unfettered response to the world. It is not, thankfully, subject to some scientific calculation. It is not repeatable. And there is no good reason why it should be repeated: except to capture and exclusively enslave the sounds – and maybe exploit them financially." (pp.54-5)

Perhaps the veneration of the composer has something to do with the cult of celebrity (tying back to the much older tradition of 'heroism' – and, of course, heroes are predominantly male, just as composers are), and of marketing opportunity. Thus, the infamous Helicopter Quartet, in which the musicians' performances in different helicopters are radioed back to the concert hall and mixed live by the composer, is an enormous spectacle, serving to propagate the myth of Stockhausen as a larger-than-life mystical genius, a composer whose works demand and involve an excess justified solely due to the part they play in the building up of this legend; an overpowering by scale and (apparent) audacity with the mystifying effect of a religious ritual, but without even the content of that ritual – truly, a Debordian spectacle.

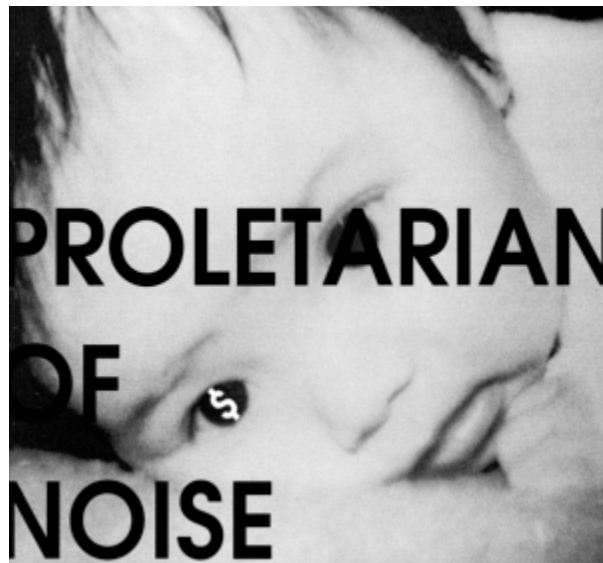
The second approach to come under Prévost's scrutiny is the apparently more affable Cageian school, here criticised for the removal of social relation and human intention from the process of music-making, the adoption of 'chance' and 'random' elements, the attempt to remove personality and to simply 'let the sounds be sounds'. The prime target here is Cage's long-term collaborator David Tudor – who was hauled up on precisely the same grounds by Cecil Taylor in A.B. Spellman's 'Four

Lives in the Bebop Business.’ Tudor once remarked: “I had to learn how to cancel my consciousness of any previous moment in order to produce the next one, bringing about the freedom to do anything.” The problem with this, as Prévost notes, is that “any so-called ‘freedom’ is totally dislocated from any human objective - except the perverse satisfaction of carrying out an irrelevant instruction. Perhaps Tudor, in the above quotation, was explaining some of his own strategies for trying to escape ‘the anticipated’ in performance. But there is something self-deceiving in the idea of trying: ‘to cancel one’s consciousness of any previous moment’. This practice is nigh impossible as well as being perhaps of no particular consequence.” (p.50) The freedom thus achieved is thus a very different one from that of free improvisation, which always carries with it some notion of *responsibility* (to oneself, to the audience, to the other musicians, to the flow of the music); it is a pointless freedom, a freedom which exists for no real purpose and to no real end, sacrificing both the self and the social to some idealized concept of nothingness.

This is all well argued, with a minimum of fuss and academic name or jargon-dropping, considering political theories and realities while remaining closely focussed on how these might and have related to actual practice, to actual music-making. But its presence in this anthology leaves a number of unanswered (or perhaps one might even say un-raised) questions: for instance, we might safely say that Prévost’s subject is acoustic free improvisation, given the reiteration of his dislike for “abuses occurring in music (e.g. the oppressive use of electronically induced volume and the indiscriminate, often careless and uninspired usurpation of material by means of sampling)” (p.57). Of course, ‘Noise’ *could* fit with Prévost’s ideal concepts of free improvisation if it is taken as a term signifying the opening up of spaces within and against the system of modern-day capitalism. Thus, in the following essay, by Ray Brassier: “ ‘Noise’ has become the expedient moniker for a motley array of sonic practices – academic, artistic, counter-cultural – with little in common besides their perceived recalcitrance with respect to the conventions governing classical and popular musics. ‘Noise’ not only designates the no-man’s-land between electro-acoustic investigation, free improvisation, avant-garde experiment, and sound art; more interestingly, it refers to anomalous zones of interference between genres: between post-punk and free jazz; between musique concrète and folk; between stochastic composition and art brut.” (p.62)

