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More Repression BY BILL DIETZ

Author's Note: The following text was written between 2013 and 2014 at the invitation of Jared Pappas-Kelley for a still forthcoming anthology of artists' manifestos. It is dedicated to A.B.

What might composing say?

Let's be honest: music is just as boring as genitalia. Music is just as accessible, just as 'on hand,' just as inscriptive, and just as temporary as any manner of reproductive-mimesis-to-orgasm.

Obviously music *works*. I.e., we like it. I.e., in listening, we're all bottoms. And obviously that 'working' participates, just like any other cultural activity, in reinforcing normative orderings of body and psyche. Even if music doesn't tickle our clits or stroke our prostates directly, even if music tends to privilege certain orifices over others, our experiences of it reiterate the same mechanisms driving genital and sexual stimulations: normed rhythms, dynamics of expectation and suspension, bindings and unbindings of libidinal flows. Likewise, regardless *what* we listen to, extant listening practices themselves are complicit in the crypto-masculinist biological determinism that clings to 'our' normative paradigms. Music's supposed extraterritoriality is nothing of the sort. Not just another territory, but one imbued with more of the same characteristics of the one from which it promises to be an escape. Like sex.

But who really wants to be an *hommelette* anyway?
Or rather, just how serious was the old avant-garde in its persistent formulations of an alien horizon? Would sphincters also be free in Marcuse's non-repressive, "polymorphous" society? Freud himself insisted that sex was not only a specific form of repression (acquired focusing of erogeneity on the genitals), but a developmentally late one at that (when compared, for example, to the pre-genital organization/"repression" of muscular control). Put non-moralistically, *how can we constructively distinguish the vague fantasy of an alien state-of-things from the purest expression of the death drive?*

Even if one were to properly imagine the real usurpation of ontological cis/heteronormativity (as, for example, Shulamith Firestone & J. Halberstam have seemed to hope to challenge us), to imagine beyond the bounds of repression itself, beyond forms of binding, would suggest an almost unspeakable science fiction; one not without imaginative merit!, but far more fantastic than casually conceived. Neither Bataille's nor Adorno's *informelle* would go nearly far enough.

Music then ("for now") is repression, plain and simple. No outside, but more of the same, indeed. But also not without certain merit? In the specificity of its repression. As a trace of another repression.

What might composing do?

Music and listening as forms of repression, as historically sedimented tangles of psychophysical relations, offer us a material basis (as opposed to "ineffable") to work on. And insofar as the particularities of music's repression involve bonding with something "inhuman" – identifications with patterns of oscillation, processes and trajectories of pattern recognition, associative triggerings of emotion and memory – it joins ranks in the broadest sense with other practices of non-genital, "perverse" relationality – hoarding, for instance. Here, music helps us to read Freud's remark that, "the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and – for reasons familiar to us [sic] – does not want to give up" in chorus with writers who understand this remark's implication (reading its emphasis against the grain of Freud's historical provincialism) to be nothing less than the suggestion of a mechanism for subject formation other than gendered lack – castration. As Guy Hocquenghem writes of Proust's bees and flowers, in music, in listening (its prospect), "[they] have no sex; they are the very *machine* of sexual *desire*." The practice of music (like the *experience* of the fetishist) would contain the glimmer of an actualization of this distinction buried deep within the murk of musical pleasure's trivialized normalization (so what if she's into armpits? so what if he's into Britney?) – a glimmer that "composing" (as I'm suggesting it here) would work to tease into play.

"For example":

When we listen through walls (to bass-lines or the neighbors fucking), let us imagine hearing's locative, vestibular function as taking an outside (an other) into oneself. That locating is always locating within oneself. Hearing as taking-in-the-other as promiscuity (hearing the neighbors, we join in). *What could it mean to make works which would insist on explicitly bringing such*

interrelational play into the foreground of attention?

