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Unique source
 All Natural Suicide Gang

1.

Here is an operation. In 1988, the composer Steve Reich, whom you might say was at one point a minimalist, used the relatively new technology of the sampler to create a work based on the digitized human voice. The composition employed entire phrases and sentences, the cadences of which dictated the melodies. Listen to what's being said: testimonials by Holocaust survivors, overburdened with meaning, unassailable. Then spin those stuttering voices into avant garde music... Well, a thing only really appears when it is turned into a weapon. "Ovens, showers, lampshades, soap": an innocuous group of words, unless we're told that the context is Germany in the 1940s.

Where to locate the power in this operation? Is the violence here inherent to sampling? In the realm of music, certainly, sampling is often viewed as a criminal act. According to this logic, an original is somehow violated by the creation of its double, and this process is symptomatic of a lamentable cultural slide from representation to repetition. Sampling, however, is not interested in repetition. Its sole purpose is the creation of new, discrete events. With the extension of the digital into every sphere of life, each reproduction is an original, each sample a new beginning, the first in an infinite sequence of beginnings. This is where the power of sampling is to be found, and this is why it is attended by cultural anxieties, anxieties widely mistaken as copyright-related, which is to say, money-motivated, but more likely arising from concerns about the implications of instrumentalizing human expression. In any case, there is no longer such a thing as a copy.

Artists, universally recognized as experts in the field of human expression, have naturally been quick to address these issues. If sampling may be understood as the process of using appropriated documents as raw material for context-abuse, might this not be true of all good art? Given the relatively early intrusion of the digital into the realm of music, the reaction of musicians to the introduction of the sampler makes for a good case study. However, it will be useful to first review music's own peculiar relationship to reproduction, seen through some historical anecdotes.¹ After all, one dreams all day just as in the night.

2.

¹ These comparative examples will, however, only tell us so much, as the terms seem to bifurcate. For instance, take the term *History*. As a narrative of progress, it points to the future, but as a memory or memorial, it points to the past. So, then, is the Golden Age ahead of us, or behind us? To those who decry Utopia as a futile project, or, worse, one whose failures brought us the horrors of the last century, you might consider replying: we are in a Utopian moment, each moment is a Golden Age, a new beginning, the first in an infinite series. Sampling as a resistance to fragmentation? Oh, the schemes that go through my consciousness, like wine through water, and alter the color of my mind!

"Intellectual property" as regards most written material was codified in Europe in the sixteenth century, a response to the new text-copying technology of print. The old written laments about ephemerality, which measured no more than the distance between writing and sensuality, suddenly fell silent. It was almost a hundred years, however, before this notion took hold in the world of music, before a composer could actually *own* a particular musical composition. Previously, songs were understood to be common property, and, what's more, mutable, much in the way computer programs were first understood as communal efforts to be shared, re-worked, and re-released. Facts are, after all, opinions.

Although in this respect music initially lagged behind the printed word, it soon leapt ahead. Text-copying has aged gracefully since the dawn of intellectual property; after all these years of stately change, its main exponent remains the printed page. Music, on the other hand, has been subject all along to sudden shifts in the controlled reproduction and dissemination of recorded material.

Take the history of opera. Toscanini arrived at La Scala and wrought numerous changes, with the result that opera is now the consummate bourgeois form. Prior to his arrival the orchestra had played on the same level as the audience, which was a crowd with none of the docile characteristics of today's opera-goers, rather, a mob, talking, eating, jesting: "Let us meet at the opera and then decide whence to go...", "Well-met, friend, pray share this flagon...", "Indeed", "Scubberdegullion", etc. Of course, the time was right for these changes, for the bourgeoisie happened to be achieving its supreme moment of privatization and interiority, the goal of which was space for fantasy. Architecture, the model in Western metaphysics, is the necessary corollary to ritual, which would otherwise be heathen by definition. Toscanini aligned opera not simply with the house, but with a particular kind of space readily outfitted with the kinds of faux-aristocratic props necessary for bourgeois fantasy. These props, this whole process, may be seen as a kind of repetition and depletion. In that case, reproducing the signs or artifacts of the aristocracy perpetrates a thing made somehow poor in the process of reproduction. To denigrate something as a "copy" is to argue against this depletion of forms. On the other hand, it is true that aristocracies keep alive those endangered pleasures that repel the bourgeoisie, and it is possible that cultured people are merely the glittering scum which floats upon a deep river of production. Toscanini's violent changes can be said to have preserved the opera form, for the empty gestures of ritual are a force of preservation, just as death is the romanticizing principle in life. This is the lumber of life.