However, ‘Noise’ has also become – to quote Brassier once more – “a specific sub-genre of musical vanguardism,” a term which has come to designate precisely that loud, oppressive, harsh electronically-induced volume and playful/subversive use of sampling to challenge notions of genre and the origin of material, of which Prévost so disapproves. With

regards to this, issues arise such as the relation between loud electronics and quieter acoustic instruments, and, more broadly, the relation of free improvisation to noise (or free noise), and the role of theatre and performance in both (something I've come to feel increasingly neglected in the rather staid performance context of much free improv – of which more later). Mattin, for example, performs in both very quiet contexts with Radu Malfatti and extremely noisy and disrespectful contexts in which he constantly challenges expectations, in a quite aggressive way: for instance, 'Proletarian of Noise', which includes a half-hour track consisting of the reading of a text punctuated by extremely long silences, and a shorter piece consisting solely of the sounds of typing on a computer keyboard, and 'Pink Noise', where he lays down 30 minutes of ear-bending feed-back over which Junko simply screams – hardly a model of social (or socialist) interaction, as Prévost might desire.



I'll come back to such questions in a short while. But now, we might move on to look in more detail at some specific essays. Ben Watson – as usual – combines rabble-rousing quasi-manifesto gestures and sharp analysis of the lapses made by his various targets (in this case, *Wire* magazine, and their uncritical treatment of the whole 'Noise Music' scene), with the valorisation of a chosen few (Lendormin, Ascension, John Coltrane). In this particular piece, he also insists vociferously on a kind of cult of amateurism and the unlearning of technique which seems to me to ignore what actually goes on in the musics he so loves. I quote: "Modern art is an eruption of immediacy... rubbishing all previous cultural standards, achievements, techniques and skills: Asger Jorn's childish scribbles, Derek Bailey's 'can't play' guitar, J.H. Prynne's 'incomprehensible' poetry. Extrinsic formal structure (whether song or composition or training) prevents us seeing what's right under our noses: instruments, fingers, people, ears,

amplifiers, attention, inattention.” (pp.114-15) These are the things Watson values, as he’s made clear in his critical work throughout his career – and he’s entitled to such preferences. But, as he implicitly acknowledges by putting ‘can’t play’ in scare quotes, Bailey’s approach to the guitar was very different to what such a tag would suggest (see, for example, Dominic Lash’s description, available on the Incus website, of Bailey’s notes towards a planned, but never written book on guitar technique).<sup>3</sup> Prynne, meanwhile, is ‘incomprehensible’ not because he’s a surrealist ranter or a primitivist sound-poet, but because of the sheer crammed range of intellection, reference, allusion and suggestion that bursts from virtually every word of his work. What Watson is doing here is taking accusations commonly leveled against ‘avant-garde’ artists, and then running with them as if they were true, and a good thing!

To take another example, his use of Coltrane as an exemplary figure for a raggedy collection of free jazzers, free improvisers, rock musicians and figures somewhere in between (such as the Italian group Lendormin) may in some ways be entirely accurate – but it does a disservice to Coltrane to implicitly construe him as some kind of primitive, unlearning technique for new pastures of uncharted freedom. For me, that’s a dangerously simplistic explanation – the same sort of thinking you get when rock critics name-check ‘Ornette Coleman’s free jazz playing’ and believe that this somehow ‘explains’ Don Van Vliet’s vastly different approach to the saxophone. OK then: contra Watson, Coltrane’s music is *not* an abdication of technique, but technique taken to the *n*th degree, in the service of expression and of noise (if we understand noise as overburdening of information density, as something we can’t yet understand, rather than just as regression to primitive yawling). Indeed, it’s far more helpful to construe any movement as generating its own techniques, its own formal codes and practices. This is just *simply unavoidable* – even if these codes do need sharp kicks up the backside every few years and even if something else may come along very soon. New codes are prompted into being through creative experimentation and the process of learning. That’s why a healthy respect for tradition by no means precludes an ability to play with, or even apparently to scorn it – as, in the eyes of its most rigidly conservative adherents, did Coltrane’s music. Such apparent scorn is actually a development of the original spirit in which it was first created. It’s precisely this attitude which has kept African-American forms of music so vital: as Archie Shepp puts it, “Negro music and culture are inherently existential, improvisational. Nothing is sacred.”

