

Bernhard Garnichig

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Albert Ayler's Ghost

There exist around 15 versions of Ghosts by Albert Ayler¹. Performed under different circumstances throughout his entire short career of the maybe most distinguished performer in jazz history, these free variations of the same musical theme perfectly illustrate the influence by external parameters on spontaneous reconfiguration of expression through the affectual language called music. This text presents results from searching the field of sonic expression for examples of interfaces for external influence and variable parameters in audible structures at various degrees – departing from serialized totalitarian superstructures in composition to complete openness in improvised sound work that asks to not even to be called music anymore to remain its degree of freedom.

The ghost of Albert Ayler will stay with us throughout the scope of this essay as he, together with Keith Jarrett's Köln and Bregenz concerts, introduced me to the world of improvised music – though paradoxically through recordings of their performances and not knowing for years that these recordings are the result of improvisation.

Listening to the versions of Ghosts one encounters variations of a recurring folk-music inspired main theme (Thema) phasing in and out of Ayler's freely played saxophone solos. As this has been reflected on in various individual accounts on Ayler's work I will not go into detail and suggest the readers to listen to these themselves. Seven of the fifteen versions are provided alongside this document.² The idea of a theme - Thema - has been central in the history of music and sound since maybe the existence of ears. In composition the term refers to the central idea or mood of a piece which is varied and

¹Albert Ayler Discography Project. Retrieved 08:43, November 26, 2009, from <http://www.jazzdisco.org/albert-ayler/discography/>

²<http://offspacecenter.com/ghosts.zip>

reintroduced throughout the course of the composition. Outside of Music, any kind of noise has a Thema as well. Any sound wave can be traced back to its origins and thus enters our eardrums with meaning attached.

The Thema is central in the attempt to define of what is extra- and what is intramusical and thus also what can be introduced through openness. In "Was heisst Aussermusikalisch" Carl Dahlhaus uses Thema in his attempt to rethink this duality and at the same time rethinking what constitutes music at its core. The shift from Vokalmusik being regarded as *the music* until the 18th century, where the language of literal Terms (Begriffssprache) is regarded as superior to communicate the meaning of a composition to instrumental music (Instrumentalmusik) where a language of affects is at the heart of conveying the theme. Regarding those attributes which distinguish and circumscribe music from other languages as aesthetically essential constitutes the precedence of instrumental music over musics that require a literal context.³ This shift defines Text as contextual attachment of tones as something extra- and at the same time intramusical.

Extramusicality also include the political sphere as an influence or ambiance in which music is created. Mathew Herbert's concept of sampling creates a direct connection between the political and the sonic sphere. As a producer and performer of electronic music who founded his career during the foundation years of the late 1990s post-rave Intelligent Dance Music movement, Herbert requires his listeners to take the social aspects of music to a next level while remaining in the context of commercial dance music. Besides arranging sampled sound for pure pleasure, he insists on a referential value of samples in conveying a meaning through music that does not rely on vocals to

³Dahlhaus, Carl: "Was heisst Aussermusikalisch" p 61, in Dahlhaus, Carl & Eggebrecht, Hans Heinrich: "Was ist Musik" Verlag Florian Noetzel Heinrichshofen, 1985

"Hanslicks Theorie des spezifisch Musikalischen: die These dass die unterscheidenden, abgrenzenden Merkmale der Musik adie ästhethisch wesentlichen seien, begründet den Vorrang der Instrumentalmusik."

get its message across. In an interview on "The Politics of Sound" ⁴ he demands that the difference between the sound of a closing door and the sound of the door of Downing Street 10 (Address of the UK Prime Minister office) closing will become audible as soon as the listener learns how to discern the two. Such aesthetics though require the listener to engage with the music on an extra-musical and non-phenomenological level, considering the context in which a sample was recorded but delayed at the time of auditory perception. According to Herbert it is up to the listener to "start to unpick it. Once you start to engage, that's when it starts to open all up." (Herbert 119) This kind of contextual attachment requires other, non-musical aesthetics to be introduced into the perception of music, turning sound into a secondary referential envelope which contains the political considerations of the musician. Herbert thus creates music that is absolutely programmatic – the openness introduced by the practice of sampling is fully closed down by the fact that each sound comes with a predetermined meaning attached. Political engagement through music is represented by contextual reference that he requires the listener to research and unravel.

How can musical structures allow political and social engagement?

