Operating in musical economies of compromise (or . . . When do I get paid for writing this?)

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In this article Thaemlitz posits that the current state of digital audio production's borders are not determined by battles between academia and the marketplace, subsidy and enterprise, nor high-brow and low-brow. However, such binarisms continue to frame our efforts in ways which fuel rhetoric of transformation and revolution, while diffusing our material ability to impact a cultural mainstream. Rather than attempting to resolve such divisiveness and hypocrisy in our behaviour, Thaemlitz proposes an increased awareness of the cultural processes which facilitate our simultaneous participation in such seemingly irreconcilable arenas. In other words, celebrating diversity sometimes means throwing a party for a friend you are not particularly fond of.

1. INTRODUCTION

It seems the electronic music community's engagement with economics can be over-generalised into two strategies: subsidy and enterprise. Similarly, one might observe that the overwhelming stylistic tendencies of producers utilising these strategies are formalism and commercialism, respectively. Accordingly, subsidised academicians, developers and artists are ostensibly afforded the luxury of operating outside the machinery of industrial capitalism, wittingly or unwittingly perpetuating the rarefied codifications of patronage while pursuing traditional artistic inquiries into the nature of sound and production. Commercial producers, on the other hand, wittingly or unwittingly capitulate to the demands of a music industry ultimately only concerned with sales. Yet, because both systems cohabit the same dominant cultural system, we can draw many parallels between them. For example, between vying for academic tenure positions and building the right commercial connections, both offer little in terms of long-term financial stability. Both are obsessed with image management and employ elaborate rituals to develop a producer's reputation, austerity and obtuse approachability, all of which are considered vital to sustaining one's career. Both invoke a desire for recognition in the pages of history – of being recognised as having contributed to those forms of cultural development which producers commit so much time and effort. Both typically demarcate such development by a producer's ability to replicate the successes of the past, whether it be the academic artist's extension of an acknowledged 'classic', or a commercial producer's ability to follow up on the success of a hit. And in both instances, this emphasis on historical momentum generally fails to address critically such histories' function as fictions which support the larger mechanisms of subsidised and entrepreneurial production. In other words, emphasis is typically placed on a producer's contributions to a narrative history which (often uncritically) validates and valorises an institution, rather than on an institution's contributions to (or exploitation of) a producer.

The division between subsidy and enterprise is complicated by the reality that many producers operate in multiple arenas. For example, the American label Illegal Art, which draws attention to copyright issues within the commercial sphere, is owned and operated by a full-time academic professional. Conversely, the German label Mille Plateaux, which takes its name from the text by Gilles Deleuze and attempts to use theoretical discourse as a foundation for the politicisation of free-market electroacoustic audio production, is owned and operated by a financially independent entrepreneur. And while the overwhelming majority of my projects have been deliberately produced without institutional affiliation, and distributed through the commercial electronica marketplace, I consistently invoke associations with Western cultural theory and academic discourse in order to analyse and critique my activities as an entrepreneurial producer.

My general avoidance of institutional affiliation, and critical embrace of the commercial marketplace, is twofold:

(1) During my studies in the late 1980s as a visual arts student at the Cooper Union School of Art, New York, I found myself increasingly frustrated by the elitism and discriminatory practices of arts institutions – from schools to galleries and museums. While at that time there was (and continues to be) a great deal of art centred on the politicisation of 'Art', it is my contention that the history of modernism allows art institutions to usurp virtually all critical commentary by recasting it as radical gesture which is housed and facilitated by the very institution it attempts to critique. Critical commentary

becomes no more than a self-congratulatory symbol of the patron's liberal mindedness (a situation I still run into when occasionally giving audio performances in European state-funded art institutions). In the end such artists appear no more radical than the proverbial expressionist beast caged in the white cube. And despite art institutions' insistence that they represent and contribute to a shared communal heritage, I find them blind to their own limitations of audience.