---

<sup>3</sup> Dominic Lash, ‘Derek Bailey’s Guitar Notes: A Glimpse of the Incus Archive’, available at <http://www.incusrecords.force9.co.uk/pdf/Incus-DB-guitar-notes.pdf>

Watson's quite right to slam down the notion of rock bands who play noise "because Avant is in vogue", but his valorisation of aggression, of rock and roll energy and gesture, ignores the fact that the *opposite* of such Noise-as-Volume may be just as noisy as 'Noise' (volume and harshness on their own aren't inherently subversive; such a concept of noise is very much prone to the marketisation that Watson so despises). To illustrate this, we need turn no further than to the anecdote which prefaces the essay under discussion: that of Eugene Chadbourne playing country music to free improv audiences, who treated it as the kind of noise others would perceive free improv to be. I'm not, of course, suggesting that everyone should start playing country music to shake up the staid 'weird modern music' hierarchy, but what I am suggesting is that 'Noise' might be, at times, the opposite of what is normally considered 'noisy' – extremely quiet and apparently 'un-energetic' music may deny the visceral thrill of Noise (the thrill endorsed in Watson's emphasis on the physical), may deny that kind of macho aggression.<sup>4</sup> Mattin, I think, realizes the dangers of a too-narrow definition of Noise, through his highly self-critical quest to avoid falling into set patterns (both behavioural and musical): his 'reductionist' work with Radu Malfatti is, according to this argument, just as 'noisy' as his more 'power-electronics' flavoured laptop work or the 'Pink Noise' collaboration with Japanese singer/screamer Junko.

I used the word 'macho' just now, and I'm not intending that to be merely a throwaway remark. If Noise, and a particular kind of 'visceral', 'energetic' form of sound-making does have a kind of macho thrust behind it, we might consider an alternative via the essay preceding Watson's, wherein Nina Power thoughtfully considers the work of female noise artist Jessica Rylan. For Power, Rylan's work challenges noise stereotypes, her performances engaging in a more elegant (though by no means twee) consideration of the relation between voice and synthesizer, human and machine, audience and artist. Indeed, gender is an issue which might profitably have been more discussed in this anthology as a whole: Power's (very good) essay feels like a token female inclusion, and is more an exploration of a particular artist's work than a wide-ranging survey of gendered noise – which is not in itself a problem, but which does mean that it can't bear the weight that's been forced on it, to fully fill the 'woman component' of the book. (That said, I'm sure Mattin would have been mindful of this and would have wanted to avoid the usual male-dominated circles in which so much of this music's production and reception seems to be conducted).

---

<sup>4</sup> See also the concluding paragraph of Howard Slater's essay. "We can fear silence as if it were the most ear-splitting noise." (p.163)



So: why are so many of the artists mentioned men, playing at gigs attended by men? Is there perhaps something – dare I use the word? – *phallogentric* about noise, about the whole rock and roll myth of the singer with his phallic guitar or saxophone? They don't use the term 'cock rock' for nothing, and they might as well invent a similar term for less mainstream manifestations of 'aggression' and 'energy' in music. Of course, there are exceptions: the female performers in the heyday of No Wave (one of the few avant-garde musical movements in which women played a role equal to, and perhaps even more prominent than that of men), someone like Suzi Quatro, or Virginia Genta<sup>5</sup> (the saxophonist in the Jooklo Duo) – but these are very much exceptions (see what a wide range of different musics I've had to traverse to compile even that miniscule list), and hence do not trouble the general balance of things. Thus, for instance, it's OK for Alice Coltrane to play 'harp-like' arpeggios on piano or even on an actual harp (because a harp is a rather womanly instrument and Alice Coltrane's music displays that 'feminine touch'), but it probably wouldn't be OK if *she* was the one doing calisthenics and blasting on saxophone for an hour at the front of the stage, rather than fitting into the background behind her husband.