Another musical structure that seems to be open and inspire engagement at first sight turns out to be a moral absolutism imposed by the author of the most elaborate theory of Soundscape, Murray Schafer. Schafer, like Herbert, insists on the referential value of environmental sounds but even before they are sampled and processed into distinct musical structures. In his Book "Soundscape - Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World" ⁵ he demands that they are "not merely abstract acoustical events but

⁴in Pascal Gielen and Paul De Bruyne (eds.), *Arts in Society – Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, p 109 - 123, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam 2009

⁵Schafer Murray R. "Soundscape - Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World" New York : Knopf 1977

must be investigated as acoustic signs, signals and symbols." (Schafer 169) His book is not only a thorough study on the history of sound in public space and for example the influence of concrete sounds into music, but it turns into a pamphlet of acoustic ethics. By supposing that "acoustic design is to regard the soundscape of the world as a huge musical composition, unfolding around us ceaselessly" (Schafer 205) he introduces the idea of each involved individual being "simultaneously its audience, its performers and its composers." (Schafer 205) Only if each one fully appreciates the acoustic environment and starts to listen to it, a control of the soundscape should never come from above (Schafer 206) but through the introduction of a significant aural culture should become a categorical imperative. Though this turns out to become a totalitarian call for sonic consensus as he states that the orchestration of the soundscape has to be improved – and the orchestration in his mode of thinking being the individuals partaking in society – and concludes his book with "We need to regain quietude in order that fewer sound can intrude on it with pristine brilliance." and furthermore "If we have a hope of improving the acoustic design of the world it will be realizable only after the recovery of silence as a positive state in our lives." (Schafer 259) This does not leave a lot of space for taking individual action. And such demands for ethics of filtering reminds me of Geert Lovink when he writes "It is time to concentrate our efforts on the politics of filtering." in "Ten Theses on Non-Democratic Electronics: Organized Networks Updated" ⁶

Finding the veins that allow injection of new substance into musical structures

Composition can be defined as *The process of structuring sound over time* or in other words to control the emission of sounds over of time. Yet, to do something without external control is to do it freely. So any element that lives within a composition can

⁶Lovink, Geert; Rossiter Ned, Ten Theses on Non-Democratic Electronics: Organized Networks Updated . Retrieved 10:44, November 26, 2009, from <http://summit.kein.org/node/888>

never be free. Thus variables have to be introduced in such structures to allow the injection of new substance to change something within the sonic structure. If all music is composed, acoustic events that are not cannot be music. Thus there is no true improvised music but only improvised sonic action.

While generative music and other conceptions of music that involve non-deterministic structures based on digital technologies have been around for a while they just recently entered a realm that was previously solely occupied by pre-recorded music productions. The aesthetic experience of music through portable music players since the introduction of the Walkman in 1979 has never been open to any kind of non-erratic interference from the outside. Only when Michael Breidenbruecker in 2008 published RjDj ⁷, a nicely packaged port of the Pure Data real-time graphical programming environment to the iPhone, he brought this concept to a mass audience of individual musical experiences on the iPhone platform. RjDj scenes are offered to be downloaded like songs through a shop interface similar to the iTunes shop. The only similarities to a song is based on the meta information – a scene has an author and a title. A scene though is not a file containing digital audio bitstream but a software code to be executed on the listeners device. It allows the composer to include parameters such as device movement, location and microphone input to be incorporated into the music in real time while it is played back to the user. Thus the composer only establishes a stylistic frame in which external factors change the sonic result as far as the composer allows. Like any process that involves the concept of openness the sub-processes it bears cannot change the structure they exist in. But within this structure, the user or rather agent makes – consciously or not – specific choices and thus creates a singular musical experience solely for himself.

The experience of these generative pieces, whose structures rely on external input, introduce a different opposite to openness: They are designed to be listened through

⁷See <http://more.rjdj.me/about/>

headphones and in public space. There they serve as prosthetic devices to enhance the listeners experience of public urban habitat. They allow one to be detached from the immediate surroundings sonic environment and reintroduce a feeling of being in control. I use the term prosthesis because unlike other devices, portable music players are carried closely to the body and earbuds are even inserted into our ears. Prostheses also because RjDj allows the introduction of compass readings into aural experience where, implemented accordingly, this could extend our cognition with a sense for orientation to the earths magnetic field.⁸

In "Craving", a collaborative project realized with Gottfried Haider and myself between 2006 and 2008, we developed a location based composition involving musical and spoken sound fragments placed on Latitude and Longitude coordinates using GPS technology and binaural sound rendering to allow cognitive positioning of sounds through headphones.⁹ These compositions were designed based on close studies of the environment they were placed in, in this case a remote and partially deserted business district in Vienna. We aimed at introducing a tight relationship between various distinct places within this area based on data and impressions we collected. These studies included the architecture of the listeners immediate surroundings and possible effects on subjective emotional impressions. Also for example with which intentions and in which frequency these locations were utilized by the inhabitants was considered since all of these parameters become visible and will in different ways affect the user experience. This approach reverses the usual order of mobile music experience where readymade music stored as tracks is superimposed indifferent to the area the listener passes through. Here, as he walks freely through the composition, its granular locative specificity and through the power of emotional immediacy of sound, it becomes an

⁸Also see "feelSpace" by the Magnetic Perception Group at the Institute of Cognitive Science (IKW) at the University of Osnabrück, Germany. <http://feelspace.cogsci.uni-osnabrueck.de>

⁹See <http://offspacecenter.com/wepassthesemessages/>

audiovisual experience which accepts the listening individual and the temporal and spatial complexity of his cognition.