(2) Simultaneous to my disenchantment with the arts, and without any intention of becoming an audio producer, I began DJ-ing music within the context of benefits for one of the direct action groups in which I was active at the time (I was primarily active around issues of HIV/AIDS, women's healthcare, sexuality and gender). This led to my DJ-ing in trans-sexual sex-worker clubs in New York City's midtown district. It was while performing within these frameworks laden with identity politics that I observed the overwhelming majority of my musical experiences had not been as a listener or a producer, but as a consumer – ultimately manifested in its most extreme incarnation, the DJ. As with many people, this musical consumerism had a strong relation to issues of identity formation which could be traced through youth to adulthood. In particular, electronic music (and its lack of popularity within the Southern Missouri atmosphere of my adolescence) served as a refuge from the violence enacted upon me as a transgendered queer (a retrospect donning of identity perhaps facilitated by personal agency, or perhaps a form given shape by the beatings of suspicion prior to any conscious predilection on my part). Given my 'post-art-school' anti-formalist interest in media, in which music and audio serve as discourse for communication rather than as experiential endpoints in and of themselves; and given the various contexts through which I came to understand that electronic music held explicitly politicised relationships to issues of identity, and such identity is often facilitated by the reifying processes of consumerism (including lesbian and gay identities, as manifested in the 'Pink Economy'); and given my awareness that much of the contemporary electronic music I adored had roots in *musique concrète* and other early electronic audio explicitly linked to leftist direct action groups of the 1910s and 1920s (several of which were at times in violent opposition to art institutions); and given the fact that my familiarity with critical discourse against visual art institutions would not go to waste on an audio marketplace in which processes of reification allow people to embrace and internalise horrid pop music artistry to an extent only dreamed of by practitioners of the finer arts; I reluctantly decided to press my first

twelve-inch record. It may be of interest to note that among all of my commercial releases over the years, ranging from electronic dance music to computer composed piano solos, I have surprisingly and consistently had the most success with my 'non-commercial' and 'inaccessible' electroacoustic projects accompanied by lengthy theoretical texts the term 'success' is used relatively).

So, given the unusual occurrence of my writing this text within the subsidised context of *Organised Sound*, it only seems appropriate that I should take this opportunity to discuss the supposedly antithetical commercial electronica marketplace.

2. (DIS)INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

I wrote *Noise* in 1977, and still today I try to explain that it is impossible to look at music, or any other form of human endeavour, when you put it outside of the global context. Of course, music is very specific for a number of reasons. One economic reason is that music is pure information. In economics, information is a devil – it's impossible to manage. For example, the whole of economic theory is the theory of scarce resources . . . but it doesn't work for music; it doesn't work for information as whole. If I have a pot of milk, and I give it to you, I don't have it anymore. But if I give you a piece of information I still have it, I keep it. Which means that if I have something and I give it to you, I create something new: abundance. And this means that economic theory doesn't work for information, when that information can be separated from its material support – a CD, or whatever is the case today . . . In an information economy, something has more value when a lot of people have it. For example, if I am the only one to have a telephone, it doesn't mean anything, not if there is no one else to call . . . We must be very careful, when we speak about music, not to have in mind the main economic laws. (Attali 2001)

I imagine our current wonder at the power of information might only be compared to the era of the invention of the printing press. Yet it never ceases to amaze me how the neo-liberal semiotics of information technology have so easily confused facilitating new ways of exchanging and accumulating information with having actually discovered a new breed of information that defies all previously existing bureaucracies. In reality, such claims simply use the language of IT to cloak the over-familiar workings of scientific vanguardism, with all of vanguard ideology's problematic tendencies toward cultural transcendence and global decontextualisation. As the electronica marketplace identifies with IT and media economics (much electronic music actually being produced for use in digital multimedia including video games and movies), it has adapted many of the same dysfunctional relationships to cultural context and the construction of histories. In particular, the electronic distribution of music (and information in general) has come to be seen

as a historical break from traditional 'supply & demand' economics. Rather, we are said to be entering an information economy in which value is placed through the looking glass, gaining value through replication. Similarly, undistributed information is not merely considered scarce, but effectively meaningless – as though it has not yet been exposed to social influence. Both musical and digital information are conceptualised as being able to be reduced into pure communicative data, in some way separable from their material supports.

