DISRUPTIVE USE:
WORK IN CONTEXT, 2013–2015

By

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Introduction

This text constitutes an attempt to situate my own work, including both theoretical research and creative projects, at a nexus of music composition and sonic art practices, recent trajectories of critical and media theoretic thought, and contemporary philosophy. It is through the particular vectors of concepts, aesthetic and theoretical positions, and artworks of which this network of influence is comprised that the text is organized.

Chapter 1, entitled “Being-Sound: Wandelweiser, Onkyô, and Beyond,” begins with the ongoing project stück 1998 by composer Manfred Werder as the object of analytical focus from which a conceptualization of and elaboration upon the notion of being-sound—and its relationship to silence and contingency—grounds my own work in music composition and improvisation. Moreover, I address two separate (yet undoubtedly related) collective artistic practices that explore the musical implications of being-sound: the collective work of Wandelweiser (to which Werder belongs), and the minimal electro-acoustic improvisation of Onkyô (and its intersection with the work of guitarist Keith Rowe, both with and beyond the ensemble AMM).

Chapter 2, entitled “Disruptive Use,” aims to develop an understanding of the concept of being-sound into a general orientation described as being-in-sound. Toward this goal, this section endeavors to articulate an artistic methodology that comes to terms with the aesthetic dimension of French thinker François Laruelle’s
non-philosophy. Drawing upon the terms of post-continental thought,¹ Laruelle describes non-philosophy as a “re-orientation of thought” that marks a shift in thinking from the direction of philosophy to the Real toward the direction of thinking from a radically indifferent Real to philosophy.² An explicitly aesthetic incorporation of non-philosophy into a tactical, experimental artmaking reformulates the conditions of artistic practice by making a theoretical investment in the contingent materialities of both human and non-human activity. This entails a deliberate, and often disruptive, use of material: namely, musical ideas, positions, works, and instruments. Mobilizing such a non-standard orientation, this chapter investigates a range of tactical responses that engage with speculative modalities of thinking—namely, Keith Rowe’s performance as part of the AMPLIFY 2008: light Festival, and the cracked media improvisation of the Korean collective Balloon & Needle.

In the final chapter, entitled “Operations and Operas: Creative Projects, 2013–2015,” I directly address a selection of my own work: field studies (2013 - Present), The View from Nowhere (2014), and Operas for Zombie Media (2014-15). This work investigates an array of materials taken from numerous domains: objects found in a given performance environment; ideas or propositions taken from philosophy; existing artworks (e.g., a Samuel Beckett play and a Mozart

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¹ Scholar John Mullarkey uses the phrase “post-continental” to describe various streams of French philosophical activity more or less originating from the late 1960s—namely, the work of Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Henry, and François Laruelle. See Mullarkey, Post-Continental Philosophy: An Outline (London: Continuum, 2006).
concerto); and technologies from past and present (e.g., a turntable, cassette tape players, an iPod Touch, and DSP devices).
CHAPTER 1

Being-Sound: Wandelweiser, Onkyô, and Beyond

I. To Itself

Composer Manfred Werder began working on the ambitious, ongoing compositional project *stück 1998* in the autumn of 1997, and he performed its first three pages that winter.\(^3\) Its monumental score is comprised of 4,000 pages (of which the last were completed in 2001; see Figure 1), each of which uses the same format: a 5 x 8 grid of pitches given in Helmholtz pitch notation—that is, using a combination of upper and lower case alphabetic characters to indicate pitch class, and numbers to indicate register; for example, “c1” is the equivalent of middle C. In performance, each notated pitch—or “frequency” as Werder terms it—corresponds to a "time unit" having a total duration of twelve seconds. Each unit is comprised of a pitch sustained for six seconds, followed by a silence of equal duration. In total, over 160,000 time units appear in the score, therefore producing a total duration of 533 hours 20 minutes. Pitches are selected from a six-octave range (in twelve-tone equal temperament) and distributed among the units by the use of a chance procedure. Given the dimensions of the grid used and the duration of each time unit, each page has a total duration of eight minutes.

3. An account of the origination of the piece and its development may be found online at http://stuck1998.blogspot.com. I have personally worked in collaboration with the composer on multiple performances of the piece.
The score for *stück 1998* may be actualized—Werder differentiates between the actualization of the *score* and a performance of the *piece*—by any number and combination of pitched instruments. Regardless of the approach taken, performers follow the grid, reading across each row from left to right, and down the page from top to bottom. Where a given pitch falls within the range of an instrument, it is played; where it falls outside, it is omitted, resulting in a twelve-second silence. Where multiple performers are given a pitch that overlaps within the ranges of their respective instruments, the pitch is sounded tutti. Consequently, if the pages used do not provide the performer(s) with any performable pitches, the result would entail that performer’s silence for the entire duration of a given performance.

Remarkably, the only indication with regard to the dynamics and articulation to be used within the actualization of *stück 1998* is found in a phrase included in its instructions: “für sich, klar und sachlich. einfach.”4 This statement—translated by the composer as "to itself, clear and objective. simple"—provides a performance indication, but it also articulates an aesthetic position that guides both a compositional methodology and performance practice.5 Werder has noted that the phrase “replaced all further indications on dynamics, sound qualities, etc. since 1997.”6 Moreover, it serves to explicate the meaning of “actualization” as the composer uses it. With regard to how this phrase operates within his general theoretical framework, he refers to the performers, their instruments, and the site of actualization as constituting the

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5. It also appears in the *ausführende* series (1999 - Present) and by way of variation in *für eine(n) oder einige ausführende(n)* (2001 - Present), both published by Edition Wandelweiser.
context-specific “accidental qualities” of the piece, and it is in this sense that he claims that “every sound bears its precise dynamic and quality through its context.”

Perhaps most importantly, the phrase begins with the proposition “to itself,” and it consequently initiates the development of a radical exploration of sound-itself that, owing much to the canonical experimentalism of composers John Cage and Alvin Lucier, divorces affect from the necessity of its external affirmation and aims thought toward an understanding of the being-sound of sound.

II. Being-Sound

Percepts are no longer perceptions; they are independent of a state of those who experience them. Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them. Sensations, percepts, and affects are beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. [...] The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself.

The above statement outlines a notion of affect contrary to the commonplace idea of its being bound to feeling. Instead, affect exists separate from any individual experience of it. In *stück 1998* Werder engages with this scission, although with specific regard to specifically sonic affects, thus echoing the Deleuze-Guattarian ontological formulation of affect as existing “independent of the viewer or hearer.”

This theorization of affect offers insight into Werder's terminology, and particularly his use of the term “actualization.” Commenting on his work, Werder uses the term

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7. Ibid.  
9. Ibid.
“quality” in reference to the contextual elements of the piece—again, its performers, their instruments, and the site of its actualization.\textsuperscript{10} Like Lucier, he posits an equivalence between sound and affect, operating from a conceptualization of sound—itself as being comprised solely of intensive quantities—of duration, frequency, and amplitude—as distinct from a definition of sound in terms of qualitative extension. In this sense, sound is understood as being constitutive of the affective (and inaudible) matter from which the work of Lucier is composed: “I think of sound in terms of wavelengths.”\textsuperscript{11} This focus renders his work irreducible to the affirmation of subjective interiority (of either composer or listener); instead, what is encountered is sound expressing itself: the being-sound of sound. The visual artist James Turrell once commented on his work, stating, “My art deals with light itself, not as the bearer of revelation, but as revelation itself.”\textsuperscript{12} The replacement of “light” with “sound” creates an equally evocative statement regarding the work of Alvin Lucier.

Within the context of the score for \textit{stück 1998}, an instance of notation does not represent a particular sound quality—that is, the particular harmonics or timbre that would allow a pitch played at a certain dynamic level and articulated in some way to be identified as belonging to an oboe, trumpet, or violin. Sonic \textit{affect} therefore refers to those characteristics—quantities of intensity—that distinguish sound from its being felt; experience—\textit{feeling} sound—is a matter of qualitative extension—that is, affect once it has been contextualized and consequently internalized by a listening

subject, affirming the subjective interiority of the latter. Again, as in the work of Lucier, affect is severed from affirmation, and sound is separated from the necessity of its being heard. To be clear, affect is undoubtedly involved in the process of qualitative extension, but it nonetheless remains an autonomous agent.

