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Mosh Phenomenology

By Matthew Robertson

The term speedmetal sounds as antiquated as parietal engraving, but this is still about speed. And the seismology of rock n' roll. Immersion is the negation of speed, dilating time under percussive corporeality, *panta rhei*. Though phenomenology has glacially chiseled sensory partitions towards intersubjective flesh, the sediment of mark making remains quite literally as old as dirt.¹ But the tide is rising, and a labyrinthine breeze puzzles away sun-bleached structures and crumbling autumnal frescoes. Below such surface sentimentality, immersion summons a depth to which even myth stands deaf, as characters are weathered for grain and harvested like pigments, dissolving saturated elementals upon the shore. Speaking geologically, immersion is fluvial entropy.² For Robert Smithson, the subtle dispersal calls out the closed system of mechanical science, quite like art, unable to account “for change or the temporality of the mundane.”³ Enveloping the prosaic, immersion reclaims sovereign sensory heir from visual reign—it is the flow of intensities against the logic of sequence. “*Abstraction rules in a void, pretending to be free of time.*” In Heraclitus’ river where everything flows, anything goes.

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye in Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 359.

² Allison Sky' interview with Robert Smithson, "Entropy Made Visible," available at <http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/entropy.htm>

³ Ibid., Smithson adds, "And I think at one point Norbert Weiner also refers to modern art as one Niagara of entropy."

⁴ Ibid., Smithson's italics.

Allegedly, seafaring has sedimented both ‘rock’ and ‘roll’ in the vernacular of sound described as motion, long before the verbs floated around as sexual argot.⁵ Cast in nautical measure, immersion is the suspension of due course, drawn toward an inevitable storm, as transverse waves crash starboard and port. Floor tom, crash. One might be inclined to batten down the hatches until the horizon reinstates linearity, but sun and saturation play density for a woodblock bass. A surplus of notes high and dry might keep image afloat, other sunken tones register subaudibly through bone conduction alone.⁶ The immersive sea serves as a level for indeterminacy, so it only seems appropriate that speedmetal—accelerating deep southern blues from uprooted African rhythms—acknowledges a foundation in groundlessness. While Christiaan Huygens’ pendulum clock instrumentalized the side-to-side rock, it wasn’t until the British government’s Longitude Prize of 1714, and John Harrison’s subsequent spring coil designs, that the roll was compensated for.⁷ Pendulums don’t keep time very well on boats. Yet the chronometer was the GPS of its day—maintaining local time allowed navigators to calculate displacement in relation to celestial bodies, distant bodies spinning silently in space. While the unrelenting clock may keep us attuned to a heliocentric macrocosm, the nautical timepiece anticipates visuality unwinding, mechanizing nonlocal order through a tightly wound coil.

Perhaps this is a misreading of rock ’n roll. Clearly it is a distortion; the very distortion amplified by vacuum tube technology. Or it’s just bad grammar, of verbs encroaching upon proper nouns. Today, with more or less all interstices quantified, if not broadcasting live, it is displacement that we are made to keep chase with, mapping geologic surfaces to drown the tick of time’s steady accumulation. By contrast, Polynesian wayfares once encoded navigation routes in the rhyme and

⁵ Dan Graham, “Rock My Religion,” in *Rock My Religion: Writings and Projects, 1965-90*, with Brian Wallis (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Inst. of Technology, 1993), 154: “Allen Freed coined the term ‘rock ’n’ roll’ (which means ‘sex’ in black street argot) and created the first audience of black and white teenagers for ‘race’ music, which he played on his Cleveland ‘Moondog’ radio show in 1952. Freed was the

⁶ Douglas Kahn mentions bone conduction in his *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1999), 7: “While other people hear a person’s voice carried through vibrations in the air, the person speaking also hears her or his own voice as it is conducted from the throat and mouth through bone to the inner regions of the ear.”

⁷ “Marine Chronometer,” *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marine_chronometer.

cadence of song, and their oral tradition remains a science unmatched in locating destination without compass. It's as if they are able to summon scattershot islands into being, warping space by singing. Which is more than can be said for a guitar solo. Song passed down through generations isn't just an idle entertainment for the Maori; by reciting verse maps became manifest—aural overlays ciphering fluvial space. Where mute imagery crops context clean and renders all stages the same, sound distills time into spatial immediacy.