While Attali and others would purport we are entering a new economic phase, the ideological underpinnings of information economy are straight in line with the development of capitalist systems in which all experience is reified and regurgitated in the form of abstract relations. In many ways, it seems only logical that we find it difficult not to conceive of information – of our own knowledge – as commodities for barter. To paraphrase from Karl Marx's *Capital*, we might say that information, like use-value, 'possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption, therefore, is itself an embodiment of labour and, consequently, a creation of value'. But given that information starts in worthless singularity, it can only be traded for its 'surplus-value' through transference and replication, in which case it 'reproduces the equivalent of its own value [zero], and also produces an excess, a surplus-value, which may itself vary, may be more or less according to the circumstances'. As information's value only occurs in the late phases of surplus-value, the information economist finds it easy to dismiss the materials of information development, which apparently have a corollary use-value of zero. In terms of fund raising, the early days of e-business relied heavily upon this notion of starting from nothing – the bedroom media laboratory capable of yielding pure profits. Similarly, in the music business, we find a system in which an album's 'advances' that were traditionally paid *in advance* (imagine that) in order to subsidise studio expenses, are now typically paid on or after an album's release, and are considered advances strictly on the future revenues of the end-commodity itself. Through this shift it is now accepted that the 'bedroom musician' produces audio with no raw materials, auxiliary materials, instruments of labour, cost of living, nor any other material expenses. Therefore, in both IT and the electronica marketplace, we can see that the ultimate underpinning of information economics is no more than the capitalist desire for profits unmitigated by circumstance.

The major problem with this turn of events is that undistributed information is not plucked from the harps of muses in the sky, but has actual material links to cultural context, if only through the individual in whose subjective knowledge it is first made into a coherent thought. It is by overlooking such links to a material and social body that Attali fails to see the contradiction between his desire for 'global context' and his belief in 'pure information'. Through his own examples he places the information economy firmly in the grips of a traditional economy of commodities (telephones, computers, players); billion-dollar industries without which the digital transfer of information cannot occur. In the end, the 'information' economy is bound to an economy of information devices. Furthermore, in this current 'supply and demand' economy of information devices, the 'top secrets' in development and trade which help propel the economy still gain their value through scarcity rather than abundance. Again, context is a prerequisite to determining information's value. For example, just as we might argue that electroacoustic music has gained value and recognition in light of computer music's mainstream applications, so has it lost value in events such as the ORF Prix Ars Electronica, which has effectively turned the Digital Music category into a Grammy Awards for commercial electronica.[1]

Within the realm of music, MP3s and other digital media are indeed facilitating an increased supply of music, which has the music industry fearing a decentralisation of the audio marketplace. Yet perhaps this does not present the radical economic breach Attali suggests, so much as a redirection of consumer funds away from CDs toward new categories of digital transfer devices. (Might we consider this 'payback' for the music industry's blind profiteering off of the public's conversion to CDs, a media with less than half the production cost of vinyl yet sold for nearly double?) As Dont Rhine of the Los Angeles-based direct-action audio collaborative Ultra-red points out, claims of 'liberation through technology' rely upon a malicious duplicity:

[1]A related story . . . I had entered electroacoustic tape pieces in Prix Ars for years with not so much as a word in return. Like many, I was quite excited when Naut Humon first began presiding over the selection panel for the Digital Music category. Not only did it represent a possible turn away from academic formalism, but it also meant potential acknowledgement for those of us operating without academic affiliation. Similarly, given the Prix Ars' insistence upon rather overtly political cultural themes, and the fact that my work always employs overtly political cultural themes, I am not too shy to admit that I began figuring myself as somewhat of a shoe-in. A few years passed, a few more entries, and still no word. Now, I may not know much, but I know my business, and I know that the number of thematically relevant entries from the commercial field were few-to-none. And of course, the announced winners repeatedly confirmed that thematic continuity was not a consideration. (In some instances Digital Music was not even a consideration, such as the 1999 First Prize selection of an Aphex Twin video – distinct from the music itself. Imagine the producer of *Titanic*'s outrage if an electroacoustic tape piece won first prize in the Digital Video category?) I also saw that the new trend in winners was to be rather unspectacularly MIDI-based, and not necessarily employ 'computer music' in terms of digital synthesis. So, in 1999 I set out to create and enter an entirely derivative MIDI piece. The result was 'Superbonus', a fifty-seven-plus minute MIDI-based synthetic jazz excursion along the lines of Australia's jazz troupe The Necks, which has since been released as part of the double-CD *Fagjazz* (US: Comatonse Recordings, 2000). Sure enough, 'Superbonus' received an Honorable Mention. Thus ends the tale of my last entry in Prix Ars.

They refuse any contingency with simultaneous, and simultaneously non-liberating, economic forms: low-wage manufacturing, service industries, and the reproductive economies of house work et al. In other words, it only valorizes the industries of the largest and richest multi-nationals in the world. Furthermore, there is a profound deafness to all those 'ancillary' industries which make informatics possible, notably, high-tech third-world manufacturing – in which women are the largest labor force. Why women? Because multinationals can exploit time-honored sexist social structures which deem women's work as having less value than men's.

And in specific relation to Attali's synopsis of a new-phase musical information economy, Rhine continues:

> Instead of talking about the liberation of music, by perpetuating this deafness to actually existing material conditions, Attali only succeeds in celebrating a kind of global apartheid between the accumulators of labor value and those who give up their lives for others. (Rhine 2001)

In the end, the inability of information economics to acknowledge a material context for information runs parallel to its inability to acknowledge the material conditions which facilitate digital information's flow. Global context is displaced in favour of a highly specific 'global outlook' which overrides specificity. What remains out of our sight in the maquiladora zones in Juarez and Tijuana, or the tech-sweatshops throughout South- and East-Asia (or the mysterious discount record-pressing plants of Czechoslovakia), also remains conveniently out of mind. Within the battle between high-brow and low-brow, in which the electronica marketplace has repeatedly declared an alliance with the working class, this seems a rather formidable concession to go unbeknownst to all. Even those of us operating on low budgets find it more profitable to avoid inquiries into such matters, forsaking the building of true global social alliances between our ranks in favour of 'bargain' production costs. Apparently enamoured by the value of replicating and disseminating information, we have lost sight of another aspect of making the copy: image degradation.

3. A-SOCIALITY WITHIN THE SOCIAL SPACE OF ELECTRONICA

Because processes of reification so wonderfully and thoroughly mask relations to labour, and because at this time in history geography masks us from so many abusive contexts of manufacturing, the past few years have shown a resurgence in fictions of the 'neutrality of technology' within progressive circles. These fictions merge seamlessly with today's media arts, which are rooted in over-familiar ideologies of artistic universality and the neutrality of artistic media in general. Among the 'youth culture' of the commercial electronica marketplace, this retreat into modernism is accepted by the children of anti-'political correctness' as a rebellious escape from

under the thumb of 'old guard' socialist-tainted postmodernists from the 1970s and 1980s. Politics are out (as though they were ever in).