Actualization is commonly equated with realization; that is, to actualize is to make real or to give the appearance of reality. However, given affect as posited by Deleuze and Guattari, sound-itself may be understood as being always already real. Thus, sonic actualization—contrary to its common meaning—entails the contextual, qualitative exteriorization of sonic interiority. Performance, then, may be understood as the site-specific fulfillment of the process of actualization. This is affirmed by Werder's acknowledgement of there being a “fundamental disparity between the score and a performance [of Stück 1998].” His compositional methodology of abstraction yields a presentation of sonic affects, and, in this sense, the score mobilizes quantities of intensity independently of qualitative extension; it presents a grid that maps various inaudible intensities of sound-itself: the being-sound of sound. A performance of the piece is comprised of the actualization of its score, which engenders the appearance of sonorous qualities. The contextual components of the piece make sound audible, and as a result of this process of actualizing being-sound, both sound-itself and its listening subject(s) become oriented toward external contingency.

Actualization necessarily implicates the performer as an operator who negotiates

14. See note 6 above.
between, *on the one hand*, the navigation of organized intensities, and, *on the other hand*, harnessing the forces of being-sound, the instrumental mechanism and the site-specificity of its context. As such, this contingent process might result in a 12-hour outdoor performance during which the performer never plays a single sound, yet environmental sound is heard throughout; nonetheless, the performer will have remained engaged with the being-sound of sound.

III. Wandelweiser

The name “Wandelweiser” refers to an international music collective co-founded in 1992 by composer-flautist Antoine Beuger and German composer-violinist Burkhard Schlothauer. In addition to a collective of active composers and musicians, it encompasses a publishing company and record label, both based in Haan, Germany, and the Wandelweiser Composers Ensemble, a chamber ensemble dedicated almost entirely to the performance of works by members of the collective. In his formative essay “Etwas über Wandelweiser,” Schlothauer characterizes the music of Wandelweiser as generally being very quiet, and states that silence occupies considerable portions of its members' pieces. Moreover, he claims that no dramatic elements exist within the content of the music itself, and that the selection of sound material remains typically clear and unambiguous; harmony, rhythm, and melody

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16. Since the latter half of the 2000s I have been active as a member of Wandelweiser. The first performance of my work took place in December 2008 as part of the concert *Wandelweiser* at Goethe-Institut Amsterdam.
play either a minor role or none at all.\textsuperscript{17} Many pieces within the Wandelweiser repertoire unfold over extended durations, from hours to days, or even over the course of a decade.\textsuperscript{18} In the case of \textit{stück 1998}, the piece might dematerialize for some time, occasionally re-emerging into the sounding environment. Member Michael Pisaro writes that “the time between the performances is also worthy of thought: these are silences, of a kind—times when the work goes underground but does not disappear.”\textsuperscript{19} Throughout their work, and across various and often strikingly different ways and modes of presentation, the members of Wandelweiser engage both conceptually and practically with the being-sound of sound—namely, the conditions from which its actualization might emerge and unfold over time.

The work of John Cage, above all his notorious silent piece, \textit{4’33’’} (1952), is of central importance to the theoretical underpinnings and compositional output of the collective. Beuger admits that he considers \textit{4’33’’} as “the beginning—not an end—of a serious involvement with silence as an autonomous musical phenomenon.”\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, he has argued that encountering a performance of the piece marks the occasion upon which “music is experienced for the first time.”\textsuperscript{21} Pisaro has elaborated upon the importance of the work of Cage within the context of Wandelweiser:

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{18} I am referring specifically to the work of Werder. More generally, there are often multi-hour (or multi-day), marathon-style concerts of Wandelweiser music and sound installations for which the audience is invited to come and go as they please.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Michael Pisaro “Writing, Music,” in \textit{The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music}, ed. James Saunders (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 76.
\end{enumerate}
4’33” was seen not as a joke or a Zen koan or a philosophical statement: it was heard as music. It was also viewed as unfinished work in the best sense: it created new possibilities for the combination (and understanding) of sound and silence. Put simply, silence was a material and a disturbance of material at the same time.²²

Beyond the undeniable prominence of 4’33”, it is worth noting that the Wandelweiser Composers Ensemble has performed various selections from the “Number Pieces” series (1988-1992) by Cage, a specifically ontological exploration of the numerical character (or numericality) of instrumental combinations. These pieces have often been included on concert programs featuring works by Wandelweiser composers, in addition to works by Lucier and James Tenney, among others. Each piece in the series is named after the number of performers for which it is composed, and each constitutes a kind of study or articulation of its particular numericality. For instance, One (1987) is written for piano solo, Two⁵ (1991) is for piano and tenor trombone (and is the fifth duo piece in the series), Four⁶ (1992) is for a quartet of unspecified instrumentation (and is the sixth quartet piece in the series), and 103 (1991) is written for orchestra. The series has had enormous influence on the compositional practices of Wandelweiser: the decision to focus mostly on either clear, softly-sustained tones or entirely unspecified sound, the use of chanced-determined time-bracket notation, the simplification of form, and the possibility for extended periods of non-playing—for instance, the time-bracket structure for One⁵ (1990) includes a rest of over five minutes in duration. Moreover, the Number Pieces

²². See note 15 above.
demonstrate a remarkable reconsideration of musical harmony as a consequence of a novel focus on both indeterminacy—that is, the contingent overlapping of performers’ parts, often treated as discrete streams of sounding (and non-sounding) activity—and the numericality of a given musical work through its composition and performance.

In the mid-to-late 1990s there existed a period in the development of Wandelweiser wherein considerable theoretical and compositional attention was given to the Number Pieces, mainly with regard to the series' ontological implications for thinking multiplicity through musical practice, and consequently defining the numerical identity of a musical work. Beuger in particular admitted to having developed an interest in number at this time, stating, “The number of performers is a very essential issue to me. I am strongly convinced that there is something to say ontologically different about a solo, duo etc. situation: it has to do with being alone, being ‘zu zweit’ ['being two']. Three again is a very different situation.” This creative investment in the ontological implications of musical situations has found support in the work of French philosopher Alain Badiou, whose project of thinking subjective truth beyond post-structuralism and postmodernism has entailed a formulation of ontology as being fundamentally set-theoretical:

23. Among other groupings, the ontological implications of the duo occupied the attention of Wandelweiser composers. For examples, see Michael Pisaro, zwischen (1998) for two violins, and Manfred Werder, 2 ausführende (1999) for two performers; both are published by Edition Wandelweiser.
To think the infinity of the pure multiples I took tools from Cantor's set theory. To think the generic character of truths I turned to Gödel and Cohen's profound thinking of what a 'part' of a multiple is. And I supported this intervention of mathematical formalism with a radical thesis: insofar as being, qua being, is nothing other than pure multiplicity, it is legitimate to say that ontology, the science of being qua being, is nothing other than mathematics itself.\textsuperscript{25}

Set theory, as an absolute mathematical thinking of the multiple, formalizes any situation—or presentation—of being.\textsuperscript{26} A set-theoretical formalization of structured presentation, its quantitative emphasis being placed upon multiplicity, requires a theoretical framework specifically for the thinking of number, and for this Badiou turned primarily to the work of Georg Cantor (and notably his conception of ordinal number).\textsuperscript{27} A performance of a "number piece" (Cage or otherwise) therefore constitutes a performance of a form of subjective truth—that is, the spatio-temporal realization of its respective numerical character.

Importantly, Pisaro has stressed the shared understanding among members of Wandelweiser that, far from an absence of sound, many kinds of musical silence exist, and the use of silence as music compositional material drives the collective activity of its members. Referring back to the Number Pieces, one might posit that a work such as \textit{Four}\textsuperscript{6} explores the entanglement of four distinctly contingent silences. The score explains that freely-determined and numerically-assigned sounds are to be performed, all of which occur within specified windows of time; that is, "time-
brackets” that provide a range of possible starting and ending times. Given this approach to the placement of sounding activity, it is not always clear to the performers (or to the audience) exactly how their sounds will fit together, how many rests will occur within a performance (and for how long), or, in the case of *Four*, what sounds (or instruments) will even be used. Conceivable as a description of a performance of *Four*, Nicholas Melia and James Saunders have written that the Wandelweiser collective itself persists as “multi-dimensional, operational, allusive and ultimately elusive: less a thing than a collection of shifting functions, assertions, contentions, ideas, concerns and practices.”