3.

If architecture is the model in Western metaphysics, we are in some sense the inhabitants of older buildings, and ours is the business of living in a ruined house. It is useful to interrogate the use of the word *ruin*, a word which splits. On the one hand, it may refer to the sort of ancient structures cherished in the early

nineteenth century: squalid, overgrown, graffiti-covered, surveyed at sunset for best effect. It may also, however, indicate those same ruins today: scrubbed free of graffiti, restored and conserved, made lucrative, seen only in the full daylight of "open hours".

In the first example, ruin implies benign decay, and in the other, active preservation, make-work, and industry². Locating pleasure in benign decay is a perversion, as these structures are useless, and, moreover, wasteful: a spilling of seed, like gay sex. All that which is not made useful and which serves no profitable function can be seen as the unrecuperable waste of a society.

However, this waste is also a force that crystallizes society's blockages. Consider the Boston Museum of Science display of "petrified lightning", a lumpy brown rod which is composed of nothing but sand fused in an instant of extreme heat. The exhibit stands only for a fetish of damage, of waste material. A process is mystified, replaced by a ruin under glass.

In the era of the picturesquely crumbling abbey or castle, poetry was king of the arts, and it was this form that drew all the radical young dudes. A century later, on the other side of Modernism, in an age when any ancient scrap-heap is carefully made over according to an image of safety and security, music is the art toward which all the others aspire, and it is here that young romantics gather. What accounts for this change? As with the adoption of ideas of intellectual property, the schematic shifts in music lag behind those of the written word. This is the lake of our feeling.

The clearest way to trace the recent ascendance of the digital is by examining music, as this is where we now are able to locate picturesquely crumbling ruins. The Classical style, which is often said to stretch from Haydn to Beethoven, can be understood as a single unbroken lineage in which Brahms writes with Beethoven lurking over his shoulder. A carefully organized sequence of events, preserved on paper and embodied in the concert hall. The twentieth century, however, supplements this lineage with an exponentially growing media-body based on the recorded signal, a manipulable archive open to any consumer. The digital copy crystallizes this development neatly, almost allegorically. It was not until the affront of the sampler that music really went to work anxiously mapping and itemizing the husks of metropolises constructed by earlier settlers: seeking a new Classicism, with all the hedonism that follows a period of calamity³.

In any case, everything is reused. Artists rummage through the toolkits of past artists for approaches they may make use of. The task is to take these instruments and with them fashion new tools. The object is to look for the use, not the meaning. You want a 'fine art' approach, you borrow the tool from commodity culture. If it's done wrong, no problem, there is produced a nostalgia for the done-right way. For all these reasons, the modern notion of the renovated

² The French have a saying: *the consumer has only three basic needs, to be safe, to be loved, to be beautiful*. This is the desire of ruins today.

³ Historically, all new forms attack Classicism; it's a move characteristic of Romantic poetry, of course, but also of the Neo-Expressionist painting of the 1980s, a style for whom the darkest place was under the lamp.

ruin may be more relevant than the nineteenth century picturesque model of majestic decay.

4.

It still eludes me... what is so particular about the sampler?