Our visions meanwhile slip like saltwater between rusty fingers, singing of the hopes and losses from such fleeting dreams. Hands cannot grip time, neither is our thirst satiated by mundane temporalities. Ours is the begrudging displacement between overlapping spaces, a crosscurrent of still frames stubbornly accelerated to animate continuity. Eyes scratch at visual opacities, yet are unable to peel waft from weave. It's like thrashing against the waves when all you have to do is submit to equilibrium and float upon a saltier density. Though immersion in the everyday attempts to triangulate a hierarchy from the precession of simulacra, its percussive distancing is a mediated abstraction. The sensory body has evolved, but an interface to keep pace, a threadbare vessel approximating identity in the confluence electromagnetic distortion. While night and day spin at odds with moontide, self is bulwarked against the flood of information—offering but a slight reassurance from waves clapping against the hull, as if to spite celestial spin with an irregular tick. Though vision and destination may remain obscured against an infinite horizon, the sea is an echo of landmass disturbances, with islands falling like raindrops from the sky to ripple out beacons in the dark. In the interference pattern, as in song, location is mapped by the flickering *moiré*.

Words sound fluid to the percussive abrasion of sedimentary rock, as if water could keep time like sand in an hourglass. But the most quantifiable characteristic of a genre with speed is the kicks, a double bass seismograph treading beats per minute to keep afloat, like scissoring sea to just keep ears above the surface. A resilient percussion envelops pace like an embrace, but abrupt pauses and time changes undermine pure speed—and intentionality. In early liturgical composition, silence was avoided for fear that the devil might sneak in through the empty space. Instinctually, the body reads this space that the eye cannot—as an eerie calm before the storm, a premonition—like the silence of otherwise cacophonous fauna spying terrestrial threats. This horror *vacui* of the white page, like the abrupt sensory void of missing notes palm muting your ears from behind, seems to threaten the immersion redoubling 280 BPM by alternate kicks, a perfect machinic efficiency.

Aestheticized by force or farce (by commerce or surrender to point and click intervals), we're nevertheless saturated with polyrhythmic riffs, a violable continuity even now abetted by a random djent generator phone app.⁸ Emotional overlays seem inconsequential when the music has been reduced to a cold on/off binary function, the guitar riff has itself become percussive. Where atmospheric noise could once ground an affirmation of speed, the clock's nominal fragmentation belies a false consistency, ticking away like deadweight as a groundless ear keeps balance in freefall, pacing mobility between disjointed breakdowns.

Snare.

Silence.

Phenomenological Noise

What is amplification but an intensity of intersubjective exchange, drowning thought to spatialize corporeal displacement? Set against time, visibility offers little anchor in the flood of sensory immersion, body is both an interface and artifice through which anything goes. It is just a drop in the sensory ocean, flickering in the lightning strobe, where sight is an opaque cue to sound. Surrendering to fluid dynamics, sound pulls the drain plug as bodies flood the Lazarus pit to mosh, drowning a known encoding of polyrhythmic song structures to the indeterminacy of space and the unpredictability of actions provoked therein. It is why an audience still shows up—not just to hear, but to feel—and thereby maintain the possibility of overwriting audio/visual certainty in the intensity of lived experience. The gig maintains, even for Hannah Arendt, all the qualities of the space of appearance,⁹ of rockers congregating in the production of, and the participation

⁸ At least it's a genre with a sense of humor, "Misha App - Djent Generator," available at <http://www.getmisha.com>

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) 199. She defines the space of appearance as something that is produced "wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action," where bodily action is constituted as speech. Though the space of appearances "does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men [...] but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves. Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever." Such as when the music cuts out, the dancing stops. Freed was the first rock producer..."

in, speech made active¹⁰— sounds made flesh. As noise is democratic by definition,¹¹ listening and tuning out is an active dislocation, a choice. But a forced choice, perhaps, despite the democratic annunciation of sound, the necessity of filtering excess to simply maintain balance creates a certain constraint. It may be useful to think of visual perception in terms of listening, or “noise vision,” as Joseph Nechvatal calls it.¹²

Like a wave engrained upon a sea of sound, noise is the active disturbance of clouds impacting the horizon, occluding distance. From celestial anchors, surface is the staccato misdirection, the opaque resolution of an incident signal’s depth, accreting an entropic distribution from clean note through filtering envelope. But the physical attenuation, a value added in noise, is structurally intersubjective. It’s the game of Telephone through passive amplification, an aural distribution in acknowledgement of Hito Steyerl’s poor images, before active preamps. “The poor image tends towards abstraction [...] genealogy is dubious [...] It is passed on as a lure, a decoy, an index, or as a reminder of its former visual self.”¹³ Out from the caves, 1950’s distortion was a deliberation of overdriving amplifiers (compounded with literal perforations of the speaker cone) not fully extolled until the 1960’s dissent, connecting the “already distorted output of one amplifier into the input of

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, "Eye in Mind," 359. Again, flesh is as employed as a Merleau-Pontian proposition, a materialization of intersubjectivity. "The technique figures and amplifies the metaphysical structure of our flesh." Merleau-Ponty's flesh borrows the mirror as a visual metaphor for what Salomé Voegelin will elaborate with noise, but flesh is to be understood as beyond sensory perceptions, in that it includes expressive reflexivity. "The mirror emerges because I am both seeing and visible, because there is a reflexivity of the sensible; the mirror translates and reproduces that reflexivity. Through it, my outside becomes complete."

