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Space, Time, and Sonic Utopia



Part I: Utopia

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When Thomas More coined the term “utopia” in 1516, its sense was both spatial and political.¹ It named a fictional island in the South Seas whose perfect order and harmony contrasted with the disorder and unrest of Tudor England. More’s utopia, then, was at once fictional and real—fictional insofar as it was a product of imagination, but real insofar as it had a more or less precise geographical location. Yet More’s utopia had a temporal register as well, for it was not only a product of *imagination* but a product of *wish*. It was a sketch for a perfect society and, hence, had a futural sense. The privative “u” in the term utopia, then, carries a temporal reference that says “not now, but later.”

This set of conjunctions—between space and time, reality and fiction—has marked the concept of utopia from the beginning and continues to do so today. The 19th century Utopian Socialists, for example, imagined and constructed actual spaces apart—intentional communities in which the dominant system of property and social relations was suspended and replaced with alternative structures. Marx and Engels famously criticized such communities and schemes as paying inadequate attention to the historical unfolding of class struggle. For them, true “scientific” socialism could not be achieved once and for all by an act of will or secession. Rather, it could only be the historical outcome of an immanent social and material process that, in its revolutionary moment, would animate not merely a group of charismatic dreamers but an entire class, the proletariat, to throw off its chains and, hence, the chains of capitalism generally. Here, again, we see the opposition between space and time—between utopia as an independent spatial enclave and utopia as a deferred, futural achievement—an opposition that, not coincidentally, reiterates earlier religious debates between a Christian orthodoxy that reserved

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salvation for the afterlife or a futural apocalyptic Judgment, and the heretical assertion of an earthly paradise here and now.

The tension between space and time certainly animated the history of utopia in the 20th century, at least in its left-political variants. It was evident in the long debate over whether or not communism had been realized in an existing state, the Soviet Union, or whether it had yet to be achieved in an indefinite future. For Ernst Bloch, the most rigorously utopian thinker of the 20th century, the utopian impulse constantly erupted in daily life—in daydreams, advertisements, art, literature, music—as the recurrent but fragmentary imagination of a better life. These eruptions, Bloch argued, are real events in the here and now; nevertheless, such eruptions remain mere symptoms that anticipate a future transformation of the totality.² A more tenuous relationship between present utopian eruption and futural utopian achievement can be found in the theory and practice of the Situationists, whose diagnosis of an all-consuming spectacular alienation that all but foreclosed human liberation was offset not only by local strategies of resistance such as *détournement* but also by the project of constructing “situations”: transitory collective productions of genuine, active, and intense living.³

This same tension has manifested itself in the utopian politics of 20th century music. Though far less sanguine and hopeful than his friend Bloch, Theodor Adorno took modernist music to offer something like a utopian symptom or principle of hope—a crack in the edifice of administered society that allowed its listeners to glimpse a different way of living. In its dissonance, atonality, and lack of resolution, musical modernism served as a force of resistance against the culture industry and the ideological enclosure of capitalism. The active listening it required opened a space of awareness and critical reflection that revived cognitive and moral faculties that had severely atrophied under capitalism. For Adorno, then, modernist music manifested a momentary utopia that, in principle, at least, kept alive the dream of a general social transformation.

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More recently, Jacques Attali and Chris Cutler have offered historical materialist accounts of musical development that reanimate Marx & Engels' temporal treatment of utopia as the culmination of a long, dialectical historical process. Both thinkers trace music from its origins in communal ritual through its commodification and reification via musical notation and, later, audio recording. Both see music as still mired in the commodity form and the banality of repetition; yet each forecasts a musical liberation to come, a utopian moment expressed as sonic and human emancipation. For Attali, music plays the quasi-religious role of prophet, announcing future social formations prior to their concrete realization in political and economic life. His historical account from primitive communalism through church regulation, private property, and the culture industry ends with a vision of what he notoriously calls "composition," in which music is liberated from passive consumption and the commodity form, and instead is manifested in a musical gift economy marked by the pleasure of amateur music-making and the toleration of a multiplicity of musical forms, which converge and diverge in uncertain ways but always affirm music's essential ephemerality.⁴ Attali's historical narrative is explicitly utopian. In what is perhaps a dig at Adorno, a more optimistic Attali describes the culminating moment of composition as "the only utopia that is not a mask for pessimism, the only Carnival that is not a Lenten ruse."⁵

In his admirably lucid and insightful essay "Necessity and Choice in Musical Forms," Chris Cutler presents a similar—and to my mind more compelling—musical history that treats modes of musical memory as akin to Marx's modes of production.⁶ Because it is less well known (but also, I think, more persuasive), I'd like to summarize it here. Cutler begins with what he calls "the folk mode" of musical production whose technology of memory is biological and social, rooted in the human body and the collective memory of the cultural community. Cutler has in mind the vast history of ritual music, traditional songs and poems passed down from generation to generation and repeated by bards or performers, but always with a

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S difference that causes the song to drift. In such a mode, Cutler notes, “there can be no such thing as a finished or definitive piece of music. At most there could be said to be ‘matrices’ or ‘fields’.”⁷