The new social space of electronica has taken on the form of abstract and uninhabitable CAD-rendered architecture, indiscriminately gracing the record sleeves of everything from 'ivory-tower' electroacoustic tape music to 'underground' soulful deep house. Projects such as Caipirinha Production's Architettura series use architectural imagery to declare a radical abandonment of context, oblivious to the fact that such statements are not radical in their liberalism, but in their conservative and unwitting alliance with arguments traditionally used to conceal the damages of elitism and power which lie behind the development of a 'public space' that serves the few:

> Where postmodernists in the 70's and 80's approached architecture with the idea of deconstruction, overanalysis, and philosophical symbolism, we are now moving into an era of supermodernism where the emphasis of architecture has moved from meaning, message, and visual excess to aesthetics of transparency; architecture conceived as an empty medium, and buildings without text where conventional notions of space, time, and context are re-evaluated. (Caipirinha Productions 1999a)

Albums for the Architettura series consistently confuse figurative representations of space for actual social space. For example, Tetsu Inoue's album *Waterloo Terminal*, inspired by Nicholas Grimshaw's Channel Tunnel Railway Terminal at Waterloo, was presented and received as an audio expression of the terminal's material space, despite the fact that the press release itself explains the sounds were actually synthesised from colour analyses of scanned images with no more than a random relationship to Waterloo Terminal's actual architectural space:

> Remarkably – even startlingly – the music was not merely inspired by the Waterloo Station, but in a very real sense it was composed by Tetsu in collaboration with the station. Tetsu scanned over 1000 real and digitally altered photographs of the station into his computer and dumped them into his music software, which mathematically translated the arches and surfaces of the structure into electronic sound. It is as if the station itself were given voice, which Tetsu then shaped by altering pitch, timbre, resonance and rhythm, creating a linear collage born from his artistic interpretation of the architecture itself. (Caipirinha Productions 1999b)

While the claims of the Architettura series seem extreme in their naiveté, they are not atypical of discussions about relationships between music and space. Unfortunately, it seems both 'real' and 'virtual' architectural masterpieces continue to employ the allure of aesthetics to conceal the tragedies of social displacement.

One of the few critical responses to this state of affairs

is documented in Ultra-red's album *Structural Adjustments*, released by Mille Plateaux. The album was compiled in the aftermath of their two-year collaboration with the Union de Vecinos, a tenants' organisation protesting their eviction from LA's low-income Pico Aliso public housing projects. The Union's efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, and the projects were demolished in order to build new public housing facilities with fewer units and a percentage of 'mid-income' units – effectively generating homelessness among previous residents for the sake of urban revitalisation. In one of the album's accompanying texts, 'Architectronica Versus Dwelling', Ultra-red elaborated on the difficulties of portraying such direct actions within the electronica marketplace, effectively politicising electronica's valorisation of abstract space:

> Determined to pursue its normal course of constructing soundscapes from the ambiance of urban public spaces, Ultra-red began by undertaking its very own retreat to the domain of architecture. That domain failed to maintain its own integrity as long as the group participated in the social actions of the residents themselves. In other words, bending its ear to the materiality of social space, Ultra-red lost sight of the reified object of architecture . . . Location recordings within the projects frustrate any attempt on our part to fetishize the buildings and building. Location recordings, despite attempts to conceptualize them as aurally analogous to the snapshot or landscape portrait, are unable to examine architecture at the exclusion of dwelling. The reasons for this can be attributed to the interrelationship between spectacle culture and . . . the function of sound as an epistemology of space. (Ultra-red 2000)

It is unfortunate (although not surprising) that *Structural Adjustments*, one of the most profound documents around applications of sound by community-based organisations, was greeted in the audio marketplace with cool indifference. The album stands out as one of Mille Plateaux's most mishandled and financially unsuccessful releases, placing Ultra-red and Mille Plateaux in an awkward A&R crisis revolving around the tips and balances of political alliance versus economic viability. What is repeatedly lost in the reception of their work (and conversely precisely why it is so invaluable) is that Ultra-red's participation within the electronica marketplace is relentlessly tangential. Their actions and messages do not emerge from the medium, nor the marketplace. Similarly, their releases do not represent the culmination of their efforts. Rather, Ultra-red releases are the self-critical afterthoughts of community and political organisers engaging in audio production. Integral to each release is the need to address multiple and contradictory methodologies of direct social action and marketplace distribution.