¹¹ Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art*, (New York: Continuum, 2010), 15-16. "Sound invites the body into experience and reciprocally makes the object physical. Listening to sound is where objectivity and subjectivity meet [...] It is neither the thing that dominates the being nor the being that dominates the thing. They are reciprocal and equivalent [...] produced on the spot, together in difference, any prior objectivity and prior subjectivity is invested in this momentary and complex production but does not subsume it."

¹² Joseph Nechvatal, *Immersion into Noise* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 59.

¹³ Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (New York: Sternberg, 2013), 32.

another,”¹⁴ in sequence. Though inherently broken, the active message from signal to noise flows open along cold interpretative seams, accumulating.

And if the medium—in this case, sound—is the message, McLuhan’s cool tones demand participation to fill in the gaps.¹⁵ Distortion has long since won the popular vote. Claude Lefort may have been inclined to agree, his “dissolution of the markers of certainty”¹⁶ evoke a lived experience of democracy, “in the double movement whereby the mode of institution of society appears and is obscured.”¹⁷ Such distortion shifts incident note toward perceptual noise, from visual representation into abstraction, distilling curt order toward a blinder faith in unspoken corporeality. “So long as the democratic adventure continues, so long as the terms of the contradiction continue to be displaced, the meaning of what is coming into being is suspense.”¹⁸ For Lefort, such a society “secretly designates itself as a *society without history*,”¹⁹ pretending to be free of time.

But the depth of the narrative contends a history long after the telephone receiver hits ground, in the proliferation of poor noise. Collective actions speak even in silence for Arendt, as one’s mere physical presence serves as annunciation. It seems to go without saying that the distribution of Steyerl’s poor images amplify the loss of a Benjaminian aura, “no longer based on the permanence of the ‘original,’ but on the transience of the copy,”²⁰ which sounds like a description of aural phenomena, rendered through distortion and noise. Embodying frequencies pitched through vacuum tubes, distortion is shaped by downstroke attack. Thrash!²¹

¹⁴ "Distortion (music)," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Distortion_\(music\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Distortion_(music))

¹⁵ See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man: Critical Edition*, ed. W. Terrence Gordon (London: Gingko Press, 2011). McLuhan reserves hot for high definition media that saturates the senses, such as film, and cool for media like radio or comics that requires an audience to fill in the blanks.

¹⁶ Claud Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 19.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Lefort’s italics.

²⁰ Steyerl, 32.

²¹ Thrash is not to be construed with trash, once understood to be a common malapropism before internet classifications evolved like add-on opposable thumbs. It is however, synonymous with speedmetal. Trash has somehow slipped through editorial cracks and resurfaced, perhaps encouraged by auto-correction.

Flesh pinches bone, crash and rebound, breathing becomes a voluntary calculation, in the snap reflex between perceiving interstitial space and inhaling. The mosh is Merleau-Pontian flesh made preverbal utterance, of exhalations forcibly pitched across the larynx by a shoulder impacting solar plexus. A cool sweat traces away the dull pressure matted behind the hairline, confirming its red in an alkaline sweat. Circle pit is a blind curve—with no goal but to stay bipedal as an irregular crescendo of footsteps pulse toward collision. This “mosh penumbra”²² survives Arendt’s “actuality of the movement which brought it into being”²³—individuals collectively forcing their own dispersal. Pit is employed as both noun and verb; it is, in essence, the sublimation of violence into dance. I push you, you push me back, but harder. Or, in the words of Greil Marcus, “when a shove negates your existence, negate the shove.”²⁴

As we agree to perform disagreement, those who abstain from the agreed disagreement, our social contract, clear the territory. No formula but speed maintains; it’s just the dialectic of bodies in compressed space attempting to embody amplified distortion. Arendt reflects, “[b]ecause the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a ‘doer’ but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin...”²⁵ The suffering, in this case, is both voluntary and redemptive. Her words activate Merleau-Pontian notions of hyper-reflectivity—yet the inaction of a void (another one of those mundane temporalities) is inherently unstable. As Jacques Rancière notes likewise, the function politics are manifest only when politics as such cease to function, when action re-inscribing the social surface.²⁶ Subjected to the tension of bodies packed shoulder to shoulder at a gig, even a casual miscue can open up the floor. As a rule, entropy does not anticipate that space will resist time. The motion conserved by iterative decay can only pretend to rule image, asserting that a tightly wound mechanical order will always uncoil in the end. Enacting disagreement within the pit levels a certain stability and balance, while its peak efficiency equilibrium still provokes material residue. “It was, at this point, an act: a collective attempt to prove that the physical representation of an aesthetic

²² Thank you Harry Dodge.

²³ Arendt, 199.

²⁴ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 90.

²⁵ Arendt, 190.