The rise of capitalism in early modern Europe marked the beginning of a new mode of musical production, the classical or art music mode, and a new technology of musical memory, written/printed memory. This was not simply a technological development but an economic and political one that exhibited capitalism’s tendency toward reification, the transformation of processes into things. Originally merely an *aide-mémoire* for the accomplished musician, musical notation was enlisted as a solution to the problem of how to commodify the inherently transitory nature of sound and the fluid matter of music. Musical notation allowed music to take the form of fixed, exchangeable objects. And the contemporaneous institution of copyright allowed it to become legally protected private property. These conditions served to fix music in the form of a stable, finished product or object and led to the waning of real-time improvisation. The objecthood of the score shifted musical attention from the ear to the eye, as music became something to see and to read before it was something to hear. What began as a mere supplement to musical performance became an autonomous entity that governed performances and to which they were held accountable.⁸ Under capitalism, then, the score comes to perform the metaphysical sleight-of-hand that fascinated both Nietzsche and Wittgenstein: the pre-posterous inversion by which the concept “leaf” became the cause of actual, particular leaves—or, in the musical case, an abstract, inaudible entity, the score, became the cause and judge of actual musical performances.⁹

The late 19th century saw the invention of a new and improved form of musical reification: sound recording. Initially wax cylinders and phonograph records and, later, magnetic tape, compact discs, mp3s, and streams—all these technologies increased the circulation of the musical object, making it available even to those who lacked the skill

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of musical literacy. Unlike the silent score, which required living human beings to make it audible, these new objects required only another object or commodity, a playback machine. Recording thus intensified the mysterious and alienating uncanniness of the musical object, for the phonographic apparatus detached music from its source of production and allowed the voices of the dead to outlast the living.

Yet here Cutler's account breaks with Attali's and Adorno's. For Attali, audio recording is entirely beholden to the repetitive mass production, consumption, and accumulation characteristic of capitalism. Indeed, like Adorno, Attali is almost entirely hostile to repetition as both recording technology and musical form. Cutler's account, however, is more richly dialectical. He notes that audio recording has a double status. On the one hand, it perfects the reification of music that began with the institution of the score. On the other hand, it bestows upon music the characteristics of what Jacques Derrida has called a "generalized writing," the key characteristic of which is a break with presence in all its forms, notably the intentional presence of the original producer, the presence of any determinate audience, and the presence of the original context or event of inscription. Recording severed music from the presence of its production; but, by the same token, it allowed sounds to be cited, iterated, grafted onto new contexts, and, hence, granted new lives. Recorded music thus has the potential to loosen the bonds of private property and to restore to music its limitless temporality. As such, it points to a new mode of production that undermines the fixity, specialization, and private property characteristic of the art music mode.

For Cutler, indeed, recording marks a new form of memory and a new mode of musical production. Recording retains "the actuality of performance" while at the same time freeing it from any particular place and time. Moreover, "recording makes possible the manipulation or assembly of sound, or of actual performances, in an empirical way; that is to say, through listening and subsequent

decision making.”¹⁰ This is just what Glenn Gould had in mind when, in 1964, he gave up live performance in favor of recording, which enabled him to produce ideal performances consisting of myriad spliced segments. Writing soon thereafter, Gould foresaw “a new kind of listener—a listener more participant in the musical experience,” one who, equipped with basic music technology, could edit and splice bits of sound to produce new sonic events.¹¹ Such an experimental practice had been inaugurated a decade and a half prior, when, in 1948, Pierre Schaeffer produced the first examples of *musique concrète*, composed entirely by the editing and studio manipulation of field recordings and musical recordings. Schaeffer’s practice foreshadowed the era of sampling, the remix, and digital sound manipulation, practices that transform the reified musical object into fluid, open-ended auditory material. Endlessly iterated and generations removed from its source, such material becomes effectively anonymous, and the technology to capture, alter, and release it is so readily available that its proliferation is staggering.

Less explicitly utopian than Attali’s, Cutler’s account nonetheless finds its extension in the utopian wing of Internet culture, whose well-known slogan “information wants to be free” foresees a dissolution of the opposition between producers and consumers, the collective production of culture and knowledge, the elimination of private property, and the free circulation of sounds, images, texts, and codes. To paraphrase Marx, the argument is that the material productive forces of society—namely recording technologies, transmission technologies, and the Internet—come into conflict with the existing property relations—namely, the private (individual and corporate) ownership of intellectual and cultural property—thus initiating an epoch of social and cultural revolution.¹² In the sphere of music, such a culture anticipates the collapse of the recording industry and, in its place, the emergence of an open-source, fully-networked community of amateur music producers emitting a stream of all-but-authorless sonic material that is in a perpetual state of flux.¹³

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Such are some of the more powerful utopian visions articulated by theorists for whom sonic liberation is teleological, achieved only at the end of a long temporal, historical process. The other version of utopia—utopia as the construction of an alternative enclave in the here and now—has also had powerful exponents in the musical culture of the late 20th century. This notion flourished among the free improvising collectives of the late 1960s and early 1970s that construed the musical ensemble and musical performance as a space in which the ordinary relations and hierarchies—musical, social, and political—could be suspended and replaced by a set of egalitarian and communal principles. For example, *Musica Elettronica Viva* (MEV), a group of American expatriates living in Rome, saw itself as a laboratory for the formation of new political, ethical, and aesthetic subjects. Writing in 1968, the group’s spokesman Fredric Rzewski described MEV performances as initiating a precarious movement from the “occupied space” of capitalist individualism to the “created space” of genuine community. With allusions to the whole history of political philosophy from Plato’s *Republic* and Hobbes’ *Leviathan* through Marx’s *Capital* and Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid*, Rzewski’s description charts this dangerous and harrowing passage to liberation through collective improvisation. At the beginning of the performance, each member stands in “occupied space,” a lone individual distinct from others who rehearses familiar and comfortable musical material. Rzewski describes the process as follows:

Each [performer] begins by making music in the way in which he knows how, with his own rhythms, his own choice of materials, et cetera, without particular regard for others, or for setting up some kind of ensemble situation [...] He begins by making music in an already familiar way; he does not transcend himself and does not consider that he is creating anything or doing anything that he has not done already at one time or another. [Eventually, however, each performer] begins to search the atmosphere for lines which may unite his rhythms with those coming from other sources; he begins to examine his own rhythms, searching for those which he can cast out,

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hoping that someone will attach himself to them. Manifold tentacles of rhythm creep out from each vibrating body, catching hold of each other. Very slowly a single fundamental rhythm, with which all of the musicians can join in one way or another, begins to emerge from this chaos. As each person lends his weight to this rhythm, as if to a central pendulum, its force increases. A general oscillation, which forms the tonic for everyone's individual music, sets in: it is as if a giant molecule were taking form out of nothing [...] The performer finds that he has been transported into a new situation in which there are other laws of gravity. He discovers a new economy of energy; he is almost weightless and is able to move with fantastic ease. The energy, which formerly had been expended in the general tumult and conflict, is now used more efficiently, used to move the giant pendulum. By placing his balance upon this fundamental rhythm, he finds that he can devote his energies to the adornment of this rhythm, to its enrichment with smaller and more complex sub-rhythms. Ultimately, the sound of the players oscillating in a harmonic relationship with one another will acquire an unimaginable richness and fineness, completely transcending the individual musics.¹⁴

Of course, Rzewski's therapeutic program recognizes that this ideal outcome will often fail to materialize. Hence, he goes on to explore potential sources of resistance, inertia, and collapse, and to offer suggestions for their circumvention, acknowledging that, more often than not, the result will be nothingness and destruction. Each performance repeats this difficult passage, which seeks to overcome these resistances and pitfalls toward the creation of a utopian space of collective harmony. The process is a recapitulation, on a smaller scale, of the historical progression characteristic of temporal utopias. Yet its manifest aim is to generate a utopian space in the present. Reflecting on this practice decades later, Rzewski reiterated the slogan of all spatial utopias: "Paradise is now, and can only be now."¹⁵

This sort of utopian impulse was reanimated in the mid-90s by rave culture, which presented similar accounts of the transformation from

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individual to collective subjectivity. Rave's essence was fusion—the Ecstasy-fueled fusion between audience members, their collective hypnosis through Techno's 4/4 throb, and a dissolution of the division between audience and performer or DJ. In the rave, Simon Reynolds writes, “the audience [is] the star” and the whole scene forms a “a decentered, non-hierarchical assemblage of people and technology characterized by flow-without-goal and expression-without-meaning.” “The rave,” continues Reynolds, “works as an intensification machine, generating a series of heightened here-and-nows.”¹⁶

If rave had a political theory, it was provided by anarchist philosopher, poet, and historian Hakim Bey, whose pamphlet “The Temporary Autonomous Zone” was required reading for raver intellectuals. Bey's text presents a critique of traditional revolutionary politics and its temporal conception of utopia. It rejects historical materialism's deferral of emancipation to a future post-revolutionary moment and, instead, celebrates temporary uprisings and insurrections that make no claim to permanence but that satisfy the utopian impulse in the here and now. Such insurgencies aim not so much at emancipation in the traditional political sense but at what Bey calls “the *intensification* of everyday life.”¹⁷ Bey sees them as guerilla operations that open up spaces of pleasure and genuine community—“temporary autonomous zones”—within a culture of numbing conformity and control. An uprising is less like a lasting condition than what Bey calls a “peak experience.” “Like festivals,” he writes, “uprisings cannot happen every day—otherwise they would not be ‘nonordinary.’ But such moments of intensity give shape and meaning to the entirety of a life.”¹⁸ Bey's model for the uprising, then, is not so much the barricades but the party, in the ordinary sense of the term. “Let us admit,” he writes, “that we have attended parties where for one brief night a republic of gratified desires was attained. Shall we not confess that the politics of that night have more reality and force for us than those of, say, the entire U.S. Government?”¹⁹ Such claims made it easy to construe raves—one-off, clandestine, collective gatherings in open fields or abandoned buildings—as perfect manifestations of Bey's ideal.