We might well bear this gender imbalance in mind when we read Bruce Russell's optimistic statement that, "Being outside of the so-called 'music industry' which purveys alienated entertainment products that 'joyously express their slave sentiments', sound work can create, for brief periods of time 'constructed situations' where 'unitary ambiances' of sound, *mise en scène*, and selected audiences of initiated *enfants perdus* can briefly combine to 'foreshadow' 'a few aspects of a provisional micro-society.'" (p.89) The practitioners of Noise and Free Improv, for all their claims to be engaged in a field of activity which is inherently more self-critical than perhaps any other, seem to have a blind spot about still-ingrained gender imbalances and hierarchies, just as much Black Nationalism of the 1960s tarnished its emphasis on racial liberation with slurs on 'faggots', 'Jews' and women who did not fulfill the roles they were supposed to fulfill.

Even without considering gender, Matthew Hyland is able to take a less optimistic view than Russell, Prévost or Watson; in his words, "improvisation (as Derek Bailey intends it) resists commodification *almost successfully*. 'Almost' remains an upper limit as long as capital goes on being strengthened by what hasn't killed it yet." (p.130) Mathieu Saladin expands on this, pointing out that the very virtues which make free improvisation, to its more politically-motivated advocates like Prévost, a model form of interaction resistant to that of capitalist society, have been absorbed into the adapting forms of modern capitalism (what one might

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://virginiagenta.altervista.org/>

call 'post-modern capitalism', I suppose). Thus (in the words of Pierre-Michel Menger, quoted by Saladin): "the irony is that the arts, which have cultivated a fierce opposition against the domination of the market, appear as forerunners in the experimentation with flexibility, indeed hyper-flexibility" (p.145). Or, Eve Chiapello: "Planning and rationality are not any more, according to the management teachers and consultants, the only ways to make a success. Conversely, it must be 'run by chaos,' continuously innovate, be flexible, intuitive, have a strong 'emotional quotient.' Companies are too bureaucratic, too hierarchical, they alienate the workforce; they have to 'learn how to dance.'" (p.146) This sounds none too dissimilar to free improvisation, to which one could easily apply a checklist derived from the description above: chaos, innovation, flexibility, intuition, emotion. In terms of concrete examples (or merely anecdotal 'verification'), this passage particularly struck me given that, when spinning out some paragraphs for a CV, I discovered how easy it was to spin aspects of my experience of freely improvising and organising a free improvising collective into 'work-place skills' that would enable me to slot nicely into a wholly capitalist job, to be a cog in the alienation machine.

Perhaps, in the end, one has to take this as a caveat rather than as a stumbling block which invalidates the whole free improv project; or, if not as a caveat, as the beginnings of an ongoing critical discussion and self-examination which will remain (as free improv itself remains) process rather than product, continued exploration rather than arrival or conclusion. Anthony Iles puts it best in the final sentence of his Introduction: "Since we cannot accept that noise or improvisation is by default anticapitalist music, then we need to look more closely at those resistances and tensions this music carries within itself – where it provides potential tools for capitalism and where it supplies means for getting out of it." (p.17) (For his part, Saladin concludes by arguing that, as process, free improvisation remains 'noisy' by its focus on dissensus rather than consensus – it is "a creation which does not seek reconciliation or the profit of any a priori success" (p.149)).

\*\*\*

What the more idealistically-tinged essays in this collection tend to do is, via citing a whole range of Marxist scholars, to uphold the unique possibilities in free improvisation. Yet, while asserting that it may not be a perfectly resistant alternative to capitalism, they do not really delve into the specifics of sound practice – the production and consumption contexts of the free improv 'scene'. For instance, Bruce Russell argues that, "As a developing practice, and because of its improvisational method, this sound work is inherently self-critical. It is this which ensures its sharpness as a tool for exposing reification in other forms of

culture.” (p.77) I’d agree that the methods which one has developed and which one might be expected to espouse – especially if one has become associated with them in the minds and words of critics and audiences – may need to be rejected, questioned, criticised, so that they do not simply harden into marketable, reified activities, separable from the very human process of their making (though of course the risk of that happening is always far less great than in other forms of making music/sound). Yet the list of methods and possibilities which Russell comes up with hardly sounds very different to the sort of thing that might have been written when the music was in its infancy in the 1960s – it’s generalisable enough to resist further scrutiny: “experimentation with alternative performance-experiences, and the radical rejection of the cult of the composer, the ‘rules’ of music and the hierarchical models of composition, score-reading and conduction.” (p.87)

