“What true project has been lost?”: Towards a social ontology of improvised sound work.

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Bruce Roland Russell

BA (Hons), MA

School of Art
College of Design and Social Context
RMIT University
February 2016
Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the dissertation is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Bruce Roland Russell

April 2016
The work submitted for this degree has greatly benefitted from the input and assistance of my supervisors, Dr. Philip Samartzis and Dr. Linda Williams, although any remaining flaws are my own responsibility.

Throughout the years of work devoted to this my wife Kate McRae has been unfailingly supportive, and my three children have also had to put up with my ongoing unavailability, short temper, distracted manner and constant reading. I owe them all a great debt of gratitude.

I have also been given some financial support for this work by my employers at CPIT, and should mention in particular mention the support given by my colleagues Tom Rainey, and before him, Dr. Jane Gregg.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outline of research</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure of the argument</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Some methods are mastered</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novelty</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminology</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Time’s Carcass</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On improvisation as such</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case study 1: <em>A report on the construction of situations (1957)</em></td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are time</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case study 2: <em>No mean city</em></td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative constraint</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destructive practice</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Tools</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Introduction

Abstract

“What true project has been lost?”: Towards a social ontology of improvised sound work.

In my research towards this degree I have tried to understand both the determining characteristics and the social value of the “mis-competent improvised sound work” (ISW) which I have developed. The originality of my contribution lies not only in my practical work, but also in my work towards a new theory of improvisation. The theoretical work avoids relying on ethno-musicological genealogies of technique, and instead focuses on a close analysis of the experience of improvisation framed within a context of social and political theory. This theoretical framework has arisen from my own reflections on practice, both instrumental and technical, and is integral to the way my artistic work has been performed in society.

I have sought to explain my own predilection for obsolete technologies, and why these have such widespread appeal; as well as why so many other artists coming from underground rock music are adopting this improvisational freedom. One of the key virtues of this practice is in its insistent foregrounding of its own (inevitable) failure to attain the ‘authenticity’ towards which it nevertheless strives: the project of recovering ‘true communication’ in a social space for autonomous self-expression. This I argue represents a Kraussian ‘reinvention of the medium’ (Krauss, 1999, p.296). Its value lies in the subjective experience of the work within this resolutely un-recuperated ‘field of restricted practice’.

Outline of research

I have focused on trying to understand both the characteristics and the social value of the ‘mis-competent improvised sound work’ practice which I have developed. My own practice is representative of an evolving and little-studied group of artists

3/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
in New Zealand who form a loose part of a much wider and growing international network undertaking similar work.

In 2007 the original research questions were defined as follows:

- How is improvisation employed in contemporary sound practice; and what is its significance, as compared to music, for culture conceived as a whole?
- What is the relation between sound work and ‘time under the rule of the commodity’ - and what does such work reveal about conventional social definitions of time?
- What could be the relation between social action and an improvisational art project which seeks to embody time and not expropriate it?

The second of these questions proved too ambitious. Had I been engaged in a doctorate by thesis it would have been reasonable to expect a cross-disciplinary review of literature around subjective perceptions of time but in the context of a practical project accompanied by an exegetical reflection, this led far beyond my practical focus. Instead, my reading led me to the work of Gary Peters (The philosophy of improvisation, 2009) around the subjective experience of improvisation for performers and audience, which focused on the notions of irony, repetition and mimesis. By situating some of Peters’ novel insights within a framework of political theory derived from Guy Debord (culture as a sphere of revolutionary activity) I was able to develop productive ideas linking improvisation (conceived at the broadest level) to both culture and social action. Though I acknowledge the importance of ‘social definitions of time’, it is a field of scholarship too broadly anthropological to be supported in toto by my practical work. Consequently I turned my attention to a more restricted consideration of the relationship between my improvised sound work and subjective perceptions of time; as well as historically to the broader tradition of underground popular music from which it had evolved. This also led me to related matters of authorship and originality in a community of practitioners, as well as considerations around the experience of time in music and improvisation. In turn this enhanced my discussion of the first question around improvisation, music and broader concepts of culture.

4/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Introduction

My research is aimed towards a clearer understanding of the field of improvised sound work which has been undergoing a major period of growth and definition since the start of this century. My work has been directed to providing a set of provisional definitional categories describing improvised sound work, and a theoretical reflection on its social utility against which other practitioners can situate themselves. It will also help establish an overall understanding of the shared practices and boundaries of this community. As such this research is directed as much towards generating further questions and hypotheses as it is towards answers, but these are questions that arise from, and in response to the demands of practice.

In this way my research project aims for a unity of theory and practice. An important part of answering the research questions involved determining how to define the practice which I have designated ‘improvised sound work’, this was to be the foundation of the ‘social ontology’. This term is borrowed from Georg Lukács (Parkinson, 1977, pp. 145-162), and in turn gave rise to further questions. This definitional work was to be the result of undertaking the practical projects as doctoral research and reflection. As a result of this I aimed to identify their key characteristics as a ‘logic of practice’, and how these might intersect with aspects of social and political theory. In this I sought to build on my previous academic studies in the philosophy of Marxism, and in particular on the role of reification in enabling ideological thinking to dominate all classes.

In the latter part of the research my starting point was Situationist theory, to which I added Bourdieu in order to analyse the conditions of production and reception (audience theory). I also became interested in Walter Benjamin as a result of my reflections on the technology underpinning my work, eventually discovering Rosalind Krauss’s observations on the ‘reinvention of media’. Gary Peters’ (2009) book, provided an effective corollary to Benjamin’s writing on the decay of traditions, and helped to build a theoretical framework for what I saw happening within my community of practice.

5/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
My original research plan was to contain three main strands:

- A thorough literature review of relevant works of philosophy, critical theory, ethnomusicology, and cultural studies, as well as music and art criticism and journalism.
- A series of interviews towards an ‘ethnographic component’ which will fill out and develop the categories arising from the framing of the draft social ontology.
- An ongoing series of practical recording and performance projects to explore and deepen the outcomes of this research by means of my own artistic practice.

The second strand was intended to form the basis of an ethnographic study of the field of practice, which would illuminate aspects of improvised sound work identified in my own practice. In the event I decided to limit this to a much less ambitious ethnography of New Zealand practitioners centering around the Lines of Flight festival. This was published separately as a chapter in an edited text (Russell, Lines of flight: ‘the most perfectly autonomous sector in the field of cultural production’, 2011b). This change in scope was related to my decision to concentrate on the relationship within the New Zealand context between the emerging practice and the underlying tradition, sparked by Peters’ subjectivist and experiential analysis of improvisation practice. I was able to further develop that research in the process of editing a book on experimental sound culture in New Zealand (Russell, Erewhon calling: experimental sound in New Zealand, 2012).

The originality of my contribution lies, on the practical side, in my espousal of radical ‘mis-competence’ in association with an explicit framework of creative constraint with regard to the use of minimal technology. During the course of my research I also developed a new approach to improvisation with the electric guitar, which I termed ‘mock-stereo guitar’, this was a by-product of my research, but nonetheless serves to illuminate some of my reflections on technological supports for such work. On the theoretical side my originality resides in the articulation of a theory of sound improvisation which avoids the common over-reliance on ethnomusicological genealogies of technique, but instead focuses on an analysis of the experience of improvisation, framed within a context of social engagement. This
Introduction

theoretical framework has arisen from my own reflections on practice and is integral to the way my artistic work has been performed in society. Direct discussions of specific projects included in the practical research component arise as case studies at salient points in the body of the theoretical reflections.

One of the key virtues of this practice is in its insistent foregrounding of its own (inevitable) failure to attain the ‘authenticity’ towards which it nevertheless strives: the project of recovering a Debordian ‘direct communication within reality’ (Situationist International, 2006, p. 150) in a social space for autonomous self-expression. I argue (following Rosalind Krauss) that this practice represents a ‘reinvention of the medium’ (Krauss, 1999), or what Kant in The Critique of Judgement termed a ‘new rule of art’ (cited in Peters, 2009, p.31). This identification of a developing medium is another aspect of the novelty of my approach, and as such my work has sought to address ways in which social relationships are fostered through this kind of practice.

I have sought to explain both my own fixation with obsolete technologies, as well as their more widespread appeal. In addition to presenting the ideas of Krauss, I have sought to argue that the category of habitus (as developed by Bourdieu on the basis of Norbert Elias’ work) can be applied to technologies, and that it is only as the exchange value has been leached from ‘outmoded’ technologies that they can be taken up to do genuinely new work of a potentially revolutionary nature, free of the limiting habitus which surrounds the uptake of any new technology: witness the soi-disant “Apple lifestyle” which is widely disseminated in Apple’s own advertising, as well as being enthusiastically propagated as a kind of consumer meme by evangelical “Apple users”. The aim of this corporation is to insert an Apple hardware interface into every aspect of communication, consumption, work and leisure. This is achieved by creating a worldview for their customers largely mediated through the activities and viewpoints that Apple enables.

When we turn to consider why so many artists are exiting from underground rock music into this “sphere of freedom”, the questions merely sharpen. For me, the

7/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
spread of these ideas and practices within a network of artists posed the question of ‘social utility’: what is the value of this, given that no one is getting rich and few even make a living from this practice?

I suggest that its value lies in the subjective experience of the work within a resolutely un-recuperated ‘field of restricted practice’. Like Situationist (or more properly ‘post-Lettrist’) activities, such as the dérive and other methods of psychogeography, these forms of practice represent a kind of radical collective laboratory for new kinds of consciousness, the kind of changed consciousness that Lukács argued must precede a successful revolutionary change in society (History and class consciousness, 1971, p. 72). The specificity (or truth) of any medium lies in the social relations that enable the new use of particular technologies, and the new social relations that in turn inform, and are informed by, developments in consciousness.