²⁶ Jacques Rancière, "Time, Narration, Politics." WHAP Lecture Series. (West Hollywood Public Library, West Hollywood, CA, January 20, 2015).

representation could produce reality, or at least real blood.”²⁷ The term ‘mosh’ is itself another misreading, of ‘mash,’ as Bad Brains’ 1982 track “Total Mash” reclaims the verse before thrash got caught up in Anthrax. “Stomp, stomp, stomp, the idiot convention,” Anthrax proved to be clever historians by entwining the riffing style and the dance with the adapted chorus, “Caught in a Mosh.” Though mash had been spelled out in DC fanzines, commercial colonialism only heard H.R.’s Jamaican-accented ‘mash’ as ‘mosh.’²⁸

Walter Benjamin, on the other hand, kept to a closer reading of Bertolt Brecht. In his essay on epic theater, Benjamin “takes account of a circumstance which has received too little attention, and which could be described as the filling-in of the orchestra pit.”²⁹ His attention to the fact that French classical theater once left space “among the actors for spectators of high rank, whose armchairs stood upon the open stage,”³⁰ seems less out of place than the mirrored reversals of the conductor who once faced his audience from the stage, and now stands with his back to the crowd. The orchestra has been respectively tuned and turned, while in the mash-up of viewing angles, Brecht’s epic theater still “facilitates and encourages the interchangeability of actors and audience, audience and actors. Every spectator can become one of the actors.”³¹ The marriage of mosh with pit endures on an inevitable historicity. “The stage is still elevated. But it no longer rises from an immeasurable depth: it has become a public platform. The didactic play and epic theatre set out to occupy this platform,”³² and not the platform alone—but with the body itself as a platform for thought expressed in speech acts—rockers occupy the space of one another to engage. The mosh is epic by any standard, Brechtian or otherwise, as bodies becomes stages.

²⁷ Marcus, 200. In recounting the Sex Pistols’ first (and last) gig in San Francisco, Marcus suggests that a certain code, naturally exaggerated in transit from the UK, informed the crowd what punk behavior entailed: spitting at the band, etc. The activity had grown an aesthetic mythology before even engaging the material content.

²⁸ “Moshing,” in *Wikipedia*, available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moshing>

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, “What Is Epic Theater? [Second Version],” in *Understanding Brecht* (London: Verso, 1998), 22. See also “What Is Epic Theater? [First Version],” 1: “The abyss which separates the actors from the audience like the dead from the living, the abyss whose silence heightens the sublime in drama and whose resonance heightens the intoxication of opera, this abyss which, of all the elements of the stage, bears most indelibly the traces of its sacral origins, has increasingly lost its significance.”

³⁰ Benjamin, “What Is Epic Theater? [Second Version],” 17.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

³² *Ibid.*, 22.

There is a primordial intensity in the sensory compression of blood, sweat, and stench randomly distributed by the forceful dislocation of bodies—that is to read, the formal constitution between dance floor and stage, and various forms of self-governance. Distortion activates site, a pre-corporeal intuition, as the rock-out ritual reclaims irregular infrastructure, metal support poles, timber trusswork, stairs and balconies, sloped amphitheater lawns (not even proximally addressing the stage), and upraised plywood islands redoubled as diving platforms. Even with the floor already shaking, static constructed space eventually gives way—to shoulders and backs. Groundling attendees of Shakespearean theater used to throw vegetables; now crowds throw each other. In this self-organizing flux, marching under the creed of agreed disagreement, thrash enforces with the same aggression that maintains its orbital gravitation, a double bass stop and go where, quite literally, anything goes. That is to say, all actions, performed in the manner of speech, serve as entertainment, at least until enacted blows come to...well...real blows.

Autokinetic Immersion

Because amplification negates the possibility of individuals actually hearing one another's voice, power, "sharing with all potentialities that can only be actualized but never fully materialized,"³³ entwines the act and the reactive gesture, shove for shove. Self-expression, even in the distribution of pinball corporeality, is an enacted policing of reflexive judgment. Caught up in itself, the circle pit maintains explicit momentum, a thrashing claim to a sovereign space, the right to judge whether "anything whatsoever" fulfills a proper code—and in no way can it escape an aesthetic position.

For Greil Marcus, the basic dada act, "understood to be the performer's attack on the audience,"³⁴ eventually delivers the punk aesthetic generations later. Likewise Thierry de Duve's series of *Artforum* essays positions Marcel Duchamp as a mere messenger of the Independent salon's "anything goes" condition.³⁵ Given that thrash is an appropriation of punk speed and NWOBHM melody under a narrative of war and murder, an extension of the dada link is obvious. But de Duve

³³ Arendt, 200.

³⁴ Marcus, 200.

³⁵ Thierry de Duve in *Artforum International*, "Don't Shoot the Messenger," (Vol. 52, No. 3, November 2013), "Pardon My French," (Vol. 52, No. 2, October 2013), "Why was Modernism Born in France," (Vol. 52, No. 5, January 2014), "The Invention of Non-Art: A History," (Vol. 52, No. 6, February 2014), "The Invention of Non-Art: A Theory," (Vol. 52, No. 7, March 2014), "This is Art: The Anatomy of a Sentence," (Vol. 52, No. 8, April 2014).

stretches the timeline further back—Manet’s flattening the picture plane ultimately bears a sound, with vows given to the speed. “This is a chord, this is another, this is a third—now go form a band.”³⁶ The classic adaptation of punk efficiency here applies to image-making. Visual speed is embedded not only in Manet’s haphazard brushwork, but in surrendering perspectival space to performative immediacy, with an urgency to rendering only the most essential components of figuration, surface modulation and composition be damned. De Duve quotes critic Jules-Antoine Castagnary on Manet’s work presented at the Salon des Refusés:

The Bath, the Majo, the Espada are good sketches, I will grant you. But then what? Is this drawing, is this painting?” [...] Note that Castagnary does not ask whether the drawing or the painting is good, but whether Manet’s skill amounts to drawing or painting at all. At stake is not just the quality of the object but also its very identity.³⁷

As Marcus suggests, the names will change, but the narrative can always be retraced by the present: “The moment of real poetry brings all the unsettled debts of history back into play.”³⁸ It might begin to feel like everything is happening all at once, in the nowhere of compositional disintegration, like a circle pit running counterclockwise from time.

“Even though in theory, there ought to be a boundary somewhere between art and non-art, in experience it is bound to dissolve.”³⁹ The autokinetic effect is a phenomenon of vision ungrounded; it is easily experienced in the dead of night where land meets moonless sea in silence. Staring out across an uncertain distance toward a stationary light source, eyes will lock upon a singular dull glow, but spin dizzily against a depthless background. Is it a boat or star, a flickering campfire or low-flying plane? An indistinguishable horizon smoothly merges with sky—the light is a floating figurative mark without ground, hovering in indeterminate space that eyes cannot anchor. Ground starts to spin. It has been theorized that involuntary movements of tiny muscles controlling the eye are what make the light source appear to drift by its own volition—the binocular parallax is, after all, an active anticipation of speed, judging relative movement. De Duve mirrors the effect of losing the horizon in Clement Greenberg’s formalism:

³⁶ Famous punk schematic.

³⁷ De Duve, “The Invention of Non-Art: A History” (February 2014), 196.

³⁸ Marcus, 24.

³⁹ De Duve, “The Invention of Non-Art: A Theory” (March 2014), 271.

If you reflect enough on your aesthetic experience of art, Greenberg argued, you'll realize that you cannot draw a line beyond which bad art is so terribly bad that it ceases to be art at all [...] the aesthetic appreciation of art is a matter of intensity of feeling and urgency of thought on a continuous scale of nuances.⁴⁰

Working an indeterminate surface by feeling, abstraction is a violence inflicted upon visibility, tearing away common ground and, with it, the horizon for judgment. Put in Lefort's terms, the dissolution of the markers of certainty is what ensures "the democratic adventure continues,"⁴¹ displacing the terms of the contradiction. Visually, Manet took that first step away from perspectival, illusory depth towards the flat reality of the painted surface—his casual figuration grounded the mark as if it were a background—as if all marks rendered as speech were backgrounds for reevaluating a horizon for judgment. Flattening the figurative mark against all other marks seems akin to an inversion of ground, an autokinetic effect set to keep the horizon—a balancing mediation—in motion. Lefort elaborates in Merleau-Pontian terms:

It appears in the sense that the process whereby society is ordered and unified— across its divisions becomes visible. It is obscured in the sense that the locus of politics (the locus in which parties compete and in which a general agency of— power takes shape and is reproduced) becomes defined as particular, while the— principle which generates the overall configuration is concealed.⁴²

Flattening perspectival space likewise reproduces the reality of surface, but all surface needs is a little noise to distort corporeality and become immersive. Despite the reconfiguration of the picture plane according to attendant structure, studio process was the ruling principle that abstract expressionism concealed. Good artists copy, great artists steal—process is the true politic that qualifies image-making, where flattened surface materiality fails three dimensional perspectivalism. Though the cuadro first disengaged itself from its architectural anchor, it claimed a uniform surface, with a consistent horizon governing visibility. Planar portability enacted the perspectival retreat like a lens, with the easel essentially reframing a simulacra of the fresco. But artists such as Jules Olitski, Sam Francis, Morris Louis, and Jackson Pollock denied the one to one horizontal equivalence between

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Lefort, 16.

⁴² Ibid, 11.

touch and surface, encoding in process what Kazimir Malevich and the Russian constructivists visualized in aerial plan. Tearing away the canvas from its structural support and employing gravity to restructure the image, American abstraction surrendered mark-making to chance with fluid acrylics, temporarily freeing industrial acrylics from the line of production.

This gestural abstraction retains, in essence, a democratic function in line with Lefort, that of continually interrogating representational form. And the ghost of Manet still lurks within the surface. With Greenberg's flattening of traditional perspectivalism, viewers are left to float. Read intersubjectively, the viewer's reflexive ambulation becomes an anchoring ground for the declaration of the flat surface as a mark in itself. Though action painting inscribed its name with structural overtones, the reorientation to painterly surface was likewise entirely performative—painter literally became mark, as Hans Namuth's classic documentary film *Pollock Painting* (1951) attests.

It was a silent cue, perhaps misread or entirely exaggerated, for Yves Klein, Japanese Gutai, and the Viennese Actionism to thrash out anticipations of a post-Duchampian moment by extracting the performative depth of action painting through its media presentation. Act and the object became intertwined. Stalking the surface perimeter with gravitational equivalence, Pollock flattened both stage and boundary definitions—as surface inscription shifted from regulated perspectival logic to spatial intuition. Despite the inebriated caricature of existing within the composition, god-like from above, the mortal's zen surrender to chance paradoxically implied groundless immersion within. It was a far cry from Manet crowning a well-known prostitute Olympia, or Duchamp working behind intentional stage names—to collapse the stand-offish distance that had long staged the artist as mediator of visibility, composing static artifacts for an audience. Pollock's surface immersion, as both process and sovereign act, is epic theater for passive classicism. His performative gesture toward chance, while not entirely flushed, is certainly flooded by the resurgence of Duchamp's *Fountain* in '60's discourse—dredging readymade style as punk appropriation. Image, with wireless networks as the primary medium, has become entirely participatory.

Where abstract expressionism was a denial of schematic visibility, the IKB void freed the immaterial from time—once performatively immersed, anything goes. Klein may have learned three chords, or none, but conducted his invisible orchestra nevertheless. Even in negation, the full potentiality of silence produced for an absent audience was a liberation of applied mark. Absurdity is only a photo op, a leap of faith composed by the camera. The fireman assisting Klein with his fire paintings was a friend in costume, but the image has the efficiency of a thousand

words—his narrative of signing the sky could not have rung true without first painting the world International Klein Blue.

But for an Art-in-General system to function, de Duve still anchors the paradigmatic “all or nothing” binary judgment under the 18th century Beaux-Arts system as a precondition.⁴³ Whether soldiers to dada or unemployed British youth to punk, he notes the foil of salon criticism embedded within its own absolutism. “Whether or not they denied that their negative aesthetic experience was an aesthetic experience at all, denial was now a built-in consequence of the institution’s rules.”⁴⁴ Exhibited side by side, and further sanctioned by Napoleon, “[b]efore the exhibition of the Refused, we were unable to figure out what a bad painting was. Now we know it.”⁴⁵ Bad, or perhaps just poor, copies—*morceau* as they were called—perversions of the noble *tableau* form. Alphonse Legros is quoted by de Duve for his dialectical elegance, “I would call *tableaux* all successful *morceau* that naturally make a composition without seeking to be one.” De Duve further speculates upon Manet’s role:

Manet presented the jurors with what he conceived as a *tableau*, which quasi-didactically embodied that attempt at a synthesis. The jurors intuitively sensed Manet’s ambition because their notion of the *tableau*—the one prevalent in the criticism of the 1860s—involved a coalescence of qualities independent of genre. [...] The jurors saw the impure mixture of the genres but not their new synthesis.⁴⁷

Where cross-currents may very well map an interference pattern to wind-torn sailors, the attempt to locate aesthetic islands might otherwise look like just a bunch of waves to wayward drifters disoriented by a 360° horizon. If aesthetic judgment floats upon symbolic dislocation, inherently groundless, then the sublimation of violence aestheticized by an extreme form of dance announces an intersubjective

⁴³ De Duve, *Artforum International* (March 2014), 273. “[T]he invention of non-art is some fifty years older than Dada and cannot be attributed to any artist at all. It is an involuntary side effect of the binary structure of aesthetic judgment in the French Beaux-Arts system’s main state apparatus, the nineteenth-century Salon.”

⁴⁴ De Duve, “The Invention of Non-Art: A Theory” (March 2014), 308.

⁴⁵ De Duve, “The Invention of Non-Art: A History” (February 2014), 196.

⁴⁶ De Duve, “The Invention of Non-Art: A Theory” (March 2014), 274.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 273-274.

discontent with material artifacts composed at distance. The mosh wants blood, “to prove that the physical representation of an aesthetic representation could produce reality.”⁴⁸ Where a cartographic flattening of perspectival space reproduces the simulation of surface, all surface needs is a little noise to distort corporeality and become immersive.

Loonhouse Aesthetics

Neal Kay's Soundhouse was a club in northwest London that spun metal records to an underground audience throughout the genre's mid-1970s formative years. Devotees were known to perform an active spectatorship even without the presence of a live band. Whether or not audiences had already been air guitaring to Hendrix will remain in debate—either way, Rob "Loonhouse" Yeatman, a noted “practitioner” and Soundhouse regular, took the stage with the world's first homemade imitation guitar, a prototype for deskilled video game chicanery. An '80's British documentary frames the legend,⁴⁹ “Loonhouse built his own first guitar in a challenge to decipher Headbanger of the Year,” but his competitor planned to play a Gibson body with no strings or pickups. Loonhouse sensed the advantage. “This bloke's got an edge on me, this guy's got a guitar, it's just going to stick in people's minds. So I thought to myself, I'll just make a cut-out!” Abstraction rules in a void. Picasso would surely take credit for the hollow acoustic, but in upstaging his competitor's Gibson with a flatboard Flying V, Loonhouse may just as well have defined the metal aesthetic. “Well I only had a couple days to do it, it's all straight lines, and it's easy to cut out! [...] I put a couple of bits of sticky tape on it to brighten it up a bit. So from a distance it does look a bit like a real guitar.”

The interviewer's camera zooms, intrigued. “Do you put frets on it then?” As if already anticipating that strings would hardly hold. A tremolo? Eventually Loonhouse did. But frets? Air guitar is the abstraction that ensures you hit every note each time, pretending to be free of time. “No, no, I don't bother with frets, I think it's taking the piss a bit really, when you put frets on it really you're making it look too much like a real guitar.” The subtlety in Loonhouse's response is key. “It's supposed to look like a guitar, but it's not really supposed to look like a real guitar. It's supposed to be kind of like a Harlequin of a real guitar, just an image.”⁵⁰ Not only a poor image, but a mute image at that, a prop to play performative flair against the

⁴⁸ Marcus, 28.

⁴⁹ Rip thanks to progjazzfusion, “NWOBHM 1980 metal documentary,” available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IkQx7CNolRo>

⁵⁰ Ibid., I excise footnotes of Loonhouse's dialogue in favor of the narrative.

unreality of linear sequence. As for the headbanging competition—given a stage name like Loonhouse, we can only assume that image took the crown. Windmilling away as if staring into the spokes of an upturned bicycle wheel on a stool, one wonders what Duchamp would have made of the prop?

In abbreviated form, de Duve's series of six Artforum essays compiles a thesaurus on Duchamp's influence. He notes that the accusations were often derogatory, until slang misreadings began encroaching upon nominal formalism. A deep breath before plunging into the depths, they remain more or less in sequence, [Part 1:] N'importe quoi, whatever, Anything goes!, @#?#!#, My two-year-old can do that, It's crap, The Anything goes condition, box of art (further referring to Ben Vautier's own boxes), anything whatsoever, since Duchamp, anything can be art, the Duchamp syllogism, [Part 2:] post-Duchamp, The Duchamp Effect (a proper title), The Duchamp effect (lowercase), the so-called Duchamp effect (it remains in question), ready made (for Filiou, not yet compound), anything can be art, (and now onward with Duchamp's legacy:) anyone can be an artist, [Part 3:] the Beaux-Arts system has collapsed, All is art, everyone is an artist, [Part 4:] non-art & anti-art (supposed twins, but quite different), NeoDada, nonart (no hyphen), the all or nothing paradigm, Art-in-General, [Part 5:] nonart art & anti-art art (both useless to Donald Judd), art (thus reinstated), virtually art, not-art, a category mistake (a fallacy identified by Benedetto Croce), a line between art and non-art-pardon, <<oi-art (which is assuredly a misprint in ProQuest's pdf), bad art, what-is-not-art, not-yet-art, an ocean of art or of the possibility of art, potential art, this can be art, this is art, this cannot be art, virtual as art, art as not-art, art as albeit-art, the worst art, a trap, a legitimate candidate for the name of art, inferior art (italized), no longer in the bag, and not yet out of the bag labeled "condition," which contains all plausible candidates for the name of art. End quote. (You will wake up and see art when you read "this.") Part 6 addresses the deitic "this," which, written in a sentence, could refer to anything.⁵¹ De Duve's flair seems to follow suit with John Baldessari's "situation where art might be possible."

Photographer James Welling recalls John Baldessari's Post-Studio class at CalArts: "The main thing I remember about the class is that John would have this old, funky suitcase spray-painted black, full of art catalogs from Europe. He would spread them out so we could look at them."⁵² The late Jack Goldstein said, "[Baldessari] would have magazines on the floor open to the ads, to the news photos. He was

⁵¹ De Duve, "This is Art: The Anatomy of a Sentence" (April 2014), 242.

⁵² Jori Finkel, "John Baldessari's Former Students Share Memories," Los Angeles Times (20 June 2010), available at <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jun/20/entertainment/la-ca-baldessaraside-20100620-1>

saying, here's all of this stuff you can use in your art. [...] He plopped the materials on the floor and there they were, pictures we could use.”⁵³ Welling continues, “That's essentially John's teaching method: Here's a pile of things, find something that you can use.”⁵⁴ If ground is a minefield and image cannot be diffused, everything under the sky is permitted.

“‘Art altogether’ is the name I give to the universal basis for comparison that an individual is required to possess in order to declare with absolute certainty that something, anything—a urinal for example—cannot possibly be art.”⁵⁵ De Duve speaks beyond possibility. “The verdict [...] ‘This cannot be art’—amounts to an indictment of the urinal’s claim to the status of art as literally inhuman.”⁵⁶ But it’s an inhumanity that de Duve rejects in the impossibility of this “universal comparability of works.”⁵⁷ Judgment is vested in the humanity of an ungrounded witness to question not only what this “is” but what this “can be.”⁵⁸ (Part 6 of the thesaurus, meanwhile, addends art altogether, literally inhuman, je ne sais quoi, and art itself.) The entries, as annunciations of hyper-reflexive terminology, are phenomenologically entwined. “The reflective aesthetic judgment that confirms or reconfirms Fountain’s art status follows the feedback loop of the mind that restates [de Duves’s] initial postulate,”⁵⁹ —the statement “this is art” ends up in Baldessari’s 1971 calisthenics video *I Am Making Art*, which is less a workout video and more the embodiment of a mantra, as if the camera were invisible.

Like the conceptualist’s classic 1971 piece *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*, words manifest as challenges. Baldessari’s iterative instructions are the sort of the makeshift version of Loonhouse’s anything goes, an air solo on a fretless cardboard cutout, annunciating the Duchamp Effect as a rule. The piece initially existed as mere instructions sent by Baldessari to students at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, “As there wasn’t enough money for me to travel to Nova Scotia, I proposed that the students voluntarily write ‘I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art’ on the walls of the gallery, like punishment.”⁶⁰ Even words, properly sedimented, have a range that exceeds corporeal embodiment. To Baldessari’s surprise, “they covered the walls.”⁶¹ The lithographic print and handwritten script

⁵³ Jack Goldstein and Richard Hart, *Jack Goldstein and the CalArts Mafia* (Ojai, CA: Minneola Press, 2003), 68.

⁵⁴ De Duve, “This is Art: The Anatomy of a Sentence” (April 2014), 249.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Raimond Livasgani, *Artists and Prints: Masterworks from The Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Deborah Wye (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 188.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

we know it by—the poor image materialization that, in fact, many conceptual pieces are known by—was produced by a team of students. Authorship is groundless.

The detour into Baldessari's practice reveals a degree of uncertainty between the full potentiality of “anything” becoming and the manifest object. The interval enables situations for misreading, attempting to ground sensory entanglement. In a static piece, *This Is Not To Be Looked At*, the text captions a screen-printed photograph of *Artforum* magazine, paradoxically demanding that “this” universal comparability in block caps overwrites image. The bifurcation of liquid ink occurs directly upon the surface, forcing meaning through tiny interstices in the printer's screen—seeing, in choosing what to read, is a negation of peripheral ground. But from Baldessari's suitcase full of poor images poured out as a surface, the singular image delimits an opacity—it is only in circulation, entwined by groundlessness, that the referents anchor meaning.

Loonhouse's conceptual act, with or without the cardboard cutout, universalizes source material—his performance doesn't necessarily require a soundtrack. Where air guitaring occludes incident sound, the deadpan opacity of Baldessari putting dots on people's faces denies that those faces can be read, substituting a palette of primaries. If not provoking a misreading, he is certainly demanding a rereading. Abstraction rules in a void; in Baldessari's case the void was harbored in a surplus of old film stills collected at bargain prices. In de Duve's Art-in-General system of anything goes, the sensation that occurs beyond visibility—which is neither reading, nor misreading groundlessness—is actually feeling. By overwriting the function of a “real” instrument, Loonhouse inscribed his own time signature, a polyrhythmic floating signifier. His immersion in feeling is the abstraction that time can only pretend to rule. Like a colored dot, it is an opaque punch to the face of black and white halftone, punctuating the sensory flood with a breakbeat. For bodies immersed in fluvial space, bones are an unseen structural artifice until they are made to crack. Parietal engraving, however antiquated, may be the quickest way to inscribe geology.

† Matthew Robertson is trained as an architect but instead engages bodies directly in space. Robertson will crowdsurf to London to continue his graduate studies with Nigel Rolfe and Markus Vater at the RCA. A recent graduate of CalArts, his thesis, printed on transparency pages and excerpted here, was the Black MIDI of the Aesthetics & Politics program. Matthew exhibits bilocation through quantum entanglement via a lock of hair affixed to the temporal bone of an epicurean synesthete, with further audio/visual peregrinations calculated by complex mathematical proofs at HyperboLA.org

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