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The “temporary autonomous zone” (TAZ) celebrated by Bey is an explicit attempt to retool the traditional conception of utopia. Like the traditional conception, the TAZ combines a spatial and a temporal sense: it is temporally “temporary,” and it is a space or “zone.” Yet the TAZ is not a no place, a u-topia. On the contrary, Bey writes, “*the TAZ is somewhere*.”²⁰ This somewhere, however, is protean, and its denizens renounce the efforts at durability that characterized Utopian Socialist phalansteries and communes. It equally renounces the teleological conception of utopia endorsed by historical materialism. Indeed the temporality of the temporary challenges traditional conceptions of chronology and history. “If History is ‘Time,’ as it claims to be,” writes Bey, “then the uprising is a moment that springs up and out of Time, violates the ‘law’ of History.”²¹ The TAZ is a non-linear bifurcation, an anomalous eruption in the causal, teleological chain of events. And the intensity of this temporary moment is out of step with the time of the clock, on which each second is equal and homogeneous.

Bey’s text resonates with an earlier critique and reformulation of the notion of “utopia”: Michel Foucault’s “Different Spaces,” an address delivered to the Architectural Studies Circle in 1967. Like Bey, Foucault objects to the traditional conception of utopia as “having no real place,” as “fundamentally and essentially unreal.” Yet there are “different spaces,” Foucault notes, “real places, actual places [...] actually realized utopias in which the real emplacements [that is, social relationships, roles, and hierarchies] are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable.”²² Foucault famously calls these spaces “heterotopias,” a term that includes, but is both broader and more mundane than, Bey’s “temporary autonomous zones.” Foucault has in mind pockets or enclaves that operate according to different rules and that provide different articulations of subjectivity than those dominant in the culture: for example, prisons, cemeteries, gardens, zoos, museums, motels, and fairgrounds. (It is noteworthy that both Bey and Foucault consider the ship or sailing

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vessel to be the heterotopia par excellence).²³ Just as Bey suggests that the “temporary autonomous zone” offers an alternative conception of time, Foucault notes in passing that “heterotopias are connected with temporal discontinuities; that is, they open onto what might be called, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronias. The heterotopia begins to function when men are in a kind of absolute break with their traditional time.”²⁴

In the remainder of this essay, I want to take up and develop this notion of heterochronia, particularly with regard to the sound and music of the late 20th century. Music and sound art are, fundamentally, arts of time; and it’s my contention that, in the past half-century or so, vanguard music and sound art has powerfully explored this heterochronic experience.

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In 1958, John Cage gave a series of lectures at Darmstadt in which he argued for a fundamental shift in musical time. In those lectures, collectively titled “Composition as Process,” Cage notes that the essential formal aspect of European art music is the production of “time-objects”: “the presentation of a whole as an object in time having a beginning, a middle, and an ending, progressive rather than static in character, which is to say possessed of a climax or climaxes and in contrast a point or points of rest.”²⁵ Such “time-objects” bind musical flow within definite temporal limits and have the tendency to give it the narrative shape characteristic of traditional conceptions of time and history. Against this notion, Cage sought a different conception of time, one that transcends human construction. Hence, Cage endorsed a conception of music as what he called “a process essentially purposeless,” “a process the beginning and ending of which are irrelevant to its nature.” In place of the linear, narrative conception of time characteristic of the traditional musical work, Cage affirmed duration and simultaneity. He wanted his music to mirror and to become part of the open, ateleological flux of the world—“art,” he famously said, “must imitate nature in her manner of operation”²⁶—and he affirmed that this flux is not singular but multiple, a conjunction of many different flows.

The two notions of time contrasted by Cage—that of the “time-object” and that of the “purposeless process”—roughly match the terms of an opposition made by Henri Bergson, who, after a long period of neglect, has become a central figure in recent philosophical and cultural debates. Bergson famously contrasted two different experiences of time. The first is exemplified by the figure of the clock, on which moments—discrete, present entities—are laid out side-by-side in spatial succession. This is the conception of time that has

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dominated our thinking since, at least, the 17th century: time as an objective, quantitative measure of events; as something that is not part of events but which measures them from the outside. Bergson shows that this clock time subordinates time to space. Moreover, insofar as it considers time to be a matter of discrete moments, clock time is unable to account for the *passage* of time without which time is nothing at all. This key feature of passage points to a more fundamental experience of time that Bergson calls “duration”: time as a qualitative process, a flow in which past, present, and future permeate one another to form a genuine continuum.²⁷

Cage’s compatriot, Morton Feldman, drew just this distinction. Feldman objected to Karlheinz Stockhausen’s idea that the composer could “reduce [... time] to so much a square foot,” and objected to Stockhausen’s view that “Time was something he could handle and even parcel out, pretty much as he pleased.” “Frankly this approach bores me,” Feldman bluntly declared. Alluding to Bergson, he continued: “I am not a clockmaker. I am interested in getting to Time in its unstructured existence.” “I feel that the idea is more to let Time be, than to treat it as a compositional element. No—even to construct with Time won’t do. Time simply has to be left alone.” Recalling Cage, he concluded: “[N]ot how to make an object, not how this object exists by way of Time, *in* Time, or *about* Time, but how this object exists *as* Time. Time regained, as Proust referred to his work.”²⁸ This interest in time-as-duration, in making music that would not control time but would flow *with* it and *as* it led Feldman, late in his career, to compose works of immense length, for example, the 4-hour *For Philip Guston* (1984) and the 5 1/2-hour *String Quartet II* (1983). “Up to one hour you think about form,” Feldman wrote, “but after an hour it’s scale. Form is easy—just the division of things into parts. But scale is another matter. Before my pieces were like objects; now they’re like evolving things.”²⁹

These two conceptions of time are also directly at issue in Cage’s most famous composition, *4’33”*, which Cage himself felt to be his

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most successful and important piece. 4'33" sets up a confrontation between measured time and limitless duration. The title of the piece explicitly refers to the spatialized time of the clock—a fact Cage underscores by noting that the title could also be read “four feet, thirty-three inches.”³⁰ And, of course, the performance of the piece is regulated by a stopwatch. Yet the arbitrariness of this temporal scope (determined through chance procedures) and the sonic experience it discloses indicates that 4'33" aims to engage another experience of time—the time of duration, a time that does not parse out musical events but bears witness to the general acoustic flux of the world.