Of course such a changed consciousness can only be a seed; it does not immediately alter any individual’s viewpoint tout court. In my view the value of improvised sound work is that it represents a zone of autonomy, a chink in the fabric of the spectacle, an example of what Williams has called ‘emergent practices and meanings’ (Williams, p.51). It is autonomous in the terms meant by Bourdieu: being far from the dominant pole of hierarchization. And it is also ‘autonomous’ in terms of the subjective freedom of thought identified by Peters with the ironic intentionality of failure in improvisation. This is the experience of willed but gratuitous failure which I will argue forms an analogy to the dérive. It is an experience radically different in form to any of those which arise within the broad social terrain ruled by the spectacle. And finally it is autonomous in terms of the creative forms and technological supports which are commonly employed ‘insufficiently’, in ways that reject any established habitus around given technologies.

8/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Introduction

Even in the clear absence of any conscious intent by specific individuals, I argue that the overall trajectory of this field of practice is “uncooperative”\(^1\) with regard to socially dominant forces. In this I follow Lukács, who argued that revolutionary consciousness exists independently of the subjective will of any given individual. Its socially progressive role is ‘neither the sum nor the average of what is thought or felt by the single individuals’ (Lukács, 1971, p. 51). This means that the objective truth of my hypothesis will only be shown by subsequent events, and not by a sociological survey of what any individuals might currently think.

This approach is evidence-based (because it arises from practice) but speculative. It will not prove anything, because it is a reflection on art practice, and is not intended to be understood as quantitative research. It is, however, potentially productive of new hypotheses and new practices, and it conforms to existing bodies of evidence in ways that are both fruitful and suggestive.

Structure of the argument

In this dissertation the chapters are titled:

- **Some methods are mastered**
- **Time’s carcass**
- **Tools**
- **Society**
- **New theatre of operations in culture**.

*Some methods are mastered* consists of useful preliminaries. It looks at the ‘true project’ for which we are searching, which will ultimately be reconstituted as Debordian total poetics, or the “flip side” of ideology understood as reified communication. The discussion then turns to the originative tradition, the problem posed by its decay, and its relation to the concept of “the new”. Finally I discuss

\(^{1}\) I refer to the official Chinese government translation of the title of Ai Weiwei’s exhibition ‘Fuck off’ as ‘Uncooperative attitude’. The show ran outside the Third Shanghai Biennale 2000, for obvious reasons.

9/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Introduction

some fundamental terminology, in particular why I favour “mis-competent improvised sound work” as a name for the practice in which I am engaged.

Time’s carcass will discuss the most important thing about improvisation in sound as I understand it - its radical criticism both of its own form and its content, including its relationship to tradition. I will outline how this has redeployed the semantic potentials of post-punk garage rock while simultaneously critiquing these potentials in terms of a non-musical sound practice. This will first be discussed in terms of Gary Peters’ subjective analysis of the origins of free improvisation in the (lonely and brutal) experience of the improviser’s predicament. Building on this is an analysis of the use of time (the ultimate commodity in an integrated spectacle), considered both socio-historically and within the context of the work (at the moments of production and consumption). Creative constraint is discussed as both a useful strategy for organizing or shaping the ironically doomed work of improvisation, and as a necessary aspect of the destructive character of the immanent critique provided by mis-competent sound improvisation.

Tools will discuss the crucial relation of creativity to technology - the role of technological supports in producing sound work and consideration of the choices being made. Starting from a discussion of Walter Benjamin’s ideas about the revolutionary potential of the ‘outmoded’ (Benjamin, 2007, p. 181), and following a line of argument advanced by Rosalind Krauss, I suggest how the use of obsolete analogue technologies may offer a way to escape from the established habitus of technologies (understood as a mechanism of reification under capitalism). The chapter then turns to a discussion of what constitutes a medium, and how media follow ‘life-cycles’ and may thus be subject to “re-invention”. Finally I return to the concept of mis-competent technical practice and how that may enable technical practices to become art practices through the category of intention. Case studies illuminate these points through a detailed discussion of my practice in relation to the antinomies of music and sound, as well as art and technical process.
Introduction

This discussion is further developed in *Society*, based on forms of collaboration and the development of a community-based field of practice. This chapter builds on the earlier observations on the role of technological supports and the glue that binds them to social relationships. It focusses on the role of those relationships in simultaneously arising from and supporting the further development of the work. It begins shows how ‘scenes’ work, then looks at Bourdieu’s analysis of ‘restricted production’ in culture, drawing on my previously-published ethnological analysis of the *Lines of Flight* festival, where I also draw on Bourdieu’s analysis of cultural production as ‘a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies’ (1993, p. 39). The discussion expands on how artistic collaboration builds infrastructure within the ‘underground’ and in turn enables more work. A further case study looks at the working of collaboration using the studio as a tool and site of collective authorship. Finally I turn to a discussion of collective improvisational strategies as a form of ‘consciousness raising’ or collective psychic training, considered as an analogy for the role of dérive in post-Lettrist cultural practice.

In conclusion, *New theatre of operations in culture* will tie together the preceding discussions of theory and practice and consider the affective potential which this emergent field of practice could eventually have for society as a whole, towards a Situationist ‘revolution in culture’. I will outline the three main ‘ontological characteristics’ of the emergent practice as identified in the preceding chapters. I will then draw on the ideas put forward by Krauss regarding art practice and the invention of new media (1999), and consider the consequences of positing improvised sound work as precisely such a new medium. In this regard it may be possible to consider ISW as a realisation of the cultural potential locked up within music - one that points towards personal autonomy in potentially radical ways. Debord’s concept of a ‘post-Lettrist’ or total poetics is then advanced as a model for this new medium, considered as a ‘fluid language’ of anti-ideology. This consideration sits within the framework of the ‘constructed situation’, as a means for the re-invention of life outside the rules unilaterally laid down by the

11/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
spectacle. The social space of the ISW underground is considered as an example of a potential situation ‘designed to be lived by its constructors’ (Situationist International, 2006, p. 41).

While no definitive answers can be posed to the research questions, this discussion does allow us to imagine how these might be reframed, so as to enable further and more productive research in this field. In other words, what Marx termed ‘practical-critical activity’ (Early Writings, 1975, p. 422) and Debord described as the ‘lonely rendezvous’ between a unified theoretical critique and a unified social practice. This is, after all, in line with the original research problem, promising work ‘towards’ a social ontology.
Chapter 1: Some methods are mastered

This chapter consists of useful preliminaries. It looks at the ‘true project’ for which we are searching, which will ultimately be reconstituted as Debordian total poetics. This is the “flip side” of ideology understood as reified communication. The discussion then turns to the originative tradition, the problem posed by its decay, and its relation to the concept of “the new”. Finally I discuss some fundamental terminology, in particular why I favour “mis-competent improvised sound work” as a name for the practice in which I am engaged.

Communication

We don’t know what to say. Sequences of words are repeated; gestures are recognized. Outside us. Of course some methods are mastered, some results are verified... so many things we wanted have not been attained, or only partially, and not like we imagined. What communication have we desired, or experienced, or only simulated? What true project has been lost?


Every authentic cultural form is, among other things, an attempt at communication. It is embodied in, and comes to light by means of social relationships, yet these relations are inherently problematic because they are shaped by the economic relations of capitalism. They are expressed: ‘as a social relation, existing not between [the producers] themselves, but between the products of their labour’ (Marx, 1954, p. 77).

This alienated social reality, which Lukács later termed reification, acts as a kind of distorting lens, a structural flaw which applies across the full range of human social realities, as such it is: ‘crucial for the subjection of men’s consciousness to
the forms in which this reification finds expression and for their attempts to comprehend the process’ (Lukács, 1971, p. 86). This is certainly true of my own work. Despite its conscious refusal of explicit messaging, even what we might call the implicit message is embodied in the relationships that exist under and around the work. This is where the ‘communication’, or social significance, of the work really resides; and it is these surrounding social relationships that ultimately determine how the work might influence social reality in history, constituting a ‘form of communicative production’ (Williams, 2005, p. 60). It is these which I seek to examine, all the while bearing in mind that the social lens through which we are looking is fundamentally flawed.

One of the key virtues of what I am calling mis-competent improvised sound work lies precisely in its insistent foregrounding of its own (inevitable) failure to attain ‘authenticity’, while constantly striving towards precisely this. If a model of this mode of practice exists, I think it is in the writings, the actions and the creative cinematic practice of Guy Debord. Debord’s own value to later generations is best understood to be:

...embedded in the multiple ways he expressed his concern for authentic communication; it is inseparable from an art of speech and dialogue that was... one of his great passions, and therefore one of the keys to both his life and work. (Kaufmann, 2006, p. xiv)

Kaufmann has made a persuasive case that we should consider Debord as an ‘expert in loss’ (2006, p. xviii), a melancholic who attempted to recapture by global means the fleeting traces of what he saw in his past as a lost opportunity for that ‘authentic communication’. Adopting a ‘totalizing’ concept of poetics, in which that category becomes the organizing principle of human existence, he ‘turned his life into a work of art’ (2006, p. xiii).

As an artist I share in this project of recovering ‘true communication’, in a way that proposes a social use for gratuitously creative activities. For me personally
this is not least because as a child of rock ‘n roll I share on a fundamental level Patti Smith’s ecstatically-expressed conviction that ‘communication with heaven, it’s right here man’ (Smith, 1978). I understand the ‘here’ that she was referring to as the moment of performance, the moment of creative communication between artist and audience. And it is this fundamental shared conviction in the possibility of realizing ‘heaven on earth’ that justifies the appointment of Debord to the position of epigrapher for this work.