Take a close look at the economic and technological particulars of this electronic tool. In 1979, the first commercial sampler was put on the market for around \$25,000. The *Fairlight*. What a name! Ha, ha, ha. The steep price was typical of these early machines, which were consequently purchased by institutions, mostly well-funded university composition labs. This was a brief period when the majority of people making sample-based music were classically-trained academic composers who recognized in the computer a spectacular means of testing their high-flying propositions.⁴

This moment must be considered the apogee of the Modern movement in music, which all along had a tendency, as with the abstruse proposals of Schoenberg or Webern, to prescribe advanced theoretical training as a prerequisite for participation. Now, however, it was expected of students that they not only cultivate a familiarity with the usual histories and methodologies, but rely entirely on the academy for their production tools. Many bourgeois homes possessed a piano, but none a computer workstation. This was a natural endpoint to Modern music's evolutionary chain, which thrived on a particular combination of technology, money, and control.⁵

The situation was fleeting, however. Once you introduce commercial technology, you let it in the market, and things slip from your hands. Ten years after the introduction of the Fairlight, any academic composer could buy a decent sampler for under \$1000, perhaps pairing it with a newly available personal computer to yield a versatile home studio. The same was of course true for any 20-year old making hip-hop⁶. The old model of the pyramid, the new model of the pancake. All this headlong change left a wake of wreckage and trauma, and, in academic computer music, a peculiar and un-repeatable niche, the equivalent of a geographically-isolated evolutionary zone where unique life forms emerge.

Around the same time sampling was introduced, the music industry developed "MIDI", essentially a universal language allowing electronic music machines to synchronize and exchange information. This was a new coin of the realm, a currency of loins and coins, designed for swift, industry-wide adoption,

⁴ There were exceptions, like New York's "public access synthesizer studio", which contained a Fairlight on which was composed the soundtrack to the "underground" movie *Liquid Sky*.

⁵ The nobility, here perhaps a nobility of letters, has always beckoned to musicians. As when Mozart wrote "That scoundrel Voltaire has died like a dog. Good riddance."

⁶ This raises the question of amateur production. As with all strategies of appropriation, sampling cannot be conceived of in terms of amateur or professional roles. This is a part of its violence. Collecting and illegally redistributing material has no professional dimension; the person who compiles a mix tape for a friend is not an amateur. The licit practice to come closest is that of the corporation that cheaply purchases rights to déclassé cultural material, such as old dance singles, from those now forced to part with it cheaply, thence to repackage these goods for re-consumption, either under the banner of nostalgia (the low-end approach), or for the archiving fetish of the would-be collector (the high end approach).

its features driven by commercial interests. The general concept had to be widely familiar rather than intelligible only to technicians or programmers. The public happens to be most comfortable with the piano, so MIDI was engineered to turn sounds on and off by pushing keys. Strike the key and trigger an event, which is immediately sequenced in a series of other events. A chain of control achieved through a simple depression. When I am depressed, there is power at work somewhere.

The combination of sampled sounds, MIDI, and digital manipulation in general promised all sorts of possibilities. However, many are interested in the idiom of a form, few in the grammar. It turns out that people don't want distinctive sounds or sounds that have never been heard, they want sounds that correspond to phenomena already existing in the world. None, after all, is worse shod than the shoe maker's wife⁷. Musicians wanted to emulate, to invoke reality at the touch of a finger, like paint straight from the tube. Brass, woodwinds, car crashes, breaking glass: invocations! The machine recalls events and dispatches them in a digital relay that is by nature simply on or off, making obsolete the weak frequency, the half-understood signal. A zero-sum spell.

5.

Sampler-based music achieved its perfect expression early on, when it arrived at the idea of employing sampled human voice as an infinitely re-pitchable synth-sound. An electronic keyboard simulates a piano, often noting even the force with which its keys are struck: it wants you to believe that it is a percussion instrument. The voice-sample technique, then, is the process of generating limitless copies of a unique and resonant human utterance, refashioned as a sprawling kit of silicon-calibrated fake drums. The voice becomes a structural element under total control. It is made *useful*, as opposed to evocative or expressive. That which reliably promises communication becomes pure instrumentality, a move based on the notion that instruments give us what we want—predictability, security, control—rather than the confirmation of an accurate representation of the real. It goes to show you: when your desires become reality, you don't need fantasy any longer, nor art.