Improvisation: A practice of indeterminacy and ongoing redefinition

Openness in music also has to be defined against a historicist background. Before notation and commodification, music was an ongoing open process. Derek Bailey notes that "historically, it pre-dates any other music – mankind's first musical performance couldn't have been anything other than a free improvisation."¹⁰ (Bailey, 83) So how have the musics – programmatic, absolute, popular, any kind – become basically earthquake proof as they are today?

In "Noise – The Political Economy of Music", Jacques Attali asserts that "No organized society can exist without structuring differences at its core. No market economy can develop without erasing those differences in mass production."¹¹ (Attali 5) The commodification process of music has turned something that was once immaterial and about differentiation into something repetitive where "difference is artificially recreated in the multiplication of semi-identical objects." (Attali 5) For Attali music is "unexpected and prophetic" (Attali 5) and allows to draw conclusions on the present and future of society because "music is a play of mirrors in which every activity is reflected, defined, recorded and distorted." and "because as a mode of immaterial production it relates to the structuring of theoretical paradigms, far ahead of concrete production." (Attali 9)

¹⁰Bailey Derek, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, New York: Da Capo, 1993

¹¹Attali Jacques: *Noise – The Political Economy of Music*, Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press, 1985

Attali fully understands the power of music as a field of agency though he looks at the wrong method, which is not surprising as he has been assisting centralized power structures in his profession as an advisor to french president Françoise Mitterrand for 10 years. At the end of his book he proposes the idea that composition is empowerment. To make noise is to participate. To compose is to liberate oneself in the present and to produce one's own enjoyment. (Attali 142) His argument though lacks a differentiation between two essentially different things: Improvisation and Composition. "To improvise, to compose, is thus related to the idea of the assumption of differences, of the rediscovery and blossoming of the body". (Attali 142) He really seems to essentially mix up the two as most of his arguments would be perfectly valid if he was talking about improvisation and not composition, but a centralized Grande Nation type of thinking seemingly limiting him in taking this last final step. He continues "that any noise, when two people decide to invest their imaginary and their desire in it, becomes a potential relationship, future order." (Attali 143) It is the same structural thinking we find in a fellow Frenchman, Pierre Schaeffer when he, although of his efforts of musical liberation in the *musique concrète*, admits that "je suis [...] fanatique de l'ordre".¹²

Truly liberated practices though can be found in the circle of improvised sound work that came up later in the 20th century. John Zorn, talking about his ongoing efforts of bringing musicians together to improvise says: "I basically create a small society and everybody finds their own position in that society. it really becomes like a psychodrama. People are given power and it's very interesting to see which people like to run away from it, who are very docile and just do what they're told, others try very hard to get more control and more power."¹³ "Zorn does not pretend power can be dissipated, but recognizes that it is a creative force." (Hegarty 56) True openness in structures of sonic expression cannot be found in the process of structuring sound itself but bringing

¹²Quoted by Hegarty Paul in "Noise/Music: A History" p 34 New York: Continuum 2007

¹³Quoted by Hegarty Paul in "Noise/Music: A History" p 56 New York: Continuum 2007

together its agents or structuring loose, ad-hoc societies. Arranging a constellation of individuals and creating a circle in which individual agents can take sonic action. Like nodes on a computer network, to listen means to be ready to receive information. Software that incorporates networking functionality is listening to a certain port and triggers its subroutines as soon as information arrives. Which action the software takes is determined by the type of information arrives and can range from acknowledgment to discarding of information packets. Similarly in a circle of individuals that meet to improvise anyone can at any time decide to contribute sound or to remain silent. I define improvised experimental music or improvised sonic action as non-verbal communication in the constellation of performative context and any present subject. Not differentiating between active and passive presence of individuals and objects, it is all about a shared momentary sonic and spatial experience.

Music as existential experience

Such an event is a framework to take action. To act means to execute a decision, to cultivate distinction. Correlating silence to emptiness, within the framework of improvised experimental music, it puts those at the center of attention who engage in a process of communication with the space and the present subjects and objects in the form of sonic expression. Adding sound or the deliberate decision to be silent, one has to enter the circle as someone positioning himself in a room with an instrument of choice and emitting particular sound waves into space. Thus it requires people to take action in a way of immersing themselves into the idea of being in the right place, as someone who plays concerts on the market of experimental improvised music. This is not about "Everyone is a musician" as Beuys' stated it for the arts. It is about "Everyone who takes action as a musician is a musician." The particular vision of what it means to be a musician defines the outcome, thus this definition does not try to equalize but to allow for creative individual distinction.