My experience of collaborating widely with artists in New Zealand and beyond over the last thirty years has been that many of them are unsatisfied with traditional genres, media and available career structures. This dissatisfaction, furthermore, is both deepening and spreading. It is my conviction that improvisation is the main catalyst that enables the reaction against these dissatisfactions to take definite shape. The following account is an effort to provide a preliminary examination of the evidence I have adduced to support that conviction.

**Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming**

*Destined for some cul-de-sac, a scrapyard full of replicas.*


To reflect on where my practice is now, it is essential to understand where it came from; as it has grown not from the adoption of an established model, but from an iterative exploration of both my cultural context within a given tradition, and my own particular abilities within that. The context of need and opportunity is set by globalized society as a whole, but the shape of the response is a result of very specific local determinants of biography, economic geography and cultural history.

In the late 1970s I first became aware of creative practice as something I could do myself. At that time the sub-genres of rock music were proliferating in the hot house atmosphere of “post punk”; a time that many commentators judge to have been ‘a fabulous wealth of sounds and ideas that rivals the sixties as a golden age
Chapter 1: Some methods are mastered

for music’ (Reynolds, 2005, p. xxx). In particular, in the environment within which I found myself, this was true to a very great extent. From 1979 to 1985 I studied political science at Otago University, in Dunedin. In that town a group of deracinated malcontents had formed a band called The Enemy in 1977, inspired by what they saw happening in England - or at least by what they thought was happening. It is important to recall that in the pre-internet era, information about sub-cultural events was always partial and fragmentary as it filtered through to global peripheries. So reactions to overseas trends always happened at one remove from what was really going on. The Enemy were led by Chris Knox, whose subsequent career from rock towards a free-wheeling experimentalism in many ways prefigured my own. As the doyen of American post-punk criticism Byron Coley puts it: for Knox ‘artistic freedom was far more important than anything else. The DIY approach was a key philosophical component of the early Flying Nun ethos.’ (Coley, 2012).

In Dunedin it seemed that everyone who saw The Enemy in 1977 formed their own band. As a result, by the time I became aware of what was going on, this small city of 125,000 people already had a healthy rock scene which was developing in a particular direction, specifically a kind of post-punk rock that privileged obscure antecedents from the ‘psychedelic sixties’. This ‘southern psychedelic moment’ (Russell, 2011a) spawned a number of independent record labels, notably Flying Nun, which in turn generated an active national touring circuit, its own media (fanzines and student radio), and eventually by about 1985 the beginnings of international attention.

My involvement in this began as a member of the audience, then as a fanzine writer and radio DJ, later as a publicist for Flying Nun, and finally as the organizer of my own independent label. Along the way I picked up a guitar and in 1987 helped form a trio called The Dead C. We set out to work in the then-popular style of the music we admired, but imbued with an instinctive improvisational disdain.
for fixed structure and an untutored interest in using the recording process and ‘sound as such’ as raw material. In this the example of Chris Knox was well to the fore. My own enthusiasm for such strategies was greatly enhanced by my inability to ‘play properly’ (Keenan, 2013). Indeed, when The Dead C. first performed in Auckland in 1989, Knox told me how delighted he was to ‘see someone playing in a beat group who is an even worse guitarist than me’ (personal communication).

Gary Peters has, in his recent ground-breaking study *The philosophy of improvisation* (2009), identified the point of origin as an especially loaded moment for any cultural practice claiming to be improvisational. He associates this with Hegel’s theory of art as a stage in the self-expression of Spirit, and it certainly accords with my own experience of life. I have become myself not only as a result of my upbringing, my education, and my productive role in society, but on a deeper level, through an act of self-creation that I associate with the process of creation enacted outside of myself. Peters quotes Heidegger as saying:

> The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other. (Peters, 2009, p. 13)

But of course, in reality, no work of art comes from nothing, just as no artist comes from nothing. I believe that this is the reason why, even as I have been striving to analyse and understand my own ‘instinctive’ process of creativity through the work documented here, I have simultaneously been devoting a great deal of time and effort to the archival recovery of obscure recordings from my distant past, from that “post punk moment” of the early 1980s, which in some way formed a template for my understanding of the kind of work I would be moved to do. In the last three years I have curated re-issues by the rejuvenated *Flying Nun Records* of recordings by The 3Ds, The Pin Group, and The Stones; as well as a major compilation of South Island bands from the early 1980s. For me personally this is about more than simple nostalgia. I am interested in bringing these lost...
works into the light of the present in order to better understand the present, and the work we are doing now.

For me (as for Peters), a key part of this self-understanding of my relation to a cultural context has been provided by the work of Walter Benjamin, and his treatment of the concept of ‘tradition’. For Benjamin, what we regard as culture is to be seen as simultaneously the product of human history and a pile of ruins, resulting from the history of capitalism (a history within which ‘there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’ (Benjamin, 1968, p. 256)). What the past gives us is ‘wreckage upon wreckage’, a ‘pile of debris [that] grows skyward’, out of a history which should as a rule be conceived as a ‘state of emergency’ (Benjamin, 1968, pp. 257-8). It is from this unpromising material that we create new work: ‘the poets find the refuse of society on their streets and derive their heroic subject from this very refuse’ (Benjamin, 2006, p. 108). During the course of my research, the contemporary extent of the ‘wreckage’ has become more and more obvious, in everything from climate change, the explosion of forced migration to structural changes in the world economy such as the intellectual property provisions of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement.

But my belief is that within the specific field of culture, the inroads of capitalist modernity tend to dissolve traditions and shared cultural experiences. It is out of the resulting detritus that we must make new art. This is the heroic value that Benjamin sees in Kafka and Baudelaire: that they manage to make something from the ‘breakdown’, the ‘present state of collapse’ (1968, pp. 181,184) of our experience of the world. As he put it: ‘experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness’ (Benjamin, 1968, pp. 83-84). Benjamin wrote those words shortly before his death in 1940, at the high water mark of Fascism. In 1988 Guy Debord echoed him in updating his pessimistic assessment to conclude that the ‘integrated spectacle’ possesses ‘all the means

18/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
necessary to falsify the whole of production and perception, [and] is the absolute master of memories’; a state of affairs in which he succinctly concluded that ‘the globalization of the false was also the falsification of the globe’ (Debord, 1990, p. 10). In the later 1980s this might have seemed hyperbolic, yet it is my opinion that subsequent developments have tended to support his pessimistic assessment. Foremost amongst these would be the triumph of the internet, a portal on society which is wholly if not always obviously under the control of private interests in alliance with a genuinely global security complex, as partially revealed by the information released by Edward Snowden. Now more than ever we live in an era in which simulacra reign, and in which for increasing swathes of “developed” society the epitome of engagement with culture appears as the iPod “shuffle” function.

I believe that (between them) Debord and Benjamin provide a powerful explanation for many of the current changes in globalized society, including the rapid collapse of rock music into solipsism and an eternal ahistorical present, a state of affairs which Reynolds in his recent book Retromania memorably dubs ‘hyper-stasis’ (2011, p. 427). He tracks this process in considerable detail but finds himself unable to provide any plausible cause. Reynolds’ analysis suffers from a fixation on the reception of cultural production, to the exclusion of considerations around its production. In addition he tends to ignore the social relationships underpinning and connecting both these phenomena - a short-coming which he shares with Peters, who also tends to analyse the creative act in isolation from the real context of social relationships. Even if it is not their intention to further myths about art as the magical product of a special class of isolated ‘genius’, their analysis is unable to grasp the problem in its totality because it lacks the sophisticated sociological approach exemplified by Pierre Bourdieu, which he summarises as ‘the model of the relationships between the universe of economic and social conditions and the universe of life-styles’ (Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste, 1984, p. xi).

19/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
This he argues is based in a ‘practical relation to practice’ (The logic of practice, 1990, p. 34), and a full understanding of the work of art for Bourdieu ‘implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code’ which is a product of education and upbringing (1984, p. 3).

As a result of neglecting this perspective, Reynolds is overly concerned with the consequences of hyper-stasis for originality, while admitting that this latter concept is over-rated in popular culture. For me the central point at issue is more about authenticity than newness. As Peters suggests, the decay of a tradition demands that the artist address this through working to ‘re-empower the mimetic faculty’ (2009, p. 102). I will return to this point later.

The contemporary relevance of Benjamin’s famously difficult doctoral study The origin of German tragic drama (1963) is precisely that we now again (like the Germans of the seventeenth and the early twentieth century) inhabit an era in which the superfluity of images and the profusion of meanings threaten to overwhelm the value of our shared cultural traditions. Now, under spectacular rule, ‘modernity’ is as extinct as the medieval was in the baroque. The significance of the era we have just exited: ‘resides solely in the stations of its decline’ (Benjamin, 1963, p. 166). And the story of that decline, that history, is what (properly understood) identifies that which was or is ‘original’ in a cultural phenomenon, and what was or is ‘authentic’ in it. This is what Benjamin identifies as the origin of anything: not its genesis, but its history of reception and even dissolution. As he puts it in the oft-quoted ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ to his failed doctoral dissertation:

...the act of discovery can reveal it [the authentic] in the most singular and eccentric of phenomena, in both the weakest and clumsiest experiments and in the overripe fruits of a period of decadence. (Benjamin, 1963, p. 46)

It is precisely this ‘act of discovery’ which is my subject here.
The ‘dissatisfaction’ which I earlier argued was affecting many of my collaborators was in New Zealand the product of what I see as the breakdown of a rigorously formal but vibrant tradition of garage rock, which had developed in isolation from the ‘real’ music business. Inside this I found myself developing an ‘oppositional’ improvising tradition, which questioned and attempted to practically critique many of the prevailing assumptions of the once-dominant tradition. These assertions are supported by my published ethnographic investigation into the motivations and attitudes of performers at the Lines of Flight festival (Russell, 2011b). The trajectory of my creative practice is a project to try to rediscover what is authentic as a social praxis in what I call sound work, through the thorough-going deployment of improvisation understood as a category of social ontology.