A year before he composed 4'33", Cage wrote a piece called *Imaginary Landscape* #4, a piece scored for 12 radios. For Cage, the radio was a tool of indeterminacy, since the composer and performers had to submit themselves to whatever happened to be broadcast at the time. And, of course, radio is a perfect model for acoustic flow: it is always there, a perpetual transmission; but we tap into it only periodically. Moreover, the simultaneous activation of 12 radio transmissions acknowledges the multiple layers, streams and speeds of flow that make up the general acoustic flux of the world. It seems to me that 4'33" functions like a sort of radio. For a brief window in time, it attunes us to the infinite and continuously unfolding domain of worldly sound. As Cage once put it: “Music is continuous; only listening is intermittent.”³¹

The sequel to this work, 0'00" (1962) intensifies this argument about temporality. The piece calls for “nothing but the continuation of one’s daily work, whatever it is, [...] done with contact microphones, without any notion of concert or theater or the public.” “What the piece tries to say,” remarks Cage, “is that everything we do is music, or can become music through the use of microphones; so that everything I’m doing, apart from what I’m saying, produces sound.” Again, Cage includes the temporal marker. But, at the same time, he reduces it to zero, puts it under erasure. “I’m trying to find a way to

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make music that does not depend on time,” he said of the piece. “[I]t is precisely this capacity for measurement that I want to be free of.”³²

The aim of *4’33”* and *0’00”*, then, is to open time to the experience of duration and to open musical experience to the domain of worldly sound. It is also to open human experience to something beyond it: the non-human, impersonal flow that precedes and exceeds it. “I think music should be free of the feelings and ideas of the composer,” Cage famously remarked. “I have felt and hoped to have led other people to feel that the sounds of their environment constitute a music which is more interesting than the music which they would hear if they went into a concert hall.”³³ To this end, Cage urges the composer “to give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments.”³⁴

“Chance” and “silence” were Cage’s transports into this domain.³⁵ These two strategies allow the composer to bypass his subjective preferences and habits in order to make way for sonic conjunctions and assemblages that are not his own—that are preindividual and impersonal. And “silence,” for Cage, names not the absence of sound (an impossibility, he points out), but the absence of *intentional* sound, an attention to the sonic life of the world or nature. *4’33”* remains Cage’s most elegant attempt along these lines. But so much of Cage’s work reveals that he conceived of sound (natural and cultural alike) as a ceaseless flow, and composition as the act of drawing attention to or accessing it.

Cage’s conception of an open, purposeless process is an affirmation of duration, an affirmation of a post-theological, ateleological universe that is without origin, end, or purpose. Musical minimalism affirmed a similar conception of time. Composers such as La Monte Young, Tony Conrad, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Pauline Oliveros, and Charlemagne Palestine explored what Gilles Deleuze calls “non-

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pulsed time,” as opposed to the “pulsed time” of classical composition. “Pulsed time” has nothing to do with regular, repetitive pulses (which, of course, are a key feature of musical minimalism). Rather, it is the time of narrative development. It organizes the musical piece into identifiable sections and landmarks, allowing listeners to know where they are and where they are going; and it sets up conflicts to be resolved that actively solicit the listener’s sense of narrative time. Hence, Deleuze tells us, pulsed time is the time of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of education, which “measures, or scans, the formation of a subject.”³⁶ The “non-pulsed time” of the minimalists is something else entirely. Minimalist compositions dispense with narrative and teleology and are uninterested in charting the progress of a hero, whether it be the composer, the solo instrument, or the listening subject. Rather, as Belgian minimalist composer Wim Mertens notes, “[t]he music exists for itself and has nothing to do with the subjectivity of the listener [...]”; the subject no longer determines the music, as it did in the past, but the music now determines the subject.”³⁷ Steve Reich notes that his early minimalist compositions “participate in a particular liberating and impersonal kind of ritual. Focusing in on the musical process makes possible that shift of attention away from *he* and *she* and *you* and *me* outwards towards *it*.”³⁸ That is, the non-pulsed time of minimalist composition places composer, performer, and listener on a wave of becoming that flows, shifts, and changes, but extremely gradually so that one loses any clear sense of chronological time (what Deleuze calls “Chronos”) and instead is immersed in a floating, indefinite time, a pure stationary process (Deleuze’s “Aion”).³⁹

To take one final musical example, DJ Culture radically unhinges musical time. Defined by the sample—the audible cut—turntablism from Grandmaster Flash and Christian Marclay to Marina Rosenfeld and Maria Chavez constantly severs the musical line. Like Cage with his multiple radios, it juxtaposes sonic material moving at different rates and speeds and thus generates non-linear flows composed of multiple musical times. The sample itself occupies an indefinite time,

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what Nietzsche calls “the untimely” and Deleuze calls the time of “the event.” At once a verb and a noun, the term “sample” names both the process of severance and the sonic slice itself. These name, respectively, the virtual and the actual moments of the art of sampling. Severed from any originary moment, the sample is a synecdoche for recording as the production of a virtual auditory archive. To deploy a sample is to actualize it, to draw it into historical time; but such actualization does not exhaust its productive power, which continues to animate subsequent actualizations. Here again we find the temporality of Aion, the floating, indefinite time that surrounds chronological and historical unfolding.