Yet, in practice, “experimentation with alternative performance-experiences” tends to mean an ‘underground’ network of spaces which, while they are certainly different to the concert hall, the rock arena, or the nightclub, have perhaps become environments which are too settled, too safe, too comfortable: middle-aged men with beards gathering in the back-rooms of pubs suffused with the smell of real ale and the sound of free improvisation (or, younger, long-haired, angry men gathering in dingy basement rooms suffused with the sound of feedback and the sight of flaring light shows erupting out of the darkness). The overtly theatrical and playful aspects brought into the music by Steve Beresford, Han Bennink, Tristan Hontsinger and Misha Mengelberg have always been rather disapproved of by a number of free improv aficionados, as if these performers had somehow over-stepped invisible rules, invisible guidelines which govern how you ‘should do’ free improv. By contrast, Derek Bailey would simply sit down, no-nonsense, and play, just as Merzbow, Sachiko M and Axel Dorner adopt a certain bodily stillness in their performances (though, of course, there are exceptions: Thomas Lehn’s very physical approach to his analogue synthesizer, Cecil Taylor’s pelvis-oriented movement on the piano stool). Conventional rules are very easy to fall into – people mill around, then the performers go up on stage and perform, then everyone claps and has a drink and mills around again – and challenges to this are particular notable, when they happen, because of their rarity; thus, Mattin’s in-concert behaviour has gained him the reputation of an *enfant terrible* and, frankly, a bit of a nuisance, when, if we are to believe Russell, such behaviour should be the norm in free improvisation.

And, while “alternative performance-experiences” might be a goal desirable but rarely strived for in actuality, Russell’s other criteria seem, frankly, a little old-hat: the usual sweeping dismissals of the entire

system of composition and the score is a hoary old chestnut if ever there was one. On these grounds, I suppose Russell would dismiss as ‘not free enough’, or as ‘not posing a challenge to reified practice’, most of the music of Anthony Braxton and Cecil Taylor (whose music is, as many of his collaborators have stressed, and as is obvious if you’ve listened to enough recordings, based very much around compositional material). In any case, I won’t go into the issue in detail here; suffice to say that I agree with Dominic Lash’s assertion that “free improvisation and the writing down of notes on paper are not mutually exclusive activities.”<sup>6</sup>

Russell might usefully have paid more attention to the final essay in the collection, Mattin’s piece on the way that Noise and Improvisation could/ should resist the notion of Intellectual Property. Developing Cardew’s famous assertion of the inadequacy of recordings in ‘Towards an Ethics of Free Improvisation’, Mattin delves into the way in which such ideological statements so frequently contradict the way in which free improvisation is actually distributed: Incus, Emanem, and Matchless all being established record labels devoted to selling recordings of in-the-moment, one-off performances, as reproducible and repeatable artefacts. For all the claims to abandonment of ‘go-getter’ individualism and the cult of the ‘inspired’ genius, free improvisers nonetheless continually reinforce certain notions of authorship, of a hierarchy of performer and audience, in which certain people create and certain people consume (though, to be fair, the proportion of actual free improvisers among the listening cachet for free improv records must be fairly high). Of course, this is by no means conscious: hence Eddie Prévost’s astonishment that anyone could want to make a ‘career’ out of free improv (p.146). In addition, it often arises out of a material necessity: the struggle to actually earn enough money to make even a rather poorly-paid living from being a free-improvising musician. When it comes to the choice between actively resisting existing notions of authorship and putting bread on the table, there are few who would take the option of starvation.

In relation to this, we might consider the concluding point of Matthew Hyland’s essay: that the dedicated part-timer may have more time and commitment to spend on thinking deeply about their music than the professional in the pay of record companies or reliant on state funding. This is a more nuanced addition to Ben Watson’s championing of the amateur – the professionalisation and individualisation and specialisation resulting from the pragmatics of ‘making a living’ may be inherently un-noisy, however much the ensuing product is ‘difficult’ art which pushes up the decibels.