**Novelty**

*The dead cannot contradict, sometimes the living cannot.*

*New face in hell, The Fall, 1980* (Smith, 1980).

Hegel has provided a classic blueprint for how change occurs in culture. His 1807 ‘Preface’ to the *Phenomenology of Mind* declares that ‘frivolity and again ennui, which are spreading in the established order of things... betoken that there is something else approaching’ (Hegel, 2005, p. 75). This certainly accords with the Benjaminian model of the decaying tradition. It is also important to be aware that ‘novelty’ is not an absolute, but rather an emergent category: ‘the “new” is not one thing, and the “old” another. They have meaning only in their differential relations to one another’ (Evans, 2001, p. 71).

This certainly accords with my reflections on the relationship between what I do now, and the tradition in which I was “brought up” as an artist. When I was in my twenties, a career following the trajectory which mine has followed, and doing the kind of work of which mine has consisted, was barely conceivable. There were extant models, such as Douglas Lilburn and Phil Dadson, but they were artists who...
possessed a very high level of cultural capital already accepted by ‘the dominant principles of hierarchization’: that is university degrees specific to the field, and associations with institutions possessing ‘the power to consecrate producers’ (Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 41-42). In this heteronomous field of cultural production I could not hope to occupy a position, and it took the expansion of the autonomous sector of that field (the one most distant from the ‘dominant principles’) in order for a space to appear within which I, as an untutored practitioner (albeit one with academic qualifications which were irrelevant to the field) could discover and even create what Bourdieu called ‘ill-defined posts, waiting to be made rather than ready-made’ (1993, p. 43). This making of positions also required a re-orientation of the field away from music and towards contemporary art. This was a consequence of my focus on sound as a category substituting for music. A practice that was deliberately “musically” untutored could make sense within a context of “art practice” in a way impossible within the accepted cultural ambit of “music”. Since I lacked the naivety to present myself as an outsider artist, I needed an alternative context within which I could present my work that would enable it to connect with some sort of audience ready to receive it.

This raises the difficult question of originality, which paradoxically is either implicit - or impossible - in improvisational practice. At times I have grappled with the fact that no strategy, no sequence of sounds, and no technical practice used to support my work, can be described as “new”. And yet novelty is generally held to be an indispensable characteristic of “authenticity”. I have often reflected that Musica Elettronica Viva, or the Velvet Underground, or Cabaret Voltaire, or AMM; had “done it all before”: and moreover 30 or 40 years earlier. And so what could be “new” about my practice?

Peters again provides a useful discussion of this knotty problem. His solution is to locate the impulse to originality within the realm of art itself, rather than the artist or the artwork. The work of individuals falls into the realm of what Benjamin

22/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
identified as the mimetic. Originality is tied ‘to the beginning of art and the tracing of that beginning in the expressive history of mimetic gestures, clichés, and formulae’ (Peters, 2009, p. 104). In this view the virtue of improvisation is that is the art-form of beginnings *par excellence*, and that in so far as improvisation may be characterized as ironic (or distancing) then its virtue is strengthened in so far as ‘the dialectic of fixity and contingency is kept on show’ (2009, p. 96). This is the complex and always-contested relationship between the individual work and the originating tradition, which imbues all of my work with its charge of authenticity at the moment of its reception. Within the corpus of criticism, this has been most memorably stated by Byron Coley, when he said *a propos* of *The Dead C.*:

*What they did was so brilliant, it seemed obvious as soon as it had been accomplished... As radical in their conscious destruction of form as any band before or since, The Dead C. used rock instrumentation to take things apart, only to reassemble them once they had mutated sufficiently to be deemed interesting* (2006).

As Peters has suggested, improvised work avoids pastiche and cliché not through some impossible mystique of a-temporality, but through constantly foregrounding the dialectical tension between act and art (2009, pp. 94-100). I believe that success in improvisation is only possible when the improviser holds within the work and in view of the audience the relationship between the act of improvising in the now, the social context in which the improvisation occurs, and the tradition that informs it. A considerable part of the reflections that follow will focus on how I believe that what I have often called “this magic trick” can be carried off.

Important in terms of performance is my insistence on making apparent the fact that I am not “playing an instrument” in anything like a musically correct way. I am, on the contrary, performing “mis-competently”. In doing this I am drawing attention in a very self-conscious way to the apparently-obvious fact that I am not “playing music”, which is after all a culturally-sanctioned activity that everyone understands well. Instead, in a setting which seem inevitably to call for a musical
performance, I am “making a sound”, which is an activity that I argue is of a completely different order.

This consideration of “novelty” in the context of music calls to mind some of the highly suggestive and idiosyncratic arguments advanced by Henry Flynt in the early 1960s. Flynt himself is a significant if occult figure in the history of the American avant garde, and one of the best discussions of his views occurs in the recently-published work of Benjamin Piekut. Piekut makes clear that Flynt argued against the possibility of newness in art, making clear firstly that it is a purely secondary characteristic - we value works firstly as “art” and only once they have been adduced to that category do we consider their novelty, which must be purely a product of context and chronology, and thus cannot by definition be part of the artwork itself (Piekut, 2011, p. 76). In this Flynt seems to be lining up alongside Peters in assigning novelty to the field, not to the artwork, and thus to the social relationships which Bourdieu and others regard as such a fertile field for analysis. He later developed this idea even further in elaborating the concept of “brend” as a critique of art and the production of “works”. If art is defined as “what you like”, and what we know best is ourselves, then by corollary art properly understood as “brend” is defined in purely subjective terms as any ‘spontaneous self-amusement or play’ which we do for the ‘just-liking’ of it (Piekut, 2011, p. 82). The parallels to my discussion of improvisation are pretty clear, and I will discuss the further significance of Flynt’s political engagement in this context in what follows.

There is also a considerable discussion to be had around Benjamin’s dictum that we should take up ‘the objects which have begun to be extinct... when the vogue has begun to ebb from them’ (2007, p. 181). Building on the work of Rosalind E. Krauss (2000), as well as Debord’s concept of détournement (Situationist International, 2006, pp. 14-21, 67-68), it is my contention that these “objects” may be technologies, they may be genres or stylistic features, or they may even be
components of existing works. The challenge is to make them do new work, which may even deserve the epithet “revolutionary”. In line with my discussion above, the value of this “new work” will be considered in terms of its social engagement, that is, as both a product of the social relationships that give art its context, and as the catalyst for new social relationships.

**Terminology**

‘For art’s sake was scarcely ever to be taken literally; it was almost always a flag under which sailed a cargo that could not be declared because it still lacked a name.’

*Surrealism*, W. Benjamin, 1929 (2007, pp. 183-4)

While I have at other times used other terminologies such as ‘free noise’ (Russell, 2009, p. 21), I currently favour the use of the term ‘mis-competent improvised sound work’ (or ISW, for short) to describe my creative practice. This portmanteau label has the advantage of highlighting what I see as the distinguishing features of this emerging field of practice, in terms of its methods and relationship to other aspects of culture.

**Mis-competence** (hereafter simply mis-competence) I have previously defined as ‘the ability to do something both deliberately wrongly, and well’ (2010, p. 105). My definition of this neologism draws heavily on an analysis of the audio and film works of Chris Knox (Coley, 2012), because it was from within the milieu of post-punk popular music in New Zealand - in which Knox was a leading figure - that the influence of the “mis-competent virus” spread into the evolving sound underground. Many commentators (and practitioners) mistakenly regard this alternative and radically pragmatic approach to competence as merely the first stage in a universally-applicable positivistic progression from incompetence to full capability (often ideologically characterised as ‘professionalism’). My belief is that the ‘alternative techniques’ which I term mis-competent are in fact qualitatively
different in seeking different forms of competence which serve new creative ends and are inscribed differently within performing bodies. Mis-competence accepts a different logic of practice, which like all such logics is ‘a dialectic between habitus and institutions’ which is enabled ‘to attain full realization... through the capacity for incorporation’ (Bourdieu, The logic of practice, 1990, pp. 57, emphasis added). The institution being, in this case, art; because art since Duchamp has been able to at least partly free itself (by means of the concept) from the tyranny of technique, in a way that music has been slow to emulate.

Furthermore, this activity is improvised because it seeks to make its contribution spontaneously to art understood as the map of human reality; without premeditation, and without consideration for later accurate replication by any means other than real-time recording. It produces no intellectual property that may be alienated from the person of the improviser. As I have already discussed (following Peters), its value lies in its foregrounding of everything entailed in the struggle ‘to enact the origination of the artwork’ (Peters, 2009, p. 63). There is also, as I will argue later, a socio-political value in this foregrounding of “radical freedom” and an art based in real-time “action”.