One could adduce a number of other contemporary musical practices that have been engaged in the production of heterochronic experience. But I want to conclude by looking briefly at what I take to be one of the most powerful engines of sonic heterochronia: sound art. Sound art emerged in the late 1960s out of two different streams: the Cagean tradition in experimental music and installation practices in the visual arts. In his 1967 polemic, “Art and Objecthood,” Michael Fried perceptively saw that these installation practices were engaged in the exploration of a conception of time that challenged both narrative, historical time and the epiphanic time of aesthetic-religious experience.⁴⁰ For Fried, this conception of time was, precisely, one of “duration,” a temporality of “endlessness,” “inexhaustibility,” and “persistence.” Fried’s direct target was Robert Morris, whose large L-beams, blocks, and slabs engaged the viewer’s mobile body in space and time. Morris’s subsequent work radicalized these tendencies in search of an art detached from what he called “the craft of tedious object production” in favor of an art composed of “mutable stuff” which need not arrive at the point of being finalized with respect to either time or space.”⁴¹ Hence, in a 1967 project, Morris gave up the use of solid objects in favor of the most ephemeral, intangible, and amorphous of visible entities, *Steam*. Two years later, Morris exhibited his *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, an installation that was constantly in flux. Over the course of its three-week exhibition, the artist made

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daily changes to the installation, which, instead of culminating in a final form, ended up with an almost empty space that presented simply a set of photographs and a tape recorder that played back the sounds of Morris' clean-up.⁴²

Robert Smithson explicitly countered Fried with a celebration of the artist's immersion in the Dionysian flow of time and matter that dissolves all objects and subjects. Art critics and the art market, Smithson noted, fasten on "art objects" and assign them "commodity values." Yet such objects are merely souvenirs from the artist's plunge into the "dedifferentiated," "oceanic" flux that constitutes the real aesthetic experience. "When a *thing* is seen through the consciousness of temporality, it is changed into something that is nothing," Smithson wrote. "Separate 'things,' 'forms,' 'objects,' 'shapes,' etc. with beginnings and endings are mere convenient fictions: there is only an uncertain disintegrating order that transcends the limits of rational separations. The fictions erected in the eroding time stream are apt to be swamped at any moment."⁴³

Sound art grew out of this artistic milieu, radicalizing musical experimentalism, on the one hand, and postminimalist sculptural practices, on the other. Sound was better suited than other media to satisfy Smithson's and Morris's desire for artworks that resisted reification and modeled the Dionysian flux. Sound is the most immersive of sensory stuff and, at low frequencies, it is non-directional. As such, it draws attention to the total field or situation rather than directing it to a thing or set of things. Much in the way that Morris, Smithson, and others sought a dedifferentiated form of installation that shifted focus from figure to ground, sound art shifted perception from the rarefied cultural domain of music, with its selection of discrete tones and timbres, to the engulfing field of background noise. Take, for example, Max Neuhaus's most famous permanent installation, *Times Square* (1977–92, 2002–), a stream of rich metallic drones broadcast from deep inside a ground vent in New York City's busiest district. Audible but unobtrusive, the piece blends

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with and subtly alters the sonic environment; and insofar as that environment is ever-shifting, the installation is new each moment. Though continuous, *Times Square* is experienced in temporal slices that serve as openings onto a flow of duration of which we are a part but that also surpasses us. In this way, *Times Square* presents an indefinite extension of 4'33". Even more fully than that piece, it affirms Cage's dictum regarding the permanence of music and the intermittence of listening.

This relationship between sound and duration is equally explored in projects such as Christina Kubisch's *Electrical Walks* (2003–), which invite listeners to wander a territory wearing headphones designed to receive electromagnetic signals from power lines, security gates, ATM machines, cell phones, and other electronic devices. Where Janet Cardiff's audio walks unfold in the pulsed time of narrative and composition, directing the movements of listeners via a pre-recorded sound track and itinerary, Kubisch's walks operate very differently and bear a very different relationship to time and space. Open-ended and uncomposed, the *Electrical Walks* simply provide listeners the means by which to tap into the invisible currents of electromagnetic sound that flow through the spaces of modern life. Such an experience not only provides a *figure* for duration, the continuous, open-ended, and qualitatively heterogeneous flow of time. It places us within duration itself.