Or when we listen through headphones: not escaping or shutting ourselves off from a world but establishing a relation of extreme proximity – relating to an object vibrating so softly that we must be as close as physically possible to it, bringing it to or into the ear, to decode its tremors as sounds. *And what of works which could betray such intimacy? Works whose perceptual extremity would literally challenge the thresholds of our bodies?*

Or when we hear a recognizable tune in an advertisement: not to bind that recollection to a product, but to initiate a play of associations, a memory game, tracing the oscillation of a given "immaterial" arrangement of sounds (a piece) between the given, "present" iteration, its myriad predecessors, and the traces of their various scenes of occurrence. *What of works which could bring the cognitive work of constituting a sonic entity as such into oscillation? Which might underscore such kaleidoscopic personal epistemologies?*

Or in listening to Whitney Houston sing the American national anthem at the 1991 Super Bowl: not simply losing oneself to a vulgar moment of jingoistic patriotism, but participating in the drastic and fluctuating equivalence between a single, massively amplified voice (irrelevant whether live or pre-recorded) and a mass – oscillating between being one and the other – a sharing and switching on an otherwise unheard of scale: in the end literally joining and expanding into the sky (the "fly over"). *Works which would offer listeners radically impersonal frames of identification, beyond or exploding the limits of ideological suture?*

Or, finally, when we listen to Frank Ocean or Milton Babbitt while fucking: not simply a matter of synchronized thrusts, but a polyphony, a polyrhythmy of semblances and divergences, a titillation of distraction – of "reading" and comprehending words and rhythms while processing the collisions and collusions of our bodies; of coming to indeterminate associations in the cominglings of sounds, words, and bodily sensations. *And works which might literally facilitate the fluttering perception of a given scene's complexity – its simultaneous materiality and immateriality, its multiple temporalities and grains? Which might set up even more complex and direct plays of associations between audible figures and bodily movements? Between timbres, amplitudes, glands, and hormones; between patches of skin and bands of the spectrum? An indeterminate "serialism" of intertwined bodily & sonic "parameters?"*

Huh.

Composition? Repression? Composition instead of music?

The word "composition" is perhaps strangest here, imprecise. If it were to have a meaning, it would be in the potential to formulate relations in the most fundamental of senses. To establish the conditions of a scene. The

fantasy of a position from which one might “compose” aesthetics – our sensate relation to matter. Composition as an aesthetic form of relational experiment, a means toward another kind of “fun” altogether, would be absolutely opposed to the semio-normative connotation of the word as arrangement of audible materials (pitches, noises, samples, etc). Then again, insofar as music as we commonly know it is already a *single* form of ultra-ornate, ultra-reified, neuro-chemically intimate composed listening, the suggestion of composition instead of music might also be a strategic, temporary emphasis. That is, it would remain to be seen thereafter if music as such remained necessary.

Such an emphasis on “composition” would *not* be on the act as an activity (in relation to a passivity), nor as a privileging of the written (in whatever form), nor as a vanguard activity or toward the promotion of a vanguard composer class, but instead as a switchable, alterable, flexible mode available to anyone. Composition would be something applicable to activities as such, that is, to their detouring. Composition defined in its constant, constituent potential for reformulation, for *re-composition*, would be an activity in which active/passive divisions would constantly be in flux, would be value-less. “Those” who might at any moment compose and thus offer others something for doing, could and would likewise be offered another doing in the next moment.

Back to music and sex: the failure of both to radically transform normal life is tied to their pathological and ideological tendency toward “formlessness,” an effect of the ‘exceptional’ positions (temporal, spatial) of each vis-a-vis the everyday. Composition is also made up of forms and materials, but moves to dynamize instead of *annihilate* its body. Here it becomes critical not only to insist upon, but to *affirm* repression: not to be non-structured, but to be changeably structured; not to be singularly or normatively repressed, and also not to be non-repressed, but to be changeably repressed; to compose and re-compose, (as) a species, a community, (our) repression; our bodies, bounds, relations.

How very strange then, along this path, to arrive at something like Marcel Broodthaers in 1965, at the beginning of his *career* as an artist, saying, “Having become a friend of society, I notice that its enemies are stupid, wicked and many.”

P.S.

Dear A.,

If you'll allow me to mix a few more metaphors, the problem of sexual attraction (compounded by being sexually attractive) would be of easily getting lost in music. Or in other words, that sex is kinda fun.

The problem of accepting a place within a thoroughly bounded field (even an “eccentric” or “exotic” one) is simply laziness.

So sure, you're right that my “castle” (composing) is a fantasy. “In my head.” But it has visiting hours. And it can be broken into at any moment.

& just as sure, it won't work out for “me.” The castle will end up a dilapidated old house permeated with isolation and self-pity. But somewhere it will also retain a tenderness beyond all bounds.

What else to do? If one can at least say this much, surely there's no need to resign oneself to a zoo (Berlin)? Surely even the hint of sharing another relation would be so much more than “reality?” Surely even the thought of that potential hint is enough to maintain such tenderness?

I burn my bridges, but I can swim.

B.

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