The technique was immediately popular among academic composers and pop producers alike⁸, but soon disappeared from both realms, possibly because it seemed dated or absurd, but more likely because sampled and repitched voice is disturbing, a speech terrible and inhuman, an emulation gone bad. The sampled word is the zero degree of the word, as found in the dictionary, or in poetry. Here,

⁷ Likewise, recall that "personal computers" were originally intended to be programmed by their owners. It took nearly a decade before it became clear that consumers disliked this aspect.

⁸ I once recalled someone standing by a keyboard, blurting out "I don't know what to say!" The phrase belonged to a female character on an early 'Cosby' show, and was spoken into a brand new sampling keyboard demonstrated by Stevie Wonder, who appeared as himself. With some deft adjustments he multiplied her apparently random words across the span of the keyboard, repitched to electronic perfection, basso profundo to mezzo soprano, all subject to easy control through key depression. It was in fact Stevie Wonder, in 1981, who purchased the very first of the famous *Emulator* samplers, fresh off the assembly line. That is a quaint memory—*what a time I chose to be born!*

the communicative imperative, which depends on repetition and difference, is symbolically short-circuited, and, moreover, from within the cloak of language. It is not surprising that this production technique fell into disfavor. Man fall from a tree, that tree be felled, man fall in a well, that well be filled.

Samplers continue to offer one entirely new experience, at least on the level of consumption: the recognition, while listening to an unknown piece of music, of the basis for a sample employed in a familiar piece of music. As you look up with bewildered pleasure, the music charges on, perhaps diverging from the repetition you desired, a mental correlate to the phantom step at the top of the stairs. You briefly glimpsed a private, inaccessible field arising between two disparate experiences. Whatever pleasure you may sustain must rely on simultaneous presence and absence.⁹

6.

Digital duplication was one of the twentieth century's few new schemas. Naturally, such a force draws the curtain on older powers. All forms of depletion are heralded by the degradation of language, and, as the eclipse of Rome's power was contemporary with the decline of Latin, so the eclipse of avant garde music was indicated by its wish to transform embodied language into an instrument. A desire to be, rather than to seem. By the end of the 1980s, around the time when Reich completed his sample-based work, the configuration *avant garde music* was thoroughly depleted, a constellation made cold from forgetfulness.

You could argue that sampling poisoned the well. On the other hand, it is true that in homeopathic medicine, and sometimes in magic, you put a drop of the bad thing, the thing you fight, into water or another medium. You must fight something in order to understand it! Sampling may be invasive, negating repetition, disordering us, but then that's the wish of every man, to disorder, to mayhem.

This may be what links sampling to graffiti, apart from the shared implication of a color-threat. Each presents a text that is critical of reading. Graffiti is an effacement that must be incomplete, a symbolic erasure only, a gesture which has to preserve that which it destroys. Were it to entirely replace or obliterate, it lose its critique. It wields both an assertion of presence and a passive-aggressive absence.

The work of Broodthaers sometimes follows this logic, as with his piece *Un Coup de dès jamais n'abolira le hasard*, with its pleasantly incestuous abuse of the Francophone avant-garde. The publication of Mallarmé's poem *Un Coup de dès jamais n'abolira le hasard*, a work distinguished by its typography and disposition of the words upon the page, marked the first time that a poem's conception and meaning was determined through the mechanical printing process. A lyric automation of the design function. In 1969, Broodthaers made a series of pieces that reproduced the exact page layout of Mallarmé's poem, and the layout only, for he effaced each line of text with a solid black bar. This

⁹ This experience is utterly different from that of recognizing one composer's melodic quotation of another's work, as different as is the scan from the photograph.

gesture, while it banished all communicative symbols, retained the striking look and feel of the work¹⁰. Mallarmé's piece was emptied-out, reduced to seductive packaging. This is a move typical of appropriation, which may be considered simply an advanced form of packaging.