I'll conclude with one final example, Danish sound artist Jacob Kirkegaard's 2006 project *Four Rooms*, recorded in a series of abandoned rooms in the heart of Chernobyl's so-called "zone of exclusion." The piece is modeled on Alvin Lucier's classic sound work *I Am Sitting in a Room*, in which Lucier recorded a short text describing the piece and then repeatedly played back and re-recorded this recording until the resonant frequencies of the room overwhelmed any semblance of articulate speech, transforming it into a nervous, squelchy drone. Lucier's piece moves from personal, human, and domestic speech to anonymous sound. Kirkegaard's piece

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takes up from there. In each space, Kirkegaard recorded ten minutes of silence, or what sound technicians call “room tone,” the low-level sonic murmur caused by the movement of air particles in a particular space. He then repeatedly played back his initial recording and re-recorded it, effectively amplifying this room tone and highlighting the room’s acoustic signature, which emerges as a complex drone composed of a cluster of unstable harmonics. Yet Kirkegaard’s spaces, of course, are not just any. They are profoundly overdetermined by the nuclear disaster that, 20 years earlier, forced their sudden evacuation. Thus, the drones that emerge from these rooms are, presumably, inflected by the radioactive particles and electromagnetic waves that still invisibly move within them. They are also haunted by the human beings that once populated them. Like radiation, sound doesn’t die but only dissipates, dilates, or loses energy. Kirkegaard’s recordings, then, can be seen as an effort to amplify or contract these dissipated or dilated sounds, to rescue sonic emissions that outlive those who produced them.⁴⁴

Lucier’s and Kirkegaard’s projects are about both space and time. They are, of course, concerned with revealing the acoustic signature of spaces. But they are also about process, duration, transformation, and alteration. Lucier’s project unfolds (or rather, folds) in real time, revealing the slow accumulation of layers. Kirkegaard, however, presents only the final fold, the result of the process. Implicitly referencing another of Lucier’s pieces, *North American Time Capsule*, Kirkegaard’s Chernobyl rooms are time capsules that collapse April 1986 with October 2005 and the decay and entropy that mark the passage between these two dates.⁴⁵ His recordings are time capsules as well. The multiple acoustic folds and the amplification they engender effectively concentrate time. Hence, instead of temporal extensity—that is, time drawn out along a line—they produce a sort of temporal intensity. It is telling that the audio-visual version of this project is titled *Aion*, for Kirkegaard’s recordings draw our attention to a time much vaster than the chronological time of human projects. They disclose the immemorial background noise out of which human

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sounds emerge and into which they recede; and they point toward an elemental time, the half-life of which dwarfs human history.⁴⁶

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Like so much experimental sound work of the past half-century, Kirkegaard's *Four Rooms* offers an instance of heterochronia, an opening onto a temporal experience that breaks with the linear, chronological, narrative, and historical time that shapes, measures, and organizes our lives. Whether such experiences are desirable or not, utopian or dystopian, depends upon one's aesthetic and ethical orientation. Yet they can be liberating, for they enjoin us to conceive ourselves and our sonic productions no longer as static physical entities but rather as processes or series of events. They allow us to join our time with the time of the world's becoming, and to understand ourselves and our aesthetic products as nodal points or contractions of this flow. While not directly or explicitly political, these heterochronic experiences are political in the important sense that Jacques Rancière gives to this term: that is, they manifest intermittent bursts of dissensus that challenge the dominant mode and distribution of the sensible.⁴⁷ At the level of their modality, these sonic heterochronias have affinities with a utopian politics that advocates the dissolution of the individual, the point of view of the whole, the joy of multiplicity, and the affirmation of intense experience.

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1 This essay was originally published in *Immediacy and Simultaneity: Utopia of Sound*, ed. Diedrich Diederichsen and Constanze Ruhm (Vienna: Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna/Schlebrügge, 2010), pp. 43–63. I have made minor modifications for this version. For my more recent reflections on some of the topics discussed here, see *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018) and “Capture and Release: Capitalism and the Flows of Sound,” in *Audiosphere: Sound Experimentation, 1980–2020* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2020), pp. 142–51, available here: <http://faculty.hampshire.edu/ccox>

2 At the turn of the millenium, the Marxist theorists Norman Geras and Fredric Jameson articulated similar, unabashedly utopian positions. See Norman Geras, “Minimum Utopia: Ten Theses,” *Necessary and Unnecessary Utopias: Socialist Register 2000*, ed. Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (London: Merlin Press, 1999), and Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005).

3 On “the spectacle,” see Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*; and on the construction of “situations,” see Debord’s “Report on the Construction of Situations” in *Situationist International Anthology*—both texts translated by Ken Knabb and available at <http://www.bopsecrets.org>.

4 See Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 135, 145.

5 Attali, p. 147.

6 Written in 1982, this essay appears in *Cutler’s File Under Popular: Theoretical and Critical Writings on Music*. Cutler’s “Plunderphonia” (1994) (in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, Revised Edition, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner [New York: Bloomsbury, 2017]) extends and updates the earlier essay.

7 Cutler, “Necessity and Choice,” p. 26.

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8 On this, see Jacques Charpentier, quoted in Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1992), p. 59; Christopher Small, *Music of the Common Tongue* (New York: Riverrun, 1987), pp. 231ff, 281ff; and Michael Chanan, *Musica Practica* (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 54ff.

9 See Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in an Extramoral Sense," *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1979), p. 83; and Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), pp. 17–18.