Because of their lack of predetermined musical structure, forms of free improvisation seem to rely on the behavioural protocol of a musical performance to be accepted in order to be experienced . It is the compliance to code which enabled John Cage in 4'33 to put the audience into the miserable situation of having to listen to what the Lettriste referred to as crachat, the involuntary emission of sounds from bodily functions like digestion and breathing for four and a half minutes. This is an example of openness in sonic-aesthetic experiences that requires the audience to conform to a protocol and make musical concepts take the same shift of authority as described in "Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization" by Alexander Galloway.¹⁴ There he introduces Protocols as the defining control structures of our time, a guideline to proper behavior within a specific system of conventions. Protocol becomes a technique for creating contingency in an environment while being indifferent to the content of the information that is communicated. Yet still this indifference does not remove the notion of control in such an environment but actually introduces the central regulative power at the core. The protocol becomes the central instance of Gouvernance in a society based on patterns and codes.

Cages most famous work is a proper composition that includes a performer, the selection of instruments, a notation and a proper performance with tickets, a concert hall and a concert audience and of course applause. While Cage indeed does have a sense of liberation, but more concerning sound than humans, as he respects sound as having a life beyond human intention. But his entire practice has been to emphasize on these within his compositions. This continues in his work in his famous "Lecture on nothing" begins with "I am here and I have nothing to say" and goes on, similar to Schafer, that we require silence in order to listen. The silence they mean, I think, is the silence they expect to be kept in a auditorium where their performances or lectures take place.

¹⁴Galloway, Alexander R. 2004. Protocol. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press

Performances of improvised sonic action can take place at any time though and by anyone willing to participate. And in order to listen somebody has to start making noise. Participants of an improvised sonic process "are searching for sounds and their context within the moments of performance." ¹⁵ (Prevost 42) Improvised performance is a constant collaborative reflection on sound-making and, because sound is pure potential, an ongoing experimental application of potentials embodied in sound, music and the involved individuals. Like Prévost I believe that improvisation "is an opportunity to make our world. If we do not act to make our world then somebody else will invent a world for us." (Prevost 57)

This realisation finally turns musical expression back into an an existential experience. There are two last key figures that understand this that I would like to mention as they could not be more oppositional in their approaches. On the one side of the arena I situate Helmut Lachenmann, who is regarded as one of the seminal composers living and working today. In his book "Musik als existentielle Erfahrung" ¹⁶ he refers to the experience and practice of music as a possibility of realizing the power of entering reality while experiencing ones own structure. One is reminded of ones own ability to recognize and thus escape dependencies to power structures and is able to practice freedom provoked by the creative medium, the creative disruption and eruption. (Lachenmann 92) He also realizes that music only makes sense if its structures refer to something beyond its structures, to realities and potentials around and within ourselves. (Lachenmann 92)

This indirect, as in non-symbolic, but existential contextual relevance is also reflected in Cornelius Cardew's practice of improvisation on the other side. In "Towards an Ethic of

¹⁵Prévost Edwin, *Free Improvisation in Music and Capitalism: Resisting Authority and the Cults of Scientism and Celebrity in Noise & Capitalism*, 2009, Arteleku Audiolab, Donostia-San Sebastián (Gipuzkoa)

¹⁶Lachenmann Helmut: *Musik als Existentielle Erfahrung*. Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden: 2004

Improvisation" ¹⁷ touching on the issue surrounding recordings of improvisational processes, he states that "it is impossible to record with any fidelity a kind of music that is actually derived in some sense from the room in which it is taking place – its shape, acoustical properties, even the view from the windows." "The natural context provides a score which the players are unconsciously interpreting in their playing. Not a score that is explicitly articulated in the music and hence of no further interest to the listener as is generally the case in traditional music, but one that coexists inseparably with the music, standing side by side with it and sustaining it. "

The ideal open sound structure thus is not musical by itself but rather about the constitution and identification of constellations involving active sonic agents. This can happen at any point of time with people from any kind of background and mindset. Only one desire has to be mutual: To play, not only music, but to realise that play can transcend beyond the magic circle of a game or other societal forms of non-obligation. To distinguish is to execute ones idea of contribution. And it is in the hands of each one of us to contribute ones particular idea of change.

¹⁷Cardew Cornelius, Towards an Ethic of Improvisation from "Treatise Handbook,"1971, Edition Peters. Retrieved 13:47, November 26, 2009, from http://www.ubu.com/papers/cardew_ethics.html