---

<sup>6</sup> Lash, *ibid.*

I'm not – necessarily – arguing that all free improvisers and noise-makers should be amateurs, spending their days washing dishes or driving taxis (as Cecil Taylor and McCoy Tyner did), and their nights creating sound. In itself that relegates improvisation to a subordinate role, a secret and illicit activity which one does 'after-hours', part of one's 'leisure-time', a 'hobby' rather than a main activity. It also runs the risk of valorising poverty, thus neatly dovetailing with the notion of the starving, misunderstood artist (Chatterton dead in his garret, Van Gogh crazed and earless, Sonny Simmons and Charles Gayle living on the streets). According to that viewpoint, the more crummy the job, the better – you are suffering for what you believe in, you are a martyr at the hands of an unjust system, you can view yourself and be viewed as a hero.

These are dangers. But that does not mean we should ignore the way in which the much-cited 'DIY ethos' characterising free improv and noise scenes has become an easy accolade, a back-slapping means of ignoring the way in which performing practices can slip into established patterns, or even into cliques and hierarchies. Despite this, DIY does still remain important, and Mattin is right to point out the way in which it could, if pursued to a sufficiently rigorous and self-critical extent, challenge notions of authorship and intellectual property/control.<sup>7</sup> This is part of a wider discourse – the work of Michel Foucault, and, especially, Roland Barthes, tends to be applied more to literature than to music, but is particularly illuminating in this context due to the way it challenges what can easily seem the accepted and 'natural' way of things ('I create my music as an individual, it is my intellectual property, and I have a right to this ownership'), the way it reveals how the actual production and distribution of ideas is always a social phenomenon. "Once written, the author stops having control over the text. The text has its own discourse and power and we should not limit it to an authoritarian voice. Language itself has its own potential and to make it solely the property of the author might dilute its power." (p.179)<sup>8</sup> That's not to say that musicians are not *responsible* for what they play, and for 'putting it out' (whether in the form of public performances or records), but is to say that the freedom involved in creating the music could and should be extended to the way that music is received.

---

<sup>7</sup> "People have been self-organising themselves by organising concerts wherever possible and more. This self-organisation, which constantly makes people change roles; from player to organiser, from critic, to distributor, helps people understand each others roles... Both in the improvised and noise scene the question of authorship is completely interrelated to that of the producer." (p.173)

<sup>8</sup> Consider alongside this: "What unfolds and becomes visible in the works, the source of their authority, is none other than the truth manifested objectively in them, the truth that consumes the subjective intention and leaves it behind as irrelevant." (Theodor Adorno (trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson), 'Parataxis: on Holderlin's late Poetry', in Notes to Literature, Vol. 2 (New York; Columbia Univ. Press, 1992), p.110)

Idealism? Perhaps there is a touch, but at least Mattin can succeed in getting people to think about the fundamental, basic contexts of what they do, rather than simply re-iterating the statements of the '60s. It's not enough simply to state that free improv and Noise are resistant to capitalism, and then to treat this as a given, without questioning this relation, without using one's assertions as a basis to develop and change one's own practices. Thus, if Eddie Prévost argues that "certain material conditions have to be met before any music can be made," Mattin takes things further: "the radical and exploratory character of improvisation should be directed not only to the making of music but in changing the conditions in which the music is produced." (p.191) And perhaps – dare we hope? – changing conditions on this 'micro' level might provide the conditions of possibility for change on a wider scale. **(DG)**

Noise & Capitalism

---

Publisher

Gipuzkoako Foru Aldundia -Arteleku

General Councilor

Markel Olano Arrese

Council of Department of Culture and Basque

Maria Jesús Aranburu

Director of Cultural Promotion and Diffusion

Haritz Solupe Urresti

Head of Visual Arts Service-Arteleku

Ana Salaverria Monfort

General Coordinator of Arteleku

Kepa Landa Maritorena

Coordinator of Audiolab Arteleku

Xabier Erkizia

Editors

Mattin, Anthony Iles

Cover design and concept

Emma Hedditch, Sara Kaaman, Mattin

Designer

Xavier Balderas

Acknowledgments

Ben Watson (for title suggestion), Lisa Rosendahl, Maider Zilbeti, Natalia Barberia, Ertz festival, Santi Eraso, Miren Eraso, Terre Thaemlitz, Nick Smith, Noè Cornago, Jean-Luc Guionnet, Ulrike Mueller and Mute Magazine

Printing

Leitzaran Grafikak

Legal deposit

SS-1085-2009

ISBN 978-84-7907-622-1