10 Cutler, "Necessity and Choice," pp. 33, 35.

11 See Glenn Gould, "The Prospects of Recording," in *Audio Culture*, pp. 180ff.

12 See Marx's preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), pp. 4–5.

13 In a later interview, Attali argued that the culture of mp3 fundamentally undermines capitalist property relations. See Angus Carlyle, "Carnival's Quarrel With Lent: An Interview with Jacques Attali," *Themepark* (Autumn 2001:118–122), also at: http://www.vibrofiles.com/essays_attali.php

14 Fredric Rzewski, "Plan for Spacecraft," in *Source: Music of the Avant-Garde, 1966–1973*, ed. Larry Austin and Douglas Kahn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 130–31.

15 Rzewski, "Little Bangs: A Nihilist Theory of Improvisation," in *Audio Culture*, p. 383.

16 Simon Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy: Into the Worlds of Techno and Rave Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 5, 246.

17 Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York: Autonomedia, 1991), p. 111.

18 Bey, *T.A.Z.*, p. 100.

19 Bey, *T.A.Z.*, p. 134.

20 Bey, *T.A.Z.*, p. 111.

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- 21 Bey. T.A.Z., p. 100.
- 22 Michel Foucault, "Different Spaces," trans. Robert Hurley, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, Vol. II, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 1998), p. 178. Both Foucault's and Bey's conceptions of heterotopia owe much to the Situationist practice of constructing liberatory "situations" that are "essentially transitory [...], ephemeral, without a future." See Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations," <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/report.htm>
- 23 See Bey, T.A.Z., p. 119, and Foucault, "Different Spaces," p. 185.
- 24 Foucault, "Different Spaces," p. 182.
- 25 John Cage, "Composition as Process II: Indeterminacy," *Silence* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), pp. 36 (Audio Culture, p. 253).
- 26 See, for example, Cage's "Introduction to Themes & Variations," Audio Culture, p. 221.
- 27 These arguments run throughout Bergson's work but receive their most sustained formulation in *Time and Free Will* (1888), "Memory of the Present and False Recognition" (1908), and *Duration and Simultaneity* (1922). See the selections from these texts in *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey (New York: Continuum, 2002).
- 28 Morton Feldman, "Between Categories," *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, ed. B.H. Friedman (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 2000), pp. 85–88.
- 29 Morton Feldman: *List of Works* (London: Universal Edition, 1998), p. 3.
- 30 John Cage in Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1988), p. 70.
- 31 See "Introduction" to *Themes & Variations* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1982), reprinted in Audio Culture.
- 32 Cage, *Conversing with Cage*, p. 74.
- 33 Cage, *Conversing with Cage*, p. 70.
- 34 Cage, "Experimental Music," *Silence: Lectures and Writings*

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(Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1961), p. 10.

35 Note that, following Kant, Deleuze distinguishes between the “transcendental” and “the transcendent.” The former names the conditions for the possibility of actual sensual experience, while the latter names what transcends sensual experience altogether. The description of a “transcendental” or “virtual” field that precedes the subject occupied Deleuze throughout his career, from *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 100–17 to “Immanence: A Life,” in *Pure Immanence*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone, 2001), pp. 25–33. In the latter text, Deleuze elaborates on the distinction between “the transcendental” and “the transcendent.”

36 See Deleuze “Vincennes Seminar Session, May 3, 1977: On Music,” trans. Timothy S. Murphy, *Discourse* 20:3 (Fall 1998), pp. 209ff.

37 Mertens, *American Minimal Music* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1983), p. 90; the relevant portion of this text is reprinted in *Audio Culture*.

38 Steve Reich, “Music as a Gradual Process,” in *Writings About Music* (New York: New York University Press, 1974); reprinted in *Audio Culture*.

39 On Chronos and Aion and their relationship to music, see the “Vincennes Seminar” and *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 262. Deleuze first introduces the Stoic distinction between Chronos and Aion in *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin Boundas, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). Deleuze and Guattari discuss the difference between Goethe’s *Bildungsroman* and Kleist’s “pure ‘stationary process’” in *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 268-9.

40 Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 148–72.

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41 Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects," *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

42 Morris had earlier used sound as a way of de-reifying objects, notably in his *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961.

43 Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 102–4, 111–13.

44 See Aden Evens: "Vibrations do not disappear, but dissipate, echoing all the while, for energy is conserved. Every vibration, every sound, hangs in the air, in the room, in bodies. Sounds spread out, they become less and less contracted, they fuse, but they still remain, their energy of vibration moving the air and the walls in the room, making a noise that still tickles the strings of a violin playing weeks later. Every sound masks an entire history of sound, a cacophony of silence." *Sound Ideas* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 14.

45 See my essay "The Alien Voice: Alvin Lucier's North American Time Capsule," *Mainframe Experimentalism*, ed. Hannah Higgins and Douglas Kahn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

46 I develop these ideas further in "Sound Art and the Sonic Unconscious," *Organised Sound*, vol. 14, no. 1 (April 2009): forthcoming.

47 See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Verso, 2004), and "The Art of the Possible: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey In Conversation with Jacques Rancière," *Artforum* (March 2007): 256–69.

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SPACE, TIME, AND SONIC UTOPIA

Christoph Cox

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