It is “sound” because the realisation of the art-work is primarily audible, and made without regard for the rules, conventions, and agreed methods of creation and presentation which would allow society as a whole to define it as music. It does however encompass the methods of music, without limiting itself in any way. Again, Henry Flynt provided a pithy formulation of this in his 1963 essay ‘Concept Art’, when he observed that what he termed ‘structure art’: ‘both fails, is completely boring, as music, and doesn’t begin to explore the aesthetic possibilities structure can have when freed from trying to be music’ (Piekut, 2011, pp. 77, emphasis added). My practical and theoretical approach has been dedicated to freeing sound (and structure) ‘from trying to be music’ since the very beginnings of my engagement with this activity, and forms the central argument of

26/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Chapter 1: Some methods are mastered

my 1993 manifesto What is free? (Russell, 2009, pp. 21-25). It is my contention that both music and noise are sub-sets of sound, and that only the broadest and logically prior category is sufficient to encompass and denote that form of radically free activity with which I am concerned.

Finally it is “work” because it is a product of praxis, which is the constitution of human reality through the process of integration of the subject and object in history. This fundamental orientation towards culture, which derives from my youthful studies in Marxism (Russell, 1985), has remained an instinctive basis of all my cultural interventions, originating in Marx’s Philosophical manuscripts of 1844, and the Theses on Feuerbach (Marx, 1975). I hold this truth self-evident: that ‘free conscious activity constitutes the species-character of man… Man makes his life activity itself an object of his will and consciousness’ (Marx, 1975, p. 328).

My insistence on a combined and simultaneous engagement with theory and practice was deepened by my subsequent discovery of the life and work of Guy Debord, who inspired me with his concept of ‘revolutionary action within culture… [undertaken through] an organized collective work aimed at a unitary use of all the means of revolutionizing everyday life’ (Situationist International, 2006, p. 36). So for my creative practice - as it has developed over the last three decades - and for this exegetical reflection, my starting point is praxis understood as a subjective practical engagement with the objective, mediated by work, which is by its very nature directed and informed by theory. It is this theoretical direction of practice that Lukács in 1922 (in ignorance of those early and then still unpublished works of Marx) designated as ‘the real and practical intervention of class consciousness in the course of history and hence the practical understanding of reification’ (Lukács, 1971, p. 78). This is the reification which I noted at the outset is the distorting lens impeding our collective understanding of social structures generally and cultural action in particular.
Chapter 1: Some methods are mastered

Essential to a ‘practical understanding’ of any category of art practice is the identification of its social role and cultural meaning: this is central to grasping the nature of the ‘true project’. This is the wager which is really at stake here. Because improvised sound work is an emerging hybrid form, combining concepts, methods and tactics from a number of other more established forms of practice; the purpose and meaning of the work is especially open to contestation. In particular, there is the obvious confusion with music, to which even informed observers often fall victim. While our quiver may contain strategies drawn from genres of music (such as - improvisation, rock, electro-acoustic, and jazz), it also boasts those more characteristic of contemporary art (such as sound- and time-based media, kinetic sculpture, inter-media and performance art).

The challenge is taxonomic and categorical. What “is” improvised sound work (or ISW) and what is “not”? And when considering the characteristics of what “is”: what aspects or moments which may be categorized, are more or less necessary to that definition? It is in this sense that I appeal to Lukács’ concept of an ontology of social existence: his attempt to supply a Marxian philosophical framework of human social existence and by definition of our socially-mediated understanding of that existence (Parkinson, 1977, pp. 145-163). This enterprise was described by Lukács himself in the following terms:

*I imagine ontology as the real philosophy based on history... from this... emerges what we designate as human social being, whose essence is the teleological positing of man, that is, work.* cited in (Rockmore, 1992, p. 224)

In focusing on work as a category of analysis, Lukács, like Marx, is abstracting one aspect from the totality of social existence, which taken as a whole determines the form that this abstract work may take. One result of this process of reflection will hopefully be to indicate the “lower level” categorical determinants that characterize this form of practice.

28/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
To go a step further, as Marx argued in his *Manuscripts of 1844*, work also affects human “nature” and consciousness, which is both mutable and self-created to an extent not true of any other species. Marx even argued that human senses are capable of development and change through engagement with the objectively given through work. This basic reality applies most baldly within the category of “art work”. Visual art is about training visual perception (something Walter Benjamin discussed in depth with reference to both photography and cinema), and audible art performs the same function for the ear. Through this process, practice will be found to affect how real people think and perceive reality, including social reality: *new ears for new messages*.

Furthermore, as a developing practice, and because of its improvisational method, this kind of sound work is inherently self-critical. It conforms to what Adorno characterised as an ‘immanent critique’, one conducted according to the internal logic of the cultural form being considered. By these standards a successful work is one which ‘expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised in its inner structures’ (Adorno, 1967, p. 32). It is through achieving proximity to this goal that improvised sound work ensures its sharpness as a tool for exposing reification in other forms of culture. Because everything about it, including its value, is contestable and contested, improvised sound work is a fertile ground for both practical experimentation and theoretical analysis. This is why, ‘even if I thought as little as possible at the “moment of creation”, this does not mean that I was without my reasons for doing so’ (Russell, 2009, pp. 1-2). In fact this paradoxical engagement with ‘thought’ is not achieved despite my practice being “carelessly knocked-off”; but rather precisely because it is teleologically posited in that way.
Chapter 2: Time’s Carcass

This chapter will discuss the most important thing about mis-competent improvisation in sound, as I understand it - its radical criticism both of its own form and its content, including its relationship to tradition. I will outline how this has rescued the semantic potentials of post-punk garage rock (which has lost all genuine cultural relevance in a solipsistic collapse into neurasthenia) while simultaneously critiquing these potentials in terms of a non-musical sound practice. This will first be discussed in terms of Gary Peters’ subjective analysis of the origins of free improvisation in the (lonely and brutal) experience of the improviser’s predicament. Building on this is an analysis of the use of time (the ultimate commodity in an integrated spectacle), considered both socio-historically and within the context of the work (at the moments of production and consumption). Creative constraint is discussed as both a useful strategy for organizing or shaping the ironically doomed work of improvisation, and as a necessary aspect of the destructive character of the immanent critique provided by mis-competent sound improvisation.

Tradition

It will then become plain that our task is not to draw a sharp mental line between past and future but to complete the thought of the past... mankind will not begin any new work, but will consciously bring about the completion of its old work.

Letter to Arnold Ruge, Karl Marx, 1843 (1975, p.209)

Constraint is a valuable stimulus to artistic creation, in the same way that grit provokes pearls in oysters. The concept of constraint is also a fertile one for
discussions of methodology, and I will return to it often in the discussion that follows. For now I wish to consider constraint in terms of chronology and the historical context within which my work has been undertaken. History is both the raw material of culture and also its scaffolding, and our work does not take place in an undifferentiated space of possibility.

As previously discussed, before I became involved in improvised sound work, my involvement was as a consumer and a critic in the rich and vibrant indigenous tradition of garage rock or post-punk music in New Zealand. Cultural criticism was indelibly marked by the significant advances made by Walter Benjamin, especially from his work of 1925-40. During that period Benjamin sought to ‘recreate criticism as a genre’, as he put it in a letter of 20 January 1930 to Gershon Scholem (Gilloch, p. 1). His aim initially was to become the foremost German literary critic, but his work had the unintended consequence of criticism’s dissolution as ‘a distinct sphere of endeavour’. Criticism became instead a hyper-mediated undertaking considering all forms of cultural production: one that was thus transformed ‘into a panoramic critique of modernity itself’ (Gilloch, p. 2).

Benjamin’s method of ‘redemptive criticism’ (in all the forms in which he gave it expression) sought to avoid historicizing artworks in isolation from the progress of history subsequent to their creation. In that view ‘culture appears reified’, while Benjamin’s now-famous view accentuates the ‘nowtime’ of the artwork; seeing ‘the work of the past as still uncompleted’ (2008, p. 124), and arguing that:

*The effect that the work of art has on us today... depends on an encounter not just with the work of art alone but with the history which has allowed the work to come down to our own age.* (2008, p. 118)

Osborne has argued that Benjamin is asserting the primacy of the present over the past in society’s perception of that past (Osborne, 1994, p. 68). In a very real sense for Benjamin, as for Kafka (in his analysis), ‘time is the trial’ (1994, p. 73).

In practice, Benjamin applied this approach most notably to his analyses of the literary work of Kafka and Baudelaire, and in more problematic form to his

31/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
unfinished epic study of the secret life of commodity consumption in European culture, *The Arcades Project* (Benjamin, 1999). The twin keys to all his literary analyses were the concept of tradition, which provided the context within which, and against which, the works under consideration developed, and the category of experience, which provided the context of reception, and the analytic tool which the critic applied to the material of history.

Tradition, in the case of Kafka and Baudelaire, represented pre-Modernity: storytelling in the case of the former, and lyric poetry in the case of the latter. Tradition provided the originary form of the work itself, as well as the context of analysis. Wolin has described it as providing the ‘semantic potentials’ (1982, p. 39) for Benjamin’s analysis, and this term has resonance for the case of sound improvisation. In terms of the choices available to the artist, tradition is both a constraint and an opportunity, and for Benjamin, it is perpetually undergoing the destructive influence of time: the ‘storm that is blowing from Paradise’ (1968, p. 257).

In my case, the tradition within which I began to work was undergoing an especially rapid disintegration. As previously discussed, the metaphor I employed in 1993 as a shorthand reference for this tradition was the Velvet Underground’s *I Heard Her Call My Name* (Reed, 1968) - specifically the feral squall of distorted guitar feedback that followed the line ‘...and then my mind split open’ (Russell, 2009, p. 22). Rock music, of course, is a tradition of modernity itself, and within that tradition, the strand which relates most directly to contemporary art practices and concerns owes its origins to the work of the Velvet Underground. The storm of time has continued to cover modernity with piled ‘wreckage upon wreckage’, and now, as Reynolds has exhaustively described, contemporary cultural conditions have stalled popular music in a motionless vortex of perpetual now-ness. Reynolds described this memorably as ‘a past we can’t get past’ (2011, p. 411), a situation in which ‘on the macro-cultural level things feel static and stalled’ (2011, p. 427).
Although he does not explicitly consider Benjamin’s as a theoretical model which might explain the mysteries of this ‘hyper-stasis’, he clearly has realized that it is a crisis in our experience of the past which has caused this. He quotes a music blogger who had perceptively observed that the ‘noughties’ were the first recent decade which would be remembered more for its music technologies, rather than for its popular music, and this seems a significant distinction, in terms of a triumph of medium over content; since it is precisely via the mediation of such media that we increasingly experience sound culture. Furthermore, Reynolds goes on to describe a nightmare scenario in which:

...potent musical intellects engage in a restless shuttling back and forth within a grid-space of influences and sources, striving frenetically to locate exit routes to the beyond.’ (2011, p. 427)

This image recalls Benjamin’s comparison of the self to a labyrinth, with the ego ‘at its enigmatic centre’, and ‘many entrances leading to the interior’ (2007, p. 31). Experience must be ‘put to work with an originary history’ in order to make the world capable of being understood (Benjamin, 2008, p. 119). When culture has become a labyrinth without exits, then experience is blocked and no such understanding is possible. The destructive ‘shock experience’ of modernity which Benjamin saw prefigured in the writing of Poe and Baudelaire has reached a new pitch of perfection, and its impact on the individual psyche is impossible to ignore.

Commodification and the concept of eternal recurrence were both linked by Benjamin in his conception of fashion and the related idea of the ‘phantasmagoria’, the category in which he foresaw some of the Situationist spectacle. As he put it: ‘fashion is the eternal recurrence of the new’ (2006, p. 155). But in an entire culture industry stuck in an online neurasthenic ‘eternal now’ - the eventual consequence of ‘the immense discoveries imminent in the field of reproduction technology’ (2006, p. 158) - then surely nothing new can be created, and if it was, how would anyone know?

For Benjamin the way out is to exploit the ‘dialectical flash’ in order to identify a constellation, or monad, which creates in our understanding a meaningfully
historical link between the ‘nowtime’ and the totality of past time (Osborne, 1994, p. 87). There is none of that potential visible in Reynolds’ clear-eyed assessment of the contemporary popular music landscape:

_The sensation of moving forward grew fainter as the decade unfurled. Time itself seemed to become sluggish... the pulse of the NOW felt weaker with each passing year... because in the 2000s the pop present became ever more crowded out by the past... every other previous decade happening again all at once: a simultaneity of pop time that abolishes history while nibbling away at the present’s own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel._ (2011, pp. x-xi)

Reynolds does feel that this is related to technological developments of the kind Benjamin had identified, he comments early in his book that ‘we’ve become victims of our ever-increasing capacity to store, organize, instantly access, and share vast amounts of cultural data’ (2011, p. xxi). And it’s that little word ‘data’ that sums up the problem. History isn’t data, and neither is knowledge, because data is just information.

The completion of this almost imperceptible Benjaminian decay of experience was as announced in 1988 by Guy Debord in his _Comments on the Society of the Spectacle_. Debord observed that ‘the manufacture of a ceaseless present where fashion itself, from clothes to music, has come to a halt... is achieved by the ceaseless circularity of information’ (1990, p. 13). Like Benjamin, he saw the end of truly human culture in the terminal depreciation of the experience of history, and its replacement with ‘impoverished spectacular thought’, which imposes its own syntax universally through its integration with reality; a reality which it has reconstructed under the guise of merely describing it, possessing now ‘all the means necessary to falsify the whole of production and perception’ (1990, pp. 9-10) - _reification realised._

While we will look in a later chapter at potential strategies for accessing ‘the wealth of pre-spectacular experience’ (Debord, 1990, p. 29), my own attempt at creating a dialectical experience with history centres on acknowledging the ‘semantic potentials’ provided by the tradition of garage rock - which were
primarily technological supports and modes of practice. These _The Dead C._ repurposed in a direction that we felt would lead somewhere interesting. And eventually, other people started to agree with us. As Nick Cain put it in 2006: ‘the group’s music and methods were instrumental in creating a legitimate and valid context in which free, noise and improvised musics could exist and thrive in New Zealand on their own terms’ (Cain, 2007). This flow-on from our collective endeavours was to have significant impact on my own work in the following years, as it became easier to find and enlist potential collaborators from among the artists who had followed the lead of _The Dead C._ towards an ‘alternative tradition’. To have managed anything like this intervention in culture, however feeble, appears in the environment described by Reynolds as an implausibly concrete achievement.

If our aim is to uncover what might be the social value of improvised sound work, we must consider both the process of creation and that of reception. As noted earlier, Peters argues that the value of improvisation for the audience lies in their experience or interpretation of the work as it is produced, not when it is finished (2009, p. 45). I will also argue that this value is multiplied by the social relations which surround the work. My experience (and not only in my own small country) is that improvisation with sound is very much the social product of small tight-knit scenes where roles are frequently exchanged and where art practice happens in within what Bourdieu terms the ‘sphere of restricted production’ (i.e. production for other producers) (1993, p. 39).

And as a result the real experience of freedom happens precisely there: in the experience and knowledge of working in some way for ourselves and freely producing ‘of ourselves’. In Marxian terms this experience was classically described in the _1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts_, inscribed under the concept of ‘species being’. For me, that description long served both as an inspiration, and as what Guy Debord termed a ‘North-west Passage’, towards a “true communication” and a potential experience of life outside of what has simply been ‘given’ to us (Kaufmann, p. 153).

35/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Chapter 2: Time’s carcass

So for me, ‘what is free’ is an outcome of autonomous collective practice in the sphere of culture. It comes out of an improvisational practice which embodies freedom, but its value is in the real world. The payoff is in enabling people to have a collective free experience which points towards alternative models of social action. This is an instance of what Raymond Williams has termed ‘cultural revolution’ through self-management (2005, p. 287).

Any social utility which may be found in this kind of work lies in its reception. Making explicit the methods used and the subjective or aesthetic pay-offs is central to understanding the work in its social context both at the point of production and the point of consumption. As I wrote in the liner notes for the Gilded Splinters album:

> It is the ideas and their expression that should be of interest, not merely questions of technique. My process is fundamentally a pragmatic and heuristic one, I proceed by analyzing the results of a process of enquiry, and reworking them until a final form is reached. The form is shaped as much by the accidents of the chosen process as by any preconceptions I may have had as to its final form. (2006)

By highlighting these apparently wayward aesthetic decisions, I intended to draw attention to ‘how the work happens’. Alongside this intention, is the related one of ensuring that the construction of meaning around the work is not the fixed and immutable product of the ‘specifically artistic intention’, but rather the collaborative product of both its recording, distribution and its consumption by an audience bringing its own meanings and sets of associations (traditions) to play within the landscape outlined, if not fully mapped, by the work itself. All of this is, by definition, a work of time. The temporal dimension will be discussed subsequently, but first we must examine in more detail the significance of improvisation, considered in the broadest possible terms.

36/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Chapter 2: Time’s carcass

On improvisation as such

*Improvisation enjoys the curious distinction of being both the most widely practiced of all musical activities and the least acknowledged and understood.*


As I have explained, it is my belief that rock music has become ‘overripe’ due to a fall in the value of experience. In terms of adducing in historical detail many examples of how the process has unfolded, both Reynolds (2011) and also David Byrne in his recent memoir *How Music Works* (Byrne, 2012) have provided ample examples. What is clear is that a crisis exists, one whose slouching progress has been visible to interested observers for some time.

It is my contention that improvisation as a strategy represents a way forward from this collapse into solipsism. Improvisation is a protean concept. Many sources consider it purely in relation to music, as an opposing pole to composition. One of the better writers on the subject, guitarist Derek Bailey, makes this explicit by sub-titling his book ‘its nature and practice in music’ (Bailey, 1993). He engages with his subject through a very widespread analysis of practice, noting that some improvisers dislike the term so much that they decline to use it, preferring to refer to a specific genre of music, or asserting that they ‘just play’ (1993, p. xii). I often assert that I ‘just play’ - frequently in response to incredulous enquiries as to how I manage to perform if I never rehearse - but I have no problem with the word itself. In fact, if I object to anything it is the restricted use of the term in relation to music alone. I have found it to be a broadly fruitful concept or heuristic principle in relation to all aspects of my work, in terms of sound techniques, recording strategies, and career planning. When I discuss improvisation in what follows, it is with this implicit broader context always in mind.

But more than simply extending the compass of the concept of improvisation, I feel that any consideration of the subject requires a fuller engagement with what it
really involves: what is improvisation, in and of itself? In this connection the previously-cited work of Gary Peters deserves further mention (Peters, 2009). Peters is both a philosopher and an improviser, and he takes an admirably broad approach to ‘the ontological significance of improvisation’ viewed as ‘the problematics of a specific (often brute) aesthetic situation’ (2009, p. 10).

By framing it thus Peters turns the agenda to an existential analysis of the act of improvising: what is the experience of this act and its implications for the artist who engages in ‘a working without a work; indeed [one that] might be considered a working to avoid works’ (2009, pp. 45-46)? He argues persuasively that in improvisation, more than other forms of artistic production:

*the artwork and the artist are understood... to originate in freedom, a freedom that is always already there cognitively but only given aesthetically to those who develop a feel for this freedom and who gain a sense of its universality* (2009, p. 43).

In his view this freedom is particularly related to three characteristics of the ‘brute’ aesthetic situation in which improvisers find themselves: the rejection of ‘works’, the privileging of the performative, and the consequent fixation on beginning; making ‘the distinction between nothing and something’ (2009, p. 36).

I can endorse these statements on the basis of my own practical experience over three decades. The project discussed next in this chapter (*Report on the Construction...*) in fact consists of little other than a game devised specifically to require the subject to begin a work multiple times in circumstances designed to be as brutally unpromising as possible. In fact I would argue that framing an improvisational practice within a decaying tradition of rock music draws this predicament in the starkest terms possible, because the rock tradition views improvisation with outright suspicion (as purely self-indulgent “jamming”), and moreover privileges sheer moronic dumbness as a virtue. To thus reframe rock music on the radical premise of free improvisation with sound in fact brings to mind Kant’s formulation in *The Critique of Judgement* (cited by Peters) that the exemplary or truly original artist is one whom art:

38/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
...arouses to a sense of his own originality in putting freedom from the constraint of rules so into force in his art, that for art itself a new rule is won (Peters, 2009, p. 31).

Through the addition of the “real freedom” which is represented by substituting “improvisation with sound” for “music”, to an authentic engagement with a living, albeit decaying, rock tradition indigenous to my native country; I argue that a ‘new rule’ has been won for art. Moreover I will argue (following Krauss) that this is a ‘rule’ that may sail more truthfully under the flag of an entirely new medium of expression (Krauss, 1999).²

To return briefly to a consideration of Derek Bailey’s account of his own path in the period 1963-65 towards what he called ‘freely improvised music’, I can sympathise with much of what he says, even though his history and musical capabilities were of a totally different order to my own. Coming as he was from a position within the then vibrant tradition of jazz improvisation, he recalls how the Joseph Holbrooke group followed a pragmatically collective path that: ‘consisted in accepting the implications of the most logical and appropriate developments in our playing, and following where they led’ (1993, p. 86). He went on to characterize as ‘instinctive’ the process by which they replaced things they found ‘stilted, moribund and formal’. He goes on to note that the key influences were: being remote from outside pressure (in a provincial town), having a certain friction within the group, collaborating with others, and playing regularly to a committed audience in a non-commercial ‘private club’ setting. All these characteristics fall under the category of social relations surrounding the work, and were also present in my own experience.

Bailey is also at pains to discuss the matter of technique, which is central to my mis-competent creative practice (discussed in more depth in the next chapter). He makes the valuable distinction between playing ‘creatively’ and playing ‘executively’ (1993, p. 100). By devoting myself to creative performance on the electric guitar (an instrument on which I cannot convincingly perform executively),

² See further discussion in Chapters 3 & 5, following.

39/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
I have elected to draw continuous attention to my technical incapacity. Furthermore, having chosen an instrument which is popularly associated with ostentatious and ‘heroic’ virtuosity, I have foregrounded even more my refusal to accept traditional restrictions and conventions, other than purely technical ones. My chosen tool box has remained limited to relatively simple electronic sound parameters such as valve amplification, distortion, reverb, wah, tremolo, equalization and ring modulation. These are all tools that were ‘state of the art’ in about 1967. My heuristic in these matters has been a relatively straightforward rhetorical question (paraphrasing Waylon Jennings): ‘are you sure Jimi done it this way?’

Over and above that, I have frequently and quite deliberately foregrounded the wrongness of my approach, in case any audience member should have overlooked it; playing with household objects, unplugging mid-performance, declining to touch the strings, swinging the guitar like a cricket bat, or refusing to move for prolonged periods. For me, this has served to both emphasise my conviction that anyone can do what I do, and simultaneously challenge other performers to respond to my ‘provocations’ with creative actions that step outside their normal performing habitus, and likewise challenge audiences to ‘admit the unwelcome shock of the new’ (Russell, 2009, p. 62).

Case study 1: A report on the construction of situations (1957)

This project was conceived as a video documentation of my improvisational practice. In January 2008 I undertook a series of performances in the shop window of a small dealer art gallery in my home town. Situating the project within the space of an ‘art shop’ admitted a fundamental layer of critique with reference to the drive towards commodification. There was an implicit challenge in the performance which may be summarised as: ‘Commodify this!’ The performances all took place between 9am and 11am on Saturday mornings, when the gallery, located in an early-twentieth century retail building in one of the main streets of
Lyttelton, was closed. Any witnesses to the performances were merely chance passers-by. The project took the shape of a game because the performances were formed by a number of more or less arbitrary rules.

Although the pieces are improvised, the series is ‘scored’ through the détournement of a theoretical text, to give it its full title: *A report on the construction of situations and on the International Situationist tendency’s conditions of organisation and action* (Situationist International, 2006, p. 25). This was one of the founding documents of the Situationist International, written by Guy Debord in 1957. The titles of the individual improvisations are drawn from the six sections of the text. An overall duration for the series was arbitrarily set at one hour, and the length of each piece was set according to the relative length of the sections compared to the whole text. Their order was likewise determined by the original order of sections. Each piece uses a single different sound source, arbitrarily selected:

1. *Revolution and counterrevolution in modern culture*: electronics (16 min)
2. *Decomposition: the ultimate stage of bourgeois thought*: clavioline (11 min)
3. *The role of minority tendencies in the ebbing period*: Tibetan singing bowl (10 min)
4. *Platform for a provisional opposition*: microphone (5 min)
5. *Toward a situationist international*: guitar (16 min)
6. *Our immediate tasks*: tape (2 min)

Viewing the individual improvisations involves being subjected each time to a laboriously repeated framing of the action. A sign displayed in the window serves as a ‘caption’ - announcing the piece being performed, followed by a quotation from the text. The cameraman begins each recording with a long shot of the gallery from the opposite footpath. The camera then ‘walks’ a zoom across the road, shows the sign in the window, and then enters the gallery through the door.

41/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Chapter 2: Time’s carcass

As soon as the camera enters the door of the gallery, I begin the improvisation. The camera comes to rest on a tripod for the duration of the performance. The frame of the video image coincides with the frame of the shop window, showing my sound performance, with me facing the camera, back to the street and any audience that may wander into the shot.

The work is made in real time, in the gaze of the camera, embedded in a quotidian setting. Every objective component of the work is visible. There are no rehearsals, beyond a brief sound check, and no second takes. That the improvisations are undertaken both with ‘proper instruments’ and with pieces of technical equipment has the virtue of drawing attention to the arbitrary nature of the line distinguishing aesthetic and technical intentions, and the relevance of mis-competent practice in both spheres.

The gallery setting and the captioning of the works (visible from the street) announces that the sound resulting from the performance is an aesthetic cultural product, whatever it actually sounds like. The nature of the performance raises questions about what ‘performing’ consists of. In this case, it consists of listening very intently to an unfolding sound, and directing it in new courses—often through almost imperceptible bodily movements. Although framed by the proscenium of the shop window, there is no ‘show’ as such. It is interesting in retrospect to read the reflective text which I wrote at the time of the project’s realisation, before the publication of Peter’s work (2009). My self-analysis of the experience of improvisation clearly mirrors his:

_I have suspected for some time, and must now, having undertaken this series of ‘audience-less’ performances, conclude that in solo improvisation, my aim is not mainly directed to pleasing the audience. I aim instead to produce a sound that excites and/or surprises me - one that opens up new areas of thought, or suggests new ideas, or stimulates new sensations. Otherwise, I can’t think of a reason to do this. So when there is ‘no audience’, in the sense that no one has come deliberately to hear the performance; that performance proceeds exactly as it otherwise would. If there was an_
audience, they would hopefully appreciate the sound for the same reasons I do. If not, too bad.

This relates to the way I behave during the improvisation. As the video record shows, I am not ‘performing’ in any usually accepted sense of the word. I am physically present, but an audience would be as entertained watching me change the batteries in my distortion pedal. I am only doing that which is necessary to make a sound.

That said, the parameters set for the project posed some unusual challenges. Having decided in advance on the length of the pieces, and the equipment to be used for each, as well as the rule that there would be no second takes – I found myself paradoxically under more ‘pressure’ than I would usually be in the presence of an audience.

When the door to the gallery opened to admit the camera and microphone, the piece had to begin. Because of the lack of the usual performance ambience (dim lights, ambient conversation, some sort of stage setting) I felt I had to steel myself to ‘make it happen’ on cue. If anything, by putting myself under this pressure: at unusual hours of the day, in the streetscape of my local community, with any possible audience out of sight behind me – I found to my surprise that I had made the performance environment as challenging as any I had encountered.

The visual record of this project shows clearly something I was only in part aware of previously - that in performance my main activity is listening, rather than acting. I realised, after having completed all these pieces using different sound sources, that I follow a common pattern in all of them.

I generally start a series of sounds and interact more or less actively with the equipment until I get ‘the sound’, and then I start to listen to it intently, and in depth. What determines the identity of ‘the sound’ is my response to it. This is a visceral or instinctive response. I can tell pretty quickly if a sound excites me, because I have spent a very long time listening for such sounds. Even as a teenager listening to punk rock records, what I responded to as much as the songs being played (a common object of response in music listeners) - were the sounds. Certain instruments and certain players made sounds to which I responded positively. I have carried this forward into my own work over twenty years of refining my engagement with sound.

Once I have a grasp on ‘the sound’, I begin to see what its inherent properties and potential are, based on my familiarity with the physical properties of the sound source in question. At this point I will begin to work with the sound - to paraphrase John Cage, I am: ‘helping sounds be what they are’.

43/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
My ideal is to find sounds that develop independently of direct intervention, sounds that have a life of their own.

This usually happens by means of - or is augmented by - more or less elaborately effected feedback loops. It is helped by driving analogue equipment outside the parameters of its normal mode of operation. This fact was clearly fore-grounded by the consistencies obvious in the results I obtained from the six different sound sources employed in this project. As I change the overall parameters within which the sound is developing (by, for instance, tuning the harmonically vibrating strings on a guitar) the development of the sound changes direction. Despite this, the development of the sound is ‘organic’.

I mean this in the sense that it is the product of equipment used in such a way as to produce an ‘electro-acoustic ecology’. I use the term ecology by analogy, in the sense that a natural environment exists in dynamic stasis, until external influences tip its development in one or another direction - such as the introduction of a new dominant species, or the damming of a river creating a lake. One of my main working methods is to create a more or less simple environmental system of sound-generating/processing equipment, and then tweaking its structure to produce a result that is to my liking.

Finally, it bears pointing out that this project is also an example of what Giorgio Agamben (as discussed later in this chapter) has called a ‘pure means’, a way of fore-grounding the medium (in this case around improvisation, as much as cinema) and making it visible (Agamben, 2004). The framing of each improvisation with the exterior shot is a way of making the entire project a series of ‘loops’, and while the repetition has objectively different content each time, overall the ‘action’ is exactly the same. This is precisely the repetition that ‘restores possibility’.

Although my cinematic work does not rely on détourned film footage, it does détourn Debord’s pamphlet as its score, and in this way refers directly to immanent critique of the politics of time which Agamben identified in Debord’s cinema, and which he associated with the foregrounding of repetition and stoppage. In these ways the experience of improvisation, properly understood, can be political. This is a contention to which I will return in my conclusion.
We are time

Time is within you, shine through your eyes,  
We’ll kill the word, black letter lies,  
All will be now, dreams are too fast,  
You are the first, we are the last,  
I! You! We! Are time!

We are time, The Pop Group, 1979  
(Sager, Smith, Stewart, Underwood, & Waddington, 1979)

Marx famously began his analysis of capitalist social reality from the concept of the commodity, which he viewed as the fundamental unit of the economy. More recently, Marxist theorists have repeatedly returned to the endlessly fertile field of study which is the Marxian concept of the commodity and its ‘fetishism’. Debord argued in The society of the spectacle that in the heightened form of late-twentieth century capitalism, time itself had become the fundamental commodity:

It is under the rule of time-as-commodity that “time is everything, man is nothing; he is at most time’s carcass” (The Poverty of Philosophy). This is time devalued - the complete inversion of time as “the sphere of human development.” (Debord, 1995, p. 110)

One of the few modern theorists to follow Debord’s suggestive analysis is Moishe Postone, who has reinterpreted Marx’s ‘critical theory’ to focus on the concept of value. He argues that under capitalism, value is embodied time: ‘the form of wealth (value) and its measure (abstract time) are constituted by labour in capitalism as “objective” social mediations’ (Postone, 1993, p. 189). He defines value in capitalist society as the ‘self-mediating’ dimension of all commodities, one that mediates the relationship of all commodities to each other and enables their exchange and therefore, taken to the most general level of social analysis, the value of all commodities is time itself.

By the mid-1990s I had become concerned in my own practice with the relationship between perceived and elapsed time, and how music (in my case, improvised

45/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
music) was in itself a way of working with, understanding and critiquing time and its social uses. In part this was a product of my theoretical engagement with Marx and my embryonic interest in Debord, but mainly it was a result of my own perceptions of time while improvising and listening to music, whether or not this was done under the influence of drugs (although this practice did provide results which were instructive if not under rigorous experimental control). I have had many conversations with improvisers around how inaccurate perceptions of elapsed time can be during a performance in which it is impossible to situate progress inside a predictable framework of musical events.

One of the fruits of this have been my ongoing experiments with tape music (as exemplified in the No mean city project, described later in this chapter), processes that have been a means to integrate improvisational strategies with aleatoric procedures in composition. In these works I improvised to tape with a variety of sound sources, then constructed collages of tape fragments using either chance procedures or quick-fire improvisational procedures - effectively, ways of composing on the editing block. I value this kind of procedure because it enables me to ‘compose’ using non-musical methods, which still incorporate strong elements of improvisation. I have previously reflected on this process under the influence of by Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of Guy Debord’s films (Russell, 2009, pp. 89-93).

Agamben introduces the concept of a ‘pure means’, a medium that does not disappear (as Hegel argued) by being realized in an artistic expression. A ‘pure means’ is one which remains visible, in the foreground. Agamben argues that because Debord’s films relied so heavily on repetition and stoppage, to the exclusion of almost all other cinematic gestures; they thus foregrounded ‘the being-image of the image’, which is otherwise the one thing an image can never show: what he terms ‘imagelessness’ (Agamben, 2004, pp. 318-19). This is a strategic opportunity to make use of the systemic drive of commodification towards totality; which Benjamin expressed in a memorable phrase: ‘the commodity wants to look itself in the face’ (2006, p. 148).

46/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Chapter 2: Time’s carcass

My experience has been that recording and reconfiguring improvisations through radical and unconcealed tape editing (jump-cutting, to borrow a cinematic term) similarly serves to foreground the technological support of the artwork. This kind of procedure is a way to draw attention to all the ways that time is embodied in the work, through both the means of production and also consumption.

Tape work can highlight precisely this repetition and stoppage as an overt way to draw attention to the difference between the time of the playing and the time of the work, the experienced time of the audience, and the performative time of the artist. For me, the use of outmoded tape editing technology also has an ironic component. By employing these means I am rejecting the time-saving discipline of digital tools in favour of a procedure that takes much more time and produces (if prosecuted in the slap-dash style I favour) an outcome that is audibly less perfect. In other words, my improvisational tape work takes a form of real-time composition and adds a gratuitous (that is ‘pointless’) quantum of time and effort to the recording in order to produce a finished work which nods towards a technologically-mediated way to falsify time (which has been the overall thrust of studio technological development throughout my lifetime) only to gleefully subvert it into a simultaneous immanent critique of both technology and the temporal dictatorship of the spectacle itself.

Foregrounding the ‘pure means’ of the editing block in this way serves to critique (or rather to expose) the more complex and problematic relationship to time in the moment of performance. Composition in this sense foregrounds the element of time and places it near the centre of the experiences of both the production and consumption of music. Furthermore, it serves to draw attention in a very explicit way to the mediation of technology, which has been so central to sound improvisation since at least Russolo’s invention of the intonorumori in 1912. The next chapter will have more to say on the subject of technology.

In real-time improvisation the two forms of time - the times of both production and consumption - appear to be identical, and yet from both the artist’s and the

47/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Chapter 2: Time’s carcass

audience’s points of view (during the performative moment) they often fail completely to coincide. This is the result of being ‘lost in music’, an almost ubiquitous experience. It also reflects the reality of art work in capitalism. Artists must invest very large amounts of time (and sometimes study) to the cultivation of intellectual and technical abilities of very specialized sorts. Bourdieu argues that this is the basis of the autonomy of art (1993, p. 112), but this autonomy also ensures that it will remain largely unencumbered by economic rewards. As a result, in the current conditions of neo-liberal late-capitalism, it is increasingly the rich who can afford to be musicians or actors (Arnett, 2014). The rest of us have to find ways to make do, to support the time required to enable (not just make) the work we wish to do. For me this has been one of virtues of mis-competent improvisation, in that it enables me to always choose the ‘quick and dirty’ approach. As a result outcomes are generally maximized versus time expended, and for me, foregrounding this strategy is both a moral and an artistic imperative, a way to bring to the attention of the audience the difference in my temporal experience of the work compared to theirs. In short: when I go home, the work of performance is still, in a real sense, in front of me - because it is never done.

This discussion parallels Peters’ analysis of improvisation, where he describes the ‘seductive and compelling lure of the work as an emerging and potentially finished structure or object’ which ‘begins the moment a free improvisation is under way’ (2009, p. 63). It cannot, of course, end in a ‘work’, since as Peters acknowledges, in free improvisation ‘the work is destroyed by becoming a work’ (2009, p. 48) - so if it is to remain improvisation then the artist must ‘take the work home’. Peters clearly values the way improvisation enacts the moment of creation, and he speculates on the role of the audience, and whether they influence that creation in various ways. For me the role and value of the audience cannot be in the creation of the work, because I am not making the work for them, and personally find it impossible to relate to the audience in a ‘performative’ sense during an improvisation. If I start to place myself in the position of the listener outside the performance, I cannot focus on the process of listening within the performance,
which for me is the fundamental moment. There can be no performance without
listening, and the trap as a performer is to listen as the audience does. The
audience listens with judgement, comparing the performance to others by the
same artists, or to the work of other artists. In the moment of performance, the
improviser’s listening can only happen in the infinitesimal gap between one sound
and the next, and the improviser’s aesthetic judgement must be deferred. In
performance, the improviser’s listening is directed only at ‘what must come next’?
The decision-making process which results from that is paradoxically largely
limited to the realm of the technical. It is more often about what can be done
rather than what should be done.

For me, the role of the audience is as witnesses, whose experience of the work
must be profoundly different in kind to mine. And only by drawing attention to that
difference can the performance be raised to the level of significance outside itself,
and eventually perhaps provoke the audience to reflect more explicitly on the use
to which they are putting time. As Peters goes on to say, ‘free improvisation... is
not the embodiment of freedom but a search for it in the here and now of the
work’s becoming’ (2009, p. p.72). And as anyone who has ever lost their