This not only places Ultra-red at odds with conventional producers, but also in a quite different position from people such as myself, whose political actions ultimately take recourse within the electronica marketplace. Although I always make an effort to disclose such recourse as symptomatic of a larger inability to transcend the workings of capitalism, and attempt to disclose such workings within the electronica marketplace, it is easy for my intentions to be overwritten by traditional tales of 'starving artists' who bite the hands of the patrons who feed us. In fact, when put on the spot, most audio producers are quick to play the economic victim by denying relationships to patronage through such obscure rambles as 'using their own money', 'only using grant money', or 'not making any money'. As Dont Rhine recently noted, 'artists (visual or audio) see their own existential choices about funding as their sole badge of political commitment while disregarding any actual engagement with political struggle as it exists all around them' (Rhine 2001).

In the end, claims to 'clean money' only reinforce one's alienation from (and ambivalent acceptance of) existing economic injustices.

4. AGAINST THE NEUTRALITY OF INCOME

If the late-1980s boom of independent electronica claimed an interest in avoiding the marketplace (at least among producers), and mid-1990s electronica expressed a desire to transform the marketplace, the current state of affairs seems to indicate little more than a final capitulation to the marketplace. Consider the undeniable transformation of so many 'rave' organisers from self-purported anarchists into capitalist benefactors. Today, it is an accepted fact that you cannot hold a 'profitless' burning man festival or love parade (. . . or a lesbian & gay pride parade) without financial injections from multi-national alcohol, tobacco, clothing and beverage concerns renowned for their violations of workers' rights – not to mention human rights. There are even those who believe such events are besting the mega-conglomerates. After all, if we are doing 'what we want' with 'their money', does that not give us the upper hand? While it is naive to assume a radical rejection of all things capitalist or Western (sorry to break the hearts of all you radical pagan faeries out there), it is far more dangerous when one's complicity with such cultural mechanisms goes unquestioned. (This is where demands for responsibility and duty come into play, if only I could invoke such terms without laughing.)

As a technology-driven media, the thirty-something-year climb of electronica into the music distributor's canon of genres holds many similarities to other technology-influenced economies. While Attali sees fit to decry music is the predecessor to all great cultural transformation, perhaps we can turn to the rapid development of e-business as a way of synopsising the history of the electronica marketplace to date. Like the commercial rise of the 'people's' Internet, many of electronica's key players find no contradiction between claiming to foster

a cultural periphery while aspiring to conquer the stock market. (You might even be able to draw some parallels between last year's collapse of America's Internet bubble-economy, and the music industry's panic when the Ambient marketplace collapsed in the mid-1990s – everyone scrambled to decide if electronica was still a viable market.) Like the Internet industry's shift in attention from 'alternative home businesses' to the multimillion dollar client, so the majority of electronica labels find themselves increasingly swept up in procedures which solely target industry, distributors and advertisement-based press. Like the Internet has been transformed from a military network into an academic privilege into a corporate advertising tool, so has electronica liberated digital synthesis from the tedium of academia to fill our lives with video game and movie soundtrack filler, product tie-ins, and football anthems. (Consider Calvin Klein's use of Markus Popp, Ford's use of Juan Atkins, or Volkswagen's use of The Orb. Even car dealers in my hometown of Springfield, Missouri, use the syncopations of drum'n'bass to sell pick-up trucks to cowboys – an odd sound without context in an otherwise electronica-free community.) Like the manner in which emerging Internet development tools have transformed the role of website designers from people involved in several tiers of technology into single-task assembly line drones, so has the broadened market of home recording equipment and software-generated musical genres recognisable by their producers' software plug-ins. (Case and point: Native Instruments' sponsorship of a 2001 Sonar Festival showcase featuring Richard Devine, Mike Dred and Jake Mandell playing to video projections of N.I. corporate logos inhabiting [what else?] a predictably people-less city of abstract CAD architecture.) In the same manner that the Internet's promise to 'bring us the world' overlooks the reality of technology's current limitations (typified by advertisements featuring computer monitors with interfaceless television-style images popping through their screens into the rooms of end-users), so has the meme of realtime signal processing's potential to 'transform' musical performance trained audiences to ignore the bored expressions of laptop orchestras as they fence us in with mindlessly formalist walls of dull grey sound. Sound so monolithic and homogenous that I cannot possibly imagine how it fails to convey any politic other than totalitarianism. And like Internet content's ever-increasing shit factor of scams and spams has shown how little information is ultimately important to anyone, so has electronica taken us into the bedroom studios of everyone and their father . . . and what sexless, empty bedrooms they tend to be.