These depleted forms were engraved onto aluminum plates, as if prepped for mass production, and presented as fine art. Broodthaers claims and then augments Mallarmé's poem to produce a new, third body, a field that lies between the works. The whole is without novelty, save the spacing of ones reading; the blanks, in effect, assume importance. In the end, a self-annihilating nothing. This was to be expected, as Broodthaers was an imitation artist. It may be that the supreme triumph of such advanced art is to cast doubt on its own validity, mixing a deep scandalous laughter with the religious spirit. There is a violence in this turn, the same violence that attends graffiti: "don't think, look!"

7.

"Graffiti"—employing here the common usage, which describes an urban decay-threat akin to mold—is pathological. Not because it is vandalism, but because it dreams of total saturation through an open-ended sequence of "tags", each a stuttering variation on the last. Total coverage is a futile and perverse premise, an infinite possibility wedded to perpetual disappointment. A sad pursuit, and therefore one ripe with violence. Like a poor man who sells his saucepan to buy something to put in it.

Then again, graffiti, like any human expression, is a search to find a style that makes further expression possible. Graffiti Culture (and why does it take so long for people to map a "culture" onto their violence?) represents the anarchic, expressive territory of those who have subverted painterly representation from the standpoint of cool alienation. Language is defaced by pictures. This is not simply the business of living in a ruined house, it's the business of representing a ruined house by repeating a ruined house. A person inscribing a visually coded word on the side of a bridge piling creates a text that is critical of reading: the traces of the pictogram's generative process disturb the traditional formal interpretation of such processes and their derivation from functional concerns. The art object is seen as an object of contemplation, not to be parsed, but to be puzzled over. Its secrets may have to do with art, but with something else as well, which hovers beyond, with no name forthcoming.

In the seventies, New York City tags like *Zephyr*, *Futura*, and *Phase II* were bringing a wind of light and speed, inscribed backwards on a hard city. A lyric renunciation of the design function. By the end of the eighties, a visitor to

¹⁰ "Look and feel", a term popularized by the computer industry, is often used to describe the overall aesthetic of a particular operating system, which is to say, the shade of the seduction one paints on the information architecture. A well-known example is the Macintosh's successful graphic user interface, which was subsequently copied throughout the industry. The term was made notorious in a series of lawsuits—Xerox against Apple, Apple against Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard—brought on the basis of whether or not it was legal to appropriate aesthetic qualities as crystallized in programming code. Look and feel, in its current sense, is a notion that did not really exist prior to the personal computer, but one which now affects all consumer realms based on digital technology.

Manhattan might see tags like *Sony, Seiko, Casio*: flattened personal electronics tokens, the pan drippings of contemporary status symbols like Rolex, Nakamichi, Trump, fake trickle-downs, décor holes. Then, in the nineties, after the best letter combinations have been used up, you see apparently nonsensical tags: *Revs, Kuma, Sems, Naers*. An arc from poetry to consumer fetish to empty form.

8.

It's refreshing to watch a form deplete itself. Ah, now it's far easier to see it as not a belief but a historical movement, a movement of thought. Easier to trace the social shift and extrapolate out as far as desired, to all design, all art, all packaging. Take vacuum-forming, an industrial process used to produce the ubiquitous plastic packaging of batteries, toys, and toothbrushes, as well as that of luxury items like boxed chocolates and cosmetics. Trace the use of this process in the plastic arts. The chief instances, which include Broodthaers' rectilinear plaques and Oyvind Fahlstrom's Esso/LSD reliefs, take the logic of the commercial sign as their model, which is not surprising, as it is a model congruent with a sustained twentieth century artistic investigation of advertising and display, from Rudy Burckhardt or Walter Benjamin's interest in the sloughed off detritus of commodity culture to a more recent fascination with corporate monograms. What would it mean to employ such a process for the purpose of reproducing not the structures of language and capitalist syntax, but those of the human form? Making a package for conservative statuary and classical figuration, for art itself: a violent cough, as when the human voice is "repurposed" as an instrument.

What it means is, it shows how far we've come with our packaging. Full circle, the lowest shall be highest. In the evenings, you can stroll out to see how we are coming along with the construction of the temple.