Increasingly for Pisaro and Werder, among others, the idea of silence has become synonymous with contingency, as evidenced not only in both *stück 1998* and text scores by Werder, but also in works such as *Anabasis* (2014) by Pisaro, who suggests that “part of the instability of silence is also that fact that the non-action of a performer opens us to contingency [...] that apparently just about anything can happen at any time.” Moreover, for Beuger, there is an almost abject quality in silence “has nothing to do with calmness or quietness.” He posits a distinctly ontological notion of silence as being constitutive of an “encounter with reality,

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28. *Two* (1989) does not feature time brackets. Instead, its two pianists play their respective material at their own speed, one measure at a time, not advancing to the next until both have played through the current measure.
which means contingency, singularity, emptiness. [...] Silence in my music always is an encounter with reality, enforced by the event of a situation being disrupted without any reason.”

Beuger posits a notion of silence—or contingency—that echoes the concept of “hyperchaos”—basically, the idea that anything is possible from one moment to the next—developed by French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux.

Arguing for the necessity of absolute contingency, Meillassoux describes hyperchaos as follows: “[Hyperchaos] is not an extreme form of chaos; it is not more disorder than chaos, it is order or disorder. Hyperchaos can mean order and stability, as well as a complete destruction of what is.” Furthermore, the contingency of hyperchaos is “so radical that even becoming, disorder, or randomness can be destroyed by it, and replaced by order, determinism, and fixity.”

Thinking in terms of music composition, hyperchaos—as a critique of laws of randomness—offers a valuable way to distinguish between the silences of Cage and Wandelweiser. The notion of hyperchaos reaches beyond any individual random, stochastic, or aleatory compositional approach. If randomness (Cage) is ultimately governed by a set of laws, then hyperchaos (Wandelweiser) suggests that these laws may change at any time; randomness remains as only one particular mode of presentation among others.

Pisaro’s *Anabasis*, a 72-minute piece written for quintet, demonstrates this difference: throughout the piece there are moments of unexpected change and other moments of stasis; and at times its sounding material is clearly perceived, and at other times sonic...

33. See note 20 above.
strata suddenly break down or reconfigure. Pisaro has commented that the piece “attempts to hear how the apparent continuum of the sounding world is actually a series of states that are as fragile and discontinuous as they are solid and connected. (Discrete continuity is one of the ways we have of understanding contingency.)”36 As a kind of analogy of hyperchaos, the compositional rules themselves that define and govern the sounding activity of Anabasis occasionally appear to abruptly break down and diverge, or they vanish completely or later reemerge.

IV. Onkyō

In an attempt to describe the music belonging to what has come to be known as the Onkyō scene in Tokyo, Japan, the phrase used by Werder in his score forstück 1998—“to itself, clear and objective. simple”—is as efficient as a description of their orientation toward sound as a performance indication. Interestingly, it is impossible to expound upon the artistic practices of the musicians that comprised Onkyō—the term itself is most commonly translated into English as “sound”—without accounting for the conditions from which the scene emerged.

Off Site began in 2000 as a tiny café located in downtown Tokyo, which also operated as a bookstore and record shop. In addition, it functioned as a performance space—one that only accommodated about 15 audience members. The walls of Off Site were thin, and due to the venue’s noise-sensitive neighbors, they prevented

musicians from making loud sounds. Consequently, the venue became home to a group of musicians strongly associated in their pursuit of quiet, electro-acoustic improvisation as part of the concert series *Meeting at Off Site*. In addition to electronic musician Toshimaru Nakamura, the core membership of Onkyō included guitarists Tetuzi Akiyama and Taku Sugimoto, electronic musician Sachiko M, and guitarist/turntablist Otomo Yoshihide.

Both in concert and on recording, one encounters a performance situation that bears striking resemblance to both Wandelweiser and the Number Pieces series by Cage—namely, a predilection for a dynamic range that generally falls just above a whisper, and a tendency toward sounds (or “silences”) that unfold over long durations, an indeterminate overlapping of concomitant strata of activity (or non-activity). Ethnomusicologist David Novak has described the improvisational approach shared by Onkyō musicians as creating “a separate context of mutual silence. *Onkyō* performances do not operate as ‘conversations’ between musicians in an improvisational structure of communication.”

The musicians do not listen to each other; instead, they “hover independently in a collective mix of sound and silence.”

In listening to performances of the duo of Nakamura and Sachiko M, one does not encounter the endless musical conversations that prevail in other improvisational musics. Instead, one hears the combination of discrete layers of intensities captured

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37. *Meeting at Off Site* was formerly known as *The Improvisation Meeting at Bar Aoyama* (1998), and later as *The Experimental Meeting at Bar Aoyama* (1999), prior to moving to Off Site until the series ended in December 2003. Beyond the scope of the series, concerts continued at the venue until it closed in 2005. See http://www.japanimprov.com/baraoyama/profile.html.


39. Ibid.
and made audible, actualized within the context of the venue: two co-present “solos,” or, echoing Pisaro, two silences.

Novak has noted that “Onkyō’s balance of sound and silence is highlighted in the use of electronic instruments. Onkyō became known overseas in part through the innovative use of consumer electronic equipment in live performance.” Sachiko M, who does not consider herself a musician, performs using primarily the built-in test tone found within the low-cost Akai S20 sampler—she refers to her instrument as “empty sampler.” Nakamura performs using the “no-input” mixing board—specifically, a Mackie 1202 VLZ mixer—as the foundation of his setup. This experimental use of the mixing board entails connecting its output to its own input—similarly to Sachiko M’s empty sampler, there is no external source material used. The output of this internal feedback loop is subsequently sampled, looped, and processed through two DOD DFX91 Digital Delay/Sampler guitar pedals and two budget-level Zoom RFX multi-effects processors: “I play the no-input mixing board which allows me to control internal feedback, produce loops, melodies, and so on.” In addition to electric guitar, Otomo Yoshihide uses two Technics SL-1200 turntables and mixer, the latter a setup that has gained iconic status in both hip-hop and electronic dance music cultures. The turntables are often used without any vinyl records whatsoever. Instead, records are replaced by cymbals, cardboard, and aluminum foil; the cartridge is employed as a pickup, conjuring the seminal electr

40. Ibid., 465.
41. Sachiko M later added two test tone oscillators to her live setup.
acoustic work *Cartridge Music* (1960) by John Cage, and sometimes it is replaced with objects such as metal springs or toothpicks. Moreover, the signals from the turntables are routed through various guitar pedals.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 2:** (clockwise from top) Sachiko M, Keith Rowe, Toshimaru Nakamura, and Otomo Yoshihide. Live in concert at the AMPLIFY 2004: addition Festival.

*Source: Yuko Zama.*

Novak describes “no-input” and “empty” instruments as being non-idiomatic insofar as “they contain no sound sources of their own. Other than their own self-noise, the instruments create no sonic material, and so (unlike a saxophone, for example) [they] will not make sounds that refer back to any recognized musical
vocabulary. An instrument such as the no-input mixing board, unlike a flute or violin, attracts the notion of an affective interiority—a continuously self-generated noise—that awaits externalization via amplification. The inaudible intensities of “self-noise” to which Novak refers readily evokes the concept of being-sound. An instrument such as the no-input mixer activates quantities of intensity independently of qualitative extension, and as in the actualization of *stück 1998*, it is the site-specificity of the contingent, contextual elements of an Onkyō performance—through which being-sound is harnessed and mobilized.

V. Keith Rowe

Perhaps the most prominent outside musician to regularly collaborate with Onkyō musicians is Keith Rowe, an English guitarist and founding member of the seminal free-improvisation ensemble AMM, who has been active for decades within the (predominantly European) domain of non-idiomatic free improvisation. In contrast to chamber music and jazz ensembles of the time, including both American and European free jazz groups, which were based on a performance of music (and a certain repertoire of music) where sounds are generally conceived first (by either the composer or the performing musician) and then (re-)produced in performance, AMM was instead “based on a philosophy [of] searching for the sound in the performance.” Moreover, AMM, like both Wandelweiser and Onkyō, distinguished

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43. See note 35 above.
itself from other groups by maintaining a leaderless existence, which perhaps may be attributed to the varying degrees of leftist political militancy demonstrated among its members. When asked by critic Dan Warburton about the formation of AMM, Rowe remarked that the intention of AMM’s founding members—strikingly similar to the collective objective of the musicians belonging to Onkyô scene—was to “invent a music that would be ours—AMM music. Music that would fit into no category. We were outside the scene of improvised music.”

The sonic landscape of AMM spans what Cage designated as “the entire field of sound.” As such, the philosophical foundation of AMM music may be closely aligned with the stance of composer Edgard Varèse, who, anticipating electronic music in the 1920s, proclaimed his work to be “organized sound,” and himself not a musician, but “a worker in rhythms, frequencies, and intensities.” As such, Varèse is a forefather in the exploration of being-sound: he described the sonic matter with which he composed as being comprised of forces, and the use of new instruments as providing the ability to present “the movement of sound-masses, of shifting planes.”

Predating both Wandelweiser and Onkyô, AMM music embraced the organization

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45. Rowe has noted that the politics of AMM is expressed sonically “within the counterpoint.” See Rowe, “Interview: Keith Rowe,” interview by Josh Ronsen, monk mink pink punk, no. 12 (July 2007), http://ronsen.org/monkminkpinkpunk/12/rowe.html.

46. See note 39 above.


49. Ibid., 17.
and investigation of flows of sound over extended durations, multiple strata of overlapping sonic activity explored patiently within self-generating structures.\textsuperscript{50}

Figure 3: Keith Rowe live in concert at the AMPLIFY 2008: light Festival. \textit{Source: Yuko Zama.}

Look at the American school of painting, which was very provincial in the 1800s: they really wanted to do something original but didn't know how to do it, the clue was to get rid of European painting, but how could they ditch European painting, what did they have to do to do that? And Jackson Pollock did it - he just abandoned the technique. How could I abandon the technique? Lay the guitar flat! All that it's doing is angling the body [of the guitar] from facing outwards to facing upwards - the strings remain horizontal, the strings are the same.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{50} Of course, this is reminiscent of the music of New York School composer Morton Feldman. AMM pianist John Tilbury is one of the foremost interpreters of Feldman’s music, and his writing about the experience relates closely with his performing with the former. See Tilbury, “On Playing Feldman,” \textit{Morton Feldman Page}, http://www.cnvill.net/mftilb.htm.

\textsuperscript{51} See note 39 above.
Renowned for his unconventional “tabletop guitar” playing style wherein the guitar is set flat upon—and parallel to—the tabletop, Rowe’s meta-instrument (which echoes the meta-piano developed by David Tudor) constitutes an electro-acoustic network within which the electric guitar forms a central node through which every sound made in performance is amplified or processed (see Figure 3). Importantly for Rowe, all signals are passed through the guitar pickups, so that they become “part of the guitar.”52 In addition to the six-stringed centerpiece of this assemblage, Rowe employs an arsenal of additional sound sources (e.g., various microphones, a handheld battery-powered fan, an iPod for audio playback, and a shortwave radio; preparations (e.g., credit cards, a knife, metal spring, plastic lid, and stones), and signal processing units (providing, for instance, equalization or filtering, distortion, pitch shifting, and audio looping), a collection that has evolved over time. Inspired by American abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock, who placed his canvases flat on the floor of his studio, Rowe has outright eschewed standard guitar technique, achieving a similarly “all-over approach” (or compositional perspective) in terms of sonic exploration.53 Critic Philip Clark has described Rowe in performance as maintaining the appearance of “forensically conducting an autopsy on the death of conventional technique.”54 Moreover, craft, which for generations has contributed toward the definition of exceptional playing ability, no longer constitutes a concern.

52. Ibid.
53. It is worth noting that Rowe initially trained as a painter.
for Rowe—he very rarely uses his fingers to fret notes: “I try to strip the music of all of the craft elements.”

The co-existence of agencies found within Rowe’s practice, which undeniably shares similarities to the instrumental setup and performance practice of Toshimaru Nakamura, is perhaps best described by composer Timothy McCormack, who in his notes on instrumental mechanism and performer-instrument physicality suggests that the body (of the performing musician) and the instrument exist together as “autonomous operators comprising a larger machine within which they mutually exert an influence over the other.” Moreover, he argues that this relationship has “led to a reversal in the hierarchy between form and content.” In the music of both Onkyô and Keith Rowe, it is not only the compositional process, but, in fact, the casual role of the musician itself that has been transformed by engagement with the being-sound of sound. The musicians are no longer the sole sources of artistic creativity; their positions along the chain of causality undergo continuous change. As part of the actualization of being-sound, this entails the contingent interaction of various sonic events, agencies, and materials, both human and nonhuman, and the performance environment itself.

57. Ibid.
58. In 1997, upon discovering a recording of music for solo electric guitar by Taku Sugimoto, which was playing over the house PA system of a venue supporting an event organized by French musician Julien Ottavi, Rowe made contact with members of the Onkyô scene. Arguably the most renowned collaboration between Rowe and these musicians—in this case, Sachiko M, Nakamura, and Yoshihide—took place as part of the AMPLIFY 2004: addition Festival; it entailed a quartet performance lasting four consecutive hours, subsequently released as a 3-CD box set.
CHAPTER 2

Disruptive Use: Tactical Responses to Being-in-Sound

It is no longer thought that determines the object [...] but rather the object that
seizes thought and forces it to think it, or better, according to it.59

I. Keith Rowe at AMPLIFY 2008: light

On September 20th, 2008, as part of the AMPLIFY 2008: light Festival
organized by Jon Abbey and hosted at Kid Ailack Art Hall in Tokyo, Keith Rowe
performed a rare solo set—his first ever in Japan—lasting just over 35 minutes in
duration.60 On December 8th, 2008, Erstwhile Records released a recording of the
performance as ErstLive 007, and in response to considerable discussion of the
performance (and the subsequent album release) within music publications, but
mostly on Internet forums, Rowe posted a detailed entry about the performance on the
Erstwhile Records-related blog Erstwords, expounding upon the compositional
process by which the performance was constructed.61 In the post, Rowe explains that
his primary formal inspiration was the work Number 11, 1952 (“Blue Poles”) by the
aforementioned painter Jackson Pollock.62 The painting, done in enamel and
aluminum paint with glass on canvas, features eight vertical “poles” presented in a

59. Ray Brassier, Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan,
2007), 149.
60. Solo performances, and especially solo album releases, are rare in Rowe’s history. See the releases
Harsh, Guitar Solo (GROB, 2000) and The Room (Erstwhile Records, 2007).
61. See Keith Rowe, “EL007,” Erstwords, January 29, 2009,
62. In addition to Pollock, Rowe has drawn considerable inspiration from the work of other visual
artists such as Mark Rothko, Caravaggio, and Cy Twombly, among others. See note 50 above.
row along the canvas (see Figure 4). Accordingly, Rowe selected four (rather than eight) “Cultural Templates” (or “poles”) to be played back during the performance, excerpts of existing recorded music by Baroque composers. Alongside each template, Rowe performed. In order of appearance, the four pieces used as templates are as follows: *Concerto for Oboe and Strings in D Minor* (1716) by Alessandro Marcello; *Dominus regnavit decorum* (Psalm 92) (1734) from *grands motets* by Jean-Joseph de Mondonville; “Tristes apprêts” from *Castor et Pollux* (1737) by Jean-Philippe Rameau; and “When I am laid in earth” (or “Dido’s Lament”) from *Dido and Aeneas* (1689) by Henry Purcell. The way in which the templates are incorporated into Rowe’s solo performance mark a noteworthy development in his longstanding use of pre-recorded music within a live performance text; he has commented on his past use of tapes:

> At the very first sessions of AMM I used pre-recorded tapes of Beach Boys, things like that, played enormously loud. It was our version of the ‘sheets of sound.’ We would play it as loud as we possibly could and try to climb over it like a wall. [...] Later, I only ever used pre-recorded tapes at periods of disruption in the group’s development.

However, during the AMPLIFY 2008: light Festival performance, the excerpts from existing recordings of Baroque music were played back unmodified—that is, without any kind of alteration or processing beyond being passed through the circuitry of the guitar and the mixer (and ultimately through a Fender Twin amplifier). Moreover, the playback of the recordings was executed at a moderate volume, certainly constituting

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63. See note 39 above.
neither a striking disruption in dynamics nor a “sheet of sound” as was common in earlier instances of his using pre-recorded tapes.

Figure 4: Jackson Pollock, Number 11, 1952 ("Blue Poles").
Source: National Gallery of Australia.

Throughout the blog entry, Rowe describes in detail the historical context of and conditions for the performance, including his own background, his artistic concerns, and the ways in which each of the chosen templates relate to both his general artistic practice and the specific solo performance that took place as part of the festival. Moreover, he discusses concepts and themes provided by the content of the templates themselves, such as “the artist in society,” “point and line,” the development of continuo playing and the corresponding role taken by Rowe as basso continuo in both AMM and later collaborations with Onkyō musicians (that is, as a layer of sustained electro-acoustic sound), “solo and accompaniment,” and “the sensitivity of touch,” among others, and questions that were of central importance
when developing his approach to the solo performance, including those regarding “profundity in the digital age” and the relationship between contemporary works and those of the past.\(^\text{64}\) Rowe elucidates his reasoning for the selection of templates:

> Thinking about the forthcoming solo, I felt the need to somehow make clear ‘who I was’: what my background is, what are my concerns? Something about my interest, the music I love, the sounds that have influenced me. […] For almost half of the solo’s duration, I utilize long sections of pre-recorded classical music unprocessed, unaltered, and presented as it is, I considered this a break from the normal expectations.\(^\text{65}\)

It is through this particular utilization of the templates that Rowe departs from not only past solo performances, but also from his typical “basso continuo” role in ensemble performance where, much like his Onkyō colleagues, he focuses on the contribution of occasional, continuous layers of sustained electro-acoustic drone. Instead, the long sections of pre-recorded music provide a kind of “continuo” layer while Rowe mostly contributes various gestures, themes, and pointillist interjections. Intriguingly, Rowe revisits the work of his own musical past, excavating and incorporating playing techniques and materials that he had abandoned, including the use of clear plastic lids from the mid-1960s, bowing the guitar strings (also from the 1960s), and a steel pan scrubber from the early 1980s.

Rowe emphasizes a semantic analysis of his own performance—that is, the ways in which his performance means to himself as an artist, the setting of the festival, the specific templates used, and so on. In fact, this appears to comprise the

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\(^{64}\) See note 16 above.
\(^{65}\) Ibid.
primary concern of the discussion. However, and perhaps to the dismay of Rowe himself, what instead demands greater attention is that which actually takes place sonically during the performance, and, crucially, the experimental methodology employed by the artist: an improvisation that takes place alongside existing musical material. From this perspective it is understood that with regard to the festival performance, Rowe is not exactly concerned with the interpretation of his templates, although what they mean to him is significant on some level—it is obvious that careful consideration was given to their being chosen and utilized. However, this importance is not quite made audibly explicit on the released concert recording. Bringing to mind the approach to performance taken by the duo of Sachiko M and Toshimaru Nakamura, Rowe forgoes any direct interaction with the material, and he avoids any kind of postmodernist synthesis—for instance, where the pre-recorded material would have been transformed, cut-up, manipulated, or used to create a mashup (of two or more overlapping musics). Instead, Rowe appears to re-enact the conceptual language of Baroque music, and, in doing so, it becomes “cloned” (or, alternatively, “sampled”) as part of his methodology. Rowe’s own contributions constitute an uncanny heterophonic voice that is performed alongside not a central melody, but each template.66 One might easily imagine Rowe—or another improvising musician—performing alongside any music whatsoever.67 The

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66. Importantly, the term “heterophony,” used musically to describe “the simultaneous variation of a single melody” (see Peter Cooke, “Heterophony,” Grove Music Online), may be translated into the “other voice” as it is derived from the Greek heteros (“other”) and phōnē (“voice”).

67. A similar performance occurs on the album Guitar, Drums ‘n’ Bass (Avant, 1996) on which renowned guitarist Derek Bailey improvises—in his own way—alongside recordings of drum and bass music (as played by DJ Ninj).
performance does not constitute a version of the pre-recorded music nor is it a
negation, and, if regarded as a unique, if atypical, musicology, Rowe’s performance is
without the traditional virtues of musicological thought—for example, analysis,
argument, critique—and, as such, it demands a radically non-standard orientation.

III. A Non-Standard Orientation


Over the last few decades, an event has unfolded within contemporary
thought, marked by a resurgence of interest in properly ontological questions—in
particular, the category of immanence. In the present conjuncture, and against the
constraints of correlationism—an incontestable insistence on a reciprocal relationship
between being and thought\footnote{Quentin Meillassoux defines “correlationism” as “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.” Originating in the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the correlationist position maintains that it is impossible to speak consistently about a realm independent of thought, and furthermore, that it is no longer the mind that conforms to objects, but objects that conform to the mind. In opposition, Meillassoux argues for a mathematical absolute that would make tenable the knowledge of a reality independent of thought. See Meillassoux, \textit{After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency}, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), 5.}—there has been a turn toward new (and often divergent) orientations of realism and materialism, a change that is beginning to find resonance
within and contribute toward a paradigm shift within the domain of artistic thought
and practice, wherein the question of the artwork as it exists beyond an
anthropocentric perspective is being addressed. The most notable underpinnings of
this event may be located in the work of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze (and,
most importantly, his collaborative work with Félix Guattari) and Alain Badiou, continental thinkers who have revived a concern for and engagement with being qua being and, specifically, the conceptualization of multiplicity.\(^7^0\) As this event has only begun to impact the domain of contemporary art, an opportunity exists for thinking its implications for artistic thought and practice, and, more broadly, for the domain of aesthetics.

Beyond the work of Deleuze and Badiou, and in spite of both its being largely overlooked and its sheer conceptual difficulty, the non-philosophy of contemporary French thinker François Laruelle offers an entirely unique theory of the Real as radical immanence.\(^7^1\) The “non” in non-philosophy” (or “non-standard philosophy” as it has come to be regarded by Laruelle himself) should be understood as not designating a negation—that is, it does not indicate an anti-philosophical stance—but rather it should be read as effectuating a kind of “radical inversion” of the relationship between philosophy and reality: a fundamental shift in thought from the direction of philosophy to the Real and, instead, toward a movement beginning from of a radically indifferent Real and moving toward philosophy. Non-philosophy is therefore intended to constitute neither a critique nor the destruction of existing philosophy; in practice, the conceptual tools offered by non-philosophy engender a “re-orientation of

\(^{70}\) For instance, Badiou’s project of thinking truth and subjectivity beyond post-structuralism and postmodernism, entails a formulation of ontology as fundamentally mathematical, and, more precisely, set-theoretical; see Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005).

thought.” Laruelle’s non-philosophy takes both historical and contemporary practices of philosophy as given according to the Real—that is, as an object of experimental, non-authoritative investigation. Laruelle has argued that everything belongs to the Real, including philosophy (as well as non-philosophy)—nothing withdraws from or lies outside of it. Non-philosophy elicits a non-philosophical use of philosophy, and it consequently emancipates philosophy from its self-imposed restraints. For Laruelle, the “One” is synonymous with the Real, although, crucially, it is not posited as a kind of original unity; instead, the One is articulated as radical immanence, and as being already separated from the dyad of thought and world (or, in Laruellian terminology: “Thought-World”, which itself is synonymous with philosophy). As everything is subsumed by the Real, including philosophy, the Thought-World (philosophy) cannot distinguish itself from the One. In non-philosophy, the fundamental separation of the One from the Thought-World establishes a unilateral duality—that is, a duality without reciprocity marked by a trajectory moving from the One to the World. The One unilaterally determines the Thought-World (see Figure 5): “Consequently, the distinction is not so much between the world and another realm of practice in-itself, or between the world and a transcendent realm of practice, but between two ways of relating to the world, one governed by the world, the other determined-according-to the Real.” In contrast to standard philosophical practice wherein thought is aimed at the Real, non-philosophy begins from it. As such, it views philosophy according to or alongside the One, and

72. See note 63 above.
this performance of seeing philosophy is done by non-philosophy as thinking in accordance with the Real.

**Unilateral Duality (Laruelle)**

**The Real**
is unilateral in itself;
has DLI over the duality.

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Figure 5: Unilateral Duality (Laruelle).
*Source: Alexander Galloway.*

In practice, non-philosophy, through its invention of a radical re-orientation of thought, suspends the sufficiency of philosophy itself so as to render it ineffectual and therefore both open to investigation and, importantly, available as material for experimentation—as philosophical concepts, positions, and works. In this regard, an utterly crucial point to be made is that as its object of investigation, non-philosophy
requires philosophy. Moreover, any operative non-standard methodology necessitates a fundamentally experimental practice. Speaking about his own “experimental texts,” Laruelle states his ambition to “treat philosophy as a material, and thus also as a materiality—without preoccupying oneself with the aims of philosophy, of its dignity, of its quasi-theological ends, of philosophical virtues, wisdom, etc.” The practice of non-philosophy constitutes a “fiction” in its being comprised of a creative performance, a kind of construction that happens in an immanent sense. It avoids representation, and, as such, it is a kind of fiction immanent to itself—that is, it is not a fabricated version of something (else). In The Concept of Non-Photography, a text that addresses the domain of aesthetics, Laruelle posits a non-photographic theory of practice, which, he argues, is “neither an extension of photography with some variation, difference or decision; nor its negation.” As such, it hinges on a non-standard methodology:

Here is the first meaning of ‘non-photography’: this word does not designate some new technique, but a new description and conception of the essence of photography and of the practice that arises within it; of its relation to philosophy; of the necessity no longer to think it through philosophy and its diverse ‘positions’, but to seek an absolutely non-onto-photo-logical thinking of essence, so as to think correctly, without aporias, circles or infinite metaphors, what photography is and what it can do.

Only a rigorously non-photographic thought—that is to say a thought from the start non-philosophical in its essence or its intimate constitution—can describe photography without begging the question, as an event that is absolute rather than divided, that is to say already philosophically anticipated in an ideal essence and empirically realistic—and, at the other extreme, can open up

photography itself, as art and as technique, to the experience of non-
photography.\textsuperscript{76}

In \textit{Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics}, another text on aesthetics, Laruelle
further develops a non-standard methodology, emphasizing the notion of “fiction”
while situating it within a theory of non-standard aesthetics:

Non-standard aesthetics is creative and inventive and its genre is that of a
philo-fiction, a philosophical artistic genre that strives to make a work with
pure and abstract thought, but not to create concepts parallel to artistic works
like the Spinozist Deleuze proposes (even if that was a giant step toward a
non-standard aesthetics). Non-standard aesthetics is characterized overall as 1.
an aesthetics, no doubt, with a conceptual materiality which is its
technological or technical core; 2. equipped with an artistic and thus
somewhat specific technological modeling; 3. but deprived of the Principle of
Sufficient Philosophy, as a duplication of transcendence.\textsuperscript{77}

Ultimately, what non-philosophy presents is not a new way of thinking \textit{about}
the Real, but a re-orientation that treats all philosophy equally and therefore as
equally part of the Real. Following Laruelle, and returning to field of contemporary
art, and in particular the domain of music and the sonic arts, it may be understood that
once music compositional decisions are suspended, the material yielded by such
decisions—that is, musical concepts, positions, and works (be they old or recent)—
become determined according to the Real, and therefore they may be treated as
equally part of the Real. The concepts and theories that comprise doctrines about
music and the sonic arts, and the works themselves, become the material \textit{for} an

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{77} François Laruelle, \textit{Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics}, trans. Drew S. Burk (Minneapolis:
experimental practice rather than the instruments of a theory of practice (or non-practice in the case of abstention), and this experimentation is performed on the basis of a new experience of the Real (or radical immanence itself)—it allows for unprecedented forms of experience.

The experimental practice displayed by Rowe in his solo performance at the AMPLIFY 2008: light Festival mobilizes the concept of being-sound toward the exploration of a radical re-orientation of musical thought that considers its objects in excess of a sensory-based relation to them. Following Laruelle, the performance given by Rowe—as a creative act—may be understood as comprising a kind of “music-fiction.” It is not a representation of Baroque music, but an immanent, performative ventriloquism via the music compositional concepts and strategies of that period—this constitutes precisely what is “cloned” (and thus rendered available as material) by Rowe:

Mostly I imagined in my mind's eye that the significant points suggested by the templates were on transparent sheets. I would conceive that the sheets were laminated on top of each other, perhaps combine all the significances and concepts as one solid mass. Another possibility is to dart around in rapid succession from point to concept to significance to idea in a blizzard of thoughts, or simply remaining on one solitary notion.78

Rowe presents a radical, non-standard re-orientation of musical thought that necessarily entails its own non-standard methodology and subsists, more generally, as operative within a non-standard, experimental artistic practice that attempts to think creatively in accordance with the Real. Here, his performative ventriloquism should

78. See note 16 above.
be understood as a tactical approach toward working with his material. In the
performance at the AMPLIFY 2008: light Festival and on the album release ErstLive
007, one encounters an unprecedented form of experience: not of sound-itself, but of
an immanent being-in-sound.

II. Balloon & Needle

In *Cracked Media: The Sound of Malfunction*, Caleb Kelly defines “cracked
media” as “the tools of media playback expanded beyond their original function as a
simple playback device for prerecorded sound or image.” Moreover, Kelly uses the
“crack” as the occasion of a practice that avoids pre-existing and intended methods of
using technology. Toward the pursuit of new creative possibilities for sound art
practice, this transformation of media—for example, turntables and CD players—
entails hacking, modification, or destruction; in addition, the already-broken, “found”
media device is commonly embraced. Importantly, Kelly identifies the transformation
and utilization of everyday technologies—old and new—as constitutive of a tactical
approach, and to this end he discusses cracked media within the context of the tactical
navigation of every life outlined by Michel De Certeau.

Where the musicians of Onkyô typically performed using professional music
equipment marketed toward and used within rock and electronic dance music circles
(and generally manufactured in Japan throughout the 1980s and 1990s), the members
of Balloon & Needle, a collective and record label formed in 2000 and based in

80. Ibid., 42.
Seoul, South Korea, have drawn from the consumer electronics boom that came in the late 20th century. Its core members employ a cracked instrumentation that on CD liner notes reads like an inventory list of a 1990s Radio Shack (see Figure 6): hacked CD players, mobile phones, and radios (Choi Joonyong); turntables played “acoustically”, i.e., often without a cartridge (Hong Chulki); disassembled computer hard drives (Jin Sangtae); and a decidedly steampunk assemblage of dismantled clocks, contact microphones, tiny speakers, motors, cymbals, and a snare drum, triggered by an old Swiss typewriter (Ryu Hankil). In contrast to a digital culture that celebrates the most recent advances in technology, and perhaps more than both Onkyō and Rowe combined, Balloon & Needle, through its meticulous, near-forensic embrace of sonic detail exposed through the crack, accepts and harnesses the inherent instability and utterly erratic nature of technologies repurposed as instruments.

Due to the fundamental unpredictability of its cracked instrumentation, the music of Balloon & Needle involves considerable contrast: no dynamic level is eschewed, and periods of densely accumulated noise are juxtaposed against periods of prolonged non-sounding activity. The musicians act in accordance with their materials; they remain entirely open to whatever sound world emanates from this situation. In its embrace of the kind of hyperchaotic contingency described by Meillassoux, the music of Balloon & Noodle shares similarities with recent work by Michael Pisaro. Over extended durations, the musicians set up and initiate processes that begin, continue for some time, diverge, reconfigure, and often end abruptly; throughout, they maintain an ostensibly austere appreciation of space that resembles
the discipline displayed at Off Site. Like Onkyō, the sound world of the collective is inextricably tied to Dotolim, an intimate office space that serves as its primary DIY performance venue—it only accommodates an audience no larger than 20.\footnote{Dotolim was established in 2006 in by Jin Sangtae, and since 2008 it has served as the home of 
\textit{Dotolim Concert Series}.}

![Figure 6: (from left to right) Jin Sangtae, Ryu Hankil, Hong Chulki, and Choi Joonyong, live in concert at Dotolim. Source: Dotolim.](image)

Independently, the members of Balloon & Needle engage with the operational mobilization of \textit{being-in-sound} toward tactical approaches to using media technologies. Like Rowe’s AMPLIFY 2008: light Festival performance, this
orientation demands an experimental use of material that originates in thinking from or according to the chosen material, be it pre-existing music (Rowe) or media objects (Balloon & Needle)—that is, cracking media implies disruptive use: the suspension of decisions governed by the intended or prescribed use of a given object or material.
CHAPTER 3

I. field studies (2013 - Present)

As an improvising musician on guitar (or live electronics, but not both simultaneously) throughout the 2000s, I became disenchanted with my own working methods within concerts of free improvisation. I was utterly bored; I felt as though in each situation—at each concert—I simply repeated the same performance: I used the same instrumentation and my contributions were generally drawn from the same sonic palette. In short, I no longer felt challenged—and in most cases, I could envisage the performance before I had even reached the venue. In 2010, as a frequent, albeit amateur, reader of contemporary philosophy, I encountered the work of François Laruelle, only then becoming available in English translation. Inspired and excited by his non-philosophical methodology, I made a break with my own performance practice, and I abandoned entirely both my instrument and my approach to free improvisation. Importantly, this did not entail the abandonment of the practice of free improvisation itself. On the contrary, it demanded a radical re-orientation of musical thinking, and, after a period of excavating the foundations of non-idiomatic music, a process of fidelity toward its core propositions.

Radical, experimental art forms originate as the product of a complex event that takes place within a situation that may be described as social, political, or even

82. Following Derek Bailey, I take “non-idiomatic music” to describe a music that resists commitment to any particular genre, style, or idiom.
philosophical. Such art forms have made claims for how to engage with, act against, or outright oppose the dominant cultural forms of their time. In every case, the claim is distilled into a central tenet—that is, a new, fundamental idea about the world or a way in which to engage with the world. These situations engage communities; the members of such communities, if they are compelled to act in fidelity to a new idea or stance, act as part of a process of remaining true to the idea. Once identified, a radical, new concept makes an appeal to particular approaches to artistic creation. In short, something happens, which allows for the identification of a core, radical idea, and this proposition—addressed to everyone—suggests a change for the better in the ways that we engage with the world. Maintaining fidelity to such an event necessitates an act of resurrection and renewal; fidelity is only possible in the form of a return to the initial, core idea that was proposed. However, a radical idea must be reconsidered in the present moment in relation to the contemporary situation—that is, one is obliged to act in the present moment in fidelity to the initial proposition.

Following the non-idiomatic practices of Keith Rowe, Onkyô, and Balloon & Needle, what might be said about free improvisation, or perhaps more specifically, the proposal made by guitarist Derek Bailey for a non-idiomatic music—that is, a music that is formed by the act of improvisation rather than idiom, one that is rooted in occasion rather than place? Improvisation must therefore be understood as being not only about the actualization of sounds (rooted in being-sound), but also the production or reconfiguration of environment. Of course, this becomes unmistakably evident through an understanding of the origins of the Onkyô scene. In this sense,
improvisation may be invoked as both a strategic term and a conceptual tool. It can refer both to the practice of making experimental music as well as the practice of everyday life. Wherever it is applied, improvisation may bring about moments of disruption, instability, or change. The radical wager of non-idiomatic music demands the activation of the entire performance context, and, consequently, the disruption of previous habits and behaviors. Through its engagement with site-specificity, free improvisation becomes not only about the creation of new artworks, but it also engenders a way of intensifying the moment by changing both aesthetic and socio-political relations.

Investigative of the subjective “self-noise” of an individual’s performance practice, free improvisation not only adheres to the concept of being-sound, but it effectuates an immanent self-criticality. As a practice that necessitates taking into account the contextual elements of a performance—that is, the venue, human and non-human relations, and the aesthetic conditions or expectations upon which the improvisation is instigated, the practice of free improvisation may consequently use any of these elements as material for experimentation.

field studies emerged from my renewed practice within the field of free improvisation; following Laruelle, the series began as the exploration of an operative, non-standard methodology employed tactically toward the domain of musicology. As in concerts of free improvisation, it entailed appearing at a venue without an instrument or any clear idea(s) about the details of my performance. Drawing exclusively from the immediate “environmental” conditions of the performance itself,
I sought to improvise—or construct a “music-fiction”—using only these “found” materials (e.g., chairs, music stands, lighting, traditional musical instruments, concert programs, trash, the house sound system, temporal expectations, and the audience itself).

Figure 7: Field Study: Mozart, W. A. (1791). Konzert in A für Klarinette und Orchester KV 622 II: Adagio. (2013). Source: Dina Maccabee.

At Wesleyan University, this approach was transformed into a kind of performative musicology, taking musical works as objects of experimentation; subsequently, each performance was deemed a “field study.” For the performance
entitled *Field Study: Mozart, W. A. (1791). Konzert in A für Klarinette und Orchester KV 622 II: Adagio.* (2013), I collaborated with clarinetist Nathan Friedman. Having familiarized myself with the score as an undergraduate student of music theory and composition, I prepared a kind of “cracked” version of the second movement—Friedman performed the clarinet part from second movement of the Mozart concerto while I performed the orchestral accompaniment, replacing the intended instrumentation with found materials (see Figure 7). The artistic methodology employed throughout the most recent iterations of *field studies,* as described above, engenders an experimental *use* of music (or musical works). Like the tactical approaches taken by Rowe (in his Amplify: light Festival performance) and members of the Balloon & Needle collective, the project engages in the transition from an engagement with the concept of *being-sound* toward a practice of *being-in-sound.*

II. The View from Nowhere (2014)

The disenchantment of the world deserves to be celebrated as an achievement of intellectual maturity, not bewailed as a debilitating impoverishment […] Nihilism is not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity.  

*The View from Nowhere* takes its name from a text of the same name by philosopher Ray Brassier, 84 a paper in which he advocates for German neurophilosopher Thomas Metzinger’s theory of the phenomenal self-consciousness—that is, that there are no such things as selves. However, Brassier

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84. See Brassier, “The View from Nowhere,” *Identities* 8, no. 12 (Summer 2011), 7-23.
makes a revision to this insight vis-à-vis the theory of rational self-consciousness—that in spite of this, there remains a subject—as developed earlier by philosopher Wilfrid Sellars. Thus, Brassier argues that it nonetheless remains possible to distinguish between, on the one hand, phenomenal selfhood, and, on the other hand, rational subjectivity.

![The View from Nowhere](image)

**Figure 8:** The View from Nowhere (2014).
*Source: Stephanie Ho.*

As a set of operations, the piece originated from the uncanny occasion upon which one hears their own voice on a recording, obtaining, albeit momentarily, a kind of “view from nowhere.” The voice maintains a dominant presence throughout the
piece; it is disembodied in two distinct ways, but remains unavoidably present in both: (1) as audio playback through an invisible loudspeaker, and (2) as audio playback through portable cassette players that move around the space. While the former approach maintains a particular conceptual importance through the recitation of a poetic-philosophical text by François Laruelle, the latter approach is aimed toward the exploration of detachment or depersonalization—that is, the experience of oneself as an outside observer, or the acquisition of an outside perspective on our own subjectivity. Prior to the event, each performer of a quartet recorded the Laruelle text onto cassette tape, and throughout the performance this is used as musical material: following distinct combinatorial paths of movement taken from Samuel Beckett’s play Quad (1981), each performer slowly pushes around the stage an empty cardboard box containing the cassette tape playback of their own recitation of the text, intentionally recalling Robert Morris’ Box with the Sound of Its Own Making (1961) (see Figure 8). Concomitantly, a cockroach, sampled from Clarice Lispector, The Passion According to G. H. (1964), remains on stage throughout the performance.

In The View from Nowhere, the stage (or the creative act of staging) itself is employed as a kind of sandbox in which the experimentation with various conceptual and physical materials takes place. Like Rowe’s Amplify 2008: light Festival performance, this process deliberately refrains from a postmodernist synthesis of diverse materials, and, instead, the elements of which it is comprised are superimposed.
III. Operas for Zombie Media (2014-15)

*Operas for Zombie Media* was initiated with a particular focus on the repurposing not only of outdated media technologies, but also of the form of opera itself. In light of the growing attentiveness towards the concept of the Anthropocene—a chronological term marking an era in which human activities directly impact the Earth’s ecosystems—within the domain of contemporary art, and in an attempt to speak to an increasing need for an ecologically-oriented consideration of the contingent nature and geological condition of present-day human activity, *Operas for Zombie Media* appropriates the theoretical grounds of “zombie media” as an effective resource for developing an artistic methodology that acknowledges *undead* media as an integrated, unavoidable part of our experience of the world.

Drawing upon the contemporary terms of media archaeology, contemporary media theorists Garnet Hertz and Jussi Parikka define “zombie media” as media that are “not only out of use, but resurrected to new uses, contexts, and adaptations.”85 A concept that abjures both the normative timelines of media technological progress and the finitude of anthropocentric thought, zombie media entails both an experimental reconfiguration of media—via hacking, circuit bending, augmentation, or unintended use—and a re-imagination of the potential functionality of media through its confrontation with aesthetic, ecological, geophysical, and socio-political concerns.

Drawing upon such terms, the *Operas* specifically repurpose discarded and ostensibly obsolete consumer-oriented audio electronics, exploring a renewed sonic—and

specifically, instrumental—potential through unintended approaches to sound creation and re-contextualization within the field of media artistic practice.

In addition to media technologies, *Operas for Zombie Media* entails the repurposing of fundamental elements of the allegedly outdated (or undead) form of opera itself. Toward my own reconsideration of opera, and in addition to work by composer Robert Ashley—namely, *in memoriam ... KIT CARSON (opera)* (1963)—and the tabletop spectacles of artist Stuart Sherman, *Opera with Objects* (1997) by Alvin Lucier served as a point of departure. In the piece, Lucier instructs the
performer to collect small resonant objects, such as jars, small cardboard boxes, or coffee cups, and set them out on a table. With a pencil held in each hand, the performer first taps a regular rhythmic pulse with only the sound of two pencils, and then with the tip of one pencil touching (and consequently resonating sympathetically) the surface of one of the objects. He writes that “the focus is on the change in loudness and timbre of the object, not on the rhythms of the tapping.” The performer is also instructed to move the pencil tip over the surface of the object, “exploring small changes” in the resulting sound. After playing one resonant object for a while, the performer moves to another (without ceasing to tap), varying the speed of their tapping, until all objects have been played. Sometimes objects may be placed on another in order to create more complex results: “Your task is to make vivid for listeners the natural amplification inherent in physical things.”

Importantly, and with a nod to the earlier piece *Vespers* (1968), which explores echolocation, the performer is encouraged to listen for echoes of the tapping from surfaces within the performance space. Granting a certain autonomy to its “stars,” *Operas with Objects* constitutes a minimalist dramatization of being-in-sound.

Each opera in the project begins with an overture, a term that traditionally describes the instrumental—and typically symphonic—introduction to an opera. However, in place of a large ensemble of acoustic instruments, one finds a multi-channeled quartet of pre-recorded voices that, reciting a libretto that recalls both

86. Alvin Lucier, *Opera with Objects* (Frankfurt am Main: Material Press, 1997).
87. Ibid.
88. Ibid.
Samuel Beckett and William Burroughs, takes flight through an assemblage of fragments from materials drawn from various sources including, among others:

- news articles addressing topics such as geopolitics and climate change
- philosophical writings on the contemporary concept of “geotrauma”
- Robert Smithson’s *Collected Writings*
- stories such as “When the World Screamed” by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
- user manuals for the repurposed devices
- Wikipedia entries on chemical elements such as silicon

Following each overture is an aria—titled after the model number of the audio playback device on which it is based—that constitutes the centerpiece of each opera. Although “aria” is a term that has historically described an expressive operatic piece for a single voice, with or without orchestral accompaniment, in each of the *Operas for Zombie Media*, an amplified consumer audio electronics device replaces the human voice—for example, a discarded portable CD player or a first-generation iPod Touch. The sonic output of the mechanism of each device, which, in some instances, is often either comprised entirely of electromagnetic signal or mechanical, is amplified by various types of microphones and extended via contemporary digital signal processing technology—namely, custom-made programs running on the Aleph soundcomputer produced by Monome. For example, to process the electromagnetic signal of an iPod Touch in the aria *A1367*, a speed-modulated granular delay line is employed toward the production of a distinctly “ambient” stratum of sounding activity. Due to multiple layers of amplification and processing, the turntable used in the aria *SL-Q350* therefore comes to resemble the no-input mixing board in Toshimaru Nakamura’s setup, the tabletop guitar used by Keith Rowe, or even the
amplified piano developed by David Tudor for his realization of Variations II (1963) by John Cage. 89

Within each aria movement of the Operas, the traditional orchestral accompaniment—or harmonic continuo—associated with the aria is revitalized as multiple strata of electro-acoustic sound. As they sustain throughout the duration of each aria, a stereo pair of sine tones, determined by GPS data local to the area of the device’s manufacturing, functions as the foundation of the continuo. A set of two numbers is derived from the geographic coordinates—that is, latitude and longitude, of the particular location; these numbers are then transposed (at the octave). In addition to the sine tones, acoustic, sustaining instruments performed by live musicians are used to play tones at any pitch and tuning, each lasting a full exhalation or bow stroke, and only occasionally. The tones are played slightly louder than the sine tones, but sound at a lower dynamic level than the live electronics. The musicians receive information about the specific sine tones (given in frequencies) used in each aria and the nearest corresponding pitches (in equal temperament). Using this data as a point of reference, the musicians are instructed to navigate the terrain of the aria movement, weaving their own sounds into the sonic fabric of sine tones and live electronic sound. This harmonic agency dramatizes the conception of the contemporary human as posited recently by media theorist Mark B. N. Hansen:

89. For details on Tudor and the amplified piano, see Tudor, *Liner Notes, Music for Piano*, Edition RZ 1018-19, 2007, CD.
To grasp the place of the human within today’s media networks, and to appreciate how these networks actualize a properly *elemental* conception of the human, we must adopt a *radically environmental perspective* encompassing human activity as one element among others: such a perspective views human agency just as it does any other type of agency, namely, as internally differentiated, dispersed across various scales and operational divisions, and implicated in and immanent to a total, multi-scalar cosmological situation.\(^90\)

The quoted passage articulates a certain conceptualization of the network that eliminates any distinction between human and non-human activity. Moreover, it encourages the abandonment of the opposition of human and non-human, and it enables our rethinking the human and human experience as an essential supplement to established notions of the figure of the network. Against anthropocentrism, human agency is reconsidered in relation to its being an element—and one of many—within contemporary media networks, and so human subjectivity itself is reconsidered as being constructed through the operation of networked processes.

*Operas for Zombie Media* expresses a renewed focus on the aesthetic component of contemporary experience—that is, the ways in which experience is organized by various material strata from geology to digital media. Following from the work of artist Robert Smithson, it posits an alternative materialism that addresses an alternative understanding of the Anthropocene as a geological concept that is constitutive of socio-technological relations *as well as* environmental and ecological realities. It investigates a speculative aesthetic practice that confronts the very material conditions—both geological and sociotechnical—of experience itself.

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Moving beyond Cagean notions, it explores a conceptualization of “environment” as defined also by sociotechnical conditions, and, moreover, an expanded understanding of the Anthropocene beyond one centered only on geology.
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