Although it appears contradictory to assert that the mainstream entertainment industry remains the most viable means for non-academic producers of 'alternative' and 'experimental' electronica to support ourselves,

it becomes increasingly clear this is the case – particularly in countries with little to no governmental funding of the arts, such as the US and Japan.[2]

The ultimate contradiction between electronica and big business is not one of social relations, but merely one of ideals . . . and realised profits. Dont Rhine notes:

> Now within electronica you have a milieu of musicians who make more money from one perfume commercial than an entire career of recordings and touring. Could anyone turn that down? How can someone have their industrial critique and music career at the same time – especially after you realize the only viable music career is one beholden to advertising and Hollywood? (Rhine 2001)

We will not get into Dont's former day-job as a secretary at an advertising firm. But as for me, while it has been easy to keep my solemn vow never to remix Madonna (in protest of her decontextualisation of community-specific music and dances from issues of race, sexuality and gender), I will confess that the appeal of momentary financial stability keeps me from ruling out much else. (Un)luckily, it has been relatively easy for me to retain my image as a character of high ideals. For the moment, when I lay my head down each night I can still appreciate the difference between, say, DJ Spooky's Geffen-powered ascension into high-finance Homophobic hip hop, and SND's unwilling (and financially downscaled) role as pioneers of a 'glitch' micro-house movement that has de-evolved around them into the very type of dance-culture economy they set out to avoid. Speaking of which, I cannot forget to tip the hat of hypocrisy toward my own dance floor, as I personally enjoy mixing 'glitch' with the older NY house music of which the best tracks are so tirelessly referential.

5. IRONY AND IMPLICATION

The question remains as to how to successfully address the inescapable contradictions of economic interests within work marketed through reductionist formulas of entertainment value. A key factor of much critical work, including my own, is irony. It can be as subtle as SND's refusal to radically change their style just so as to avoid unwanted marketplace affiliations; or it can be as convoluted as Ultra-red's use of concert-based audio performances as secondary opportunities to represent and reflect

[2]Although both commercial and government funding implicate producers within economies of compromise, my distrust of and alienation from government process makes me find the latter more disturbing. This is also undoubtedly related to my studying visual arts at a time when US conservatives targeting homosexual media successfully eliminated virtually all public funding of the arts – making concrete the notion of the US government being in opposition to the arts. Furthermore, America lacks Europe's historical link between the arts and governmental patronage, which remains understandable to me only in relation to a regal history of hierarchic social oppression. Nevertheless, it is no secret that my rent has been paid on more than one occasion by participating in European state-funded events.

upon their own processes as activists and field organisers, knowing that most audience members will interpret a concert as the primary culmination of their efforts. Of course, all producers anticipate such unavoidable misinterpretations of their work. However, there is a noteworthy difference between the modernist convention of the artist as a misunderstood sad-sack whose genius goes to waste (typically until after one's death, when one's idiocy is unable to contest investors' assertions that one was indeed a true genius) and a critical-minded attempt to address the breakdown of communication in specific contexts of production, distribution and reception . . . I say it is a noteworthy difference, but I do not say the result is guaranteed to reflect the differences between such producer's intentions. There is a constant interpretive exchange between the politicisation of a-political work, and the de-politicisation of political work.

In my own projects, I attempt to address this situation by deliberately drawing attention to this potential for simultaneous and contradictory interpretations – something that is difficult to convey when people associate an 'academic' style of writing or audio production with ideological singularity and didacticism. Although I consider my electroacoustic music largely non-performative in that it does not employ real-time processing, it is ironically when performing selections from my 'Rubato' piano solo series that I feel I have the most success with getting audiences to acknowledge their engagement with multiple interpretations. The 'Rubato' series focuses on techno-pop producers from the 1970s (the three instalments to date have focused on Kraftwerk, Gary Numan and Devo). The pieces are composed using computer composition, keeping in line with the original producers' vision of technologically generated music. However, whereas the original songs are often mechanical, the resulting piano solos are open-metred and emotive (as the name implies), typically invoking images of neo-expressionism and high-modernism. With regard to my interest in transgenderism, the piano represents a conventionally domesticated and 'feminine' image which contrasts with the original music's mechanical and 'masculine' sound (i.e. Kraftwerk's *Mensch Machine*). The references to Modernity are intended to invoke critical associations between the original producers and vanguard culture, as well as the commercial music establishment. The result is not intended to be heard as an 'anti-male' or 'female' interpretation of phalocentric music, but as a transgendered mix of various signifiers. During the live performance of these projects, the stage contains a grand piano fitted with computer displays, a digital keyboard, wires, microphones and other props contributing to an image of technological wizardry. There are also projections featuring 'transgendered' adaptations of the original producers' imagery. I appear on stage wearing formal women's attire appropriate for a piano recital. As the music begins, I appear to be playing the music on the piano as well as secondarily interacting with the computer in an unspecified manner, much as one might expect. After a few minutes of this, I may choose to lay my hands on my lap during a particularly spontaneous-sounding moment, or move my hands deliberately out of sync with the notes being heard. At this point, it is not uncommon to hear members of the audience gasp in horror, 'Oh, what a mistake!', or 'She's not really playing . . .' Others begin to laugh, while still others try to figure out the mysterious relationship between my motions and the sounds they hear. By the end of the concert, the audience is typically divided between those who are convinced I am a technical genius, and those who are convinced I am a total fraud. The latter usually laugh outright at my gestures, possibly drawing relations to pantomime and the transgendered stage. The former usually attempt to hush the titters of the latter, frustrated that their listening experience has been ruined. (Clashes within the audience became particularly verbose during a performance of *Replicas Rubato* at Amsterdam's Steim Institute.) As you may have already deduced, the focus of these performances is not on my performance as a musician (as one conventionally expects of a piano recital), but on the performance of the audience in relation to their own expectations around live performance. Eventually, a portion of the audience seems to reach this middle ground, and enjoy having been caught up in (and then losing sight of) a particular type of satisfaction from the evening's events.[3]

However, for many of the audience members such irony is forever lost . . . along with any perceivable self-criticality toward my own implication in cultural patterns surrounding music production, performance and consumption. The contents of individual projects fade in the shadows of our market-based identities as 'personalities'. We must concede that the days of the electronica 'underground' naively hailing the DJ's subversion of centre-stage stardom are long past. As producers we retain our allure as artists, masters of sonic vagueries that strike the same chords of 'universality' as newspaper horoscopes. As a communicative medium, most music conveys little more than the random vocabulary of an ancient parrot whose trainer vanished generations ago. Even when audio samples make explicit references to other compositions/contexts/histories, the results rarely surpass nostalgic affect.

Fortunately for me, when that inevitable 'big break'

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[3]Additional details for each album in the 'Rubato' series can be found at: *Die Roboter Rubato* (Kraftwerk): http://www.comatonse.com/listening/rubato.html; *Replicas Rubato* (Gary Numan): http://www.comatonse.com/listening/replicas.html; *Oh, no! It's Rubato* (Devo): http://www.comatonse.com/listening/ohnoitsrubato.html

comes it will be a short leap from irony to highly marketable comedic self parody and frivolous camp. And let's face it, as a drag queen I have the upper hand in that respect. Now if only I could get Marilyn Manson's manager to return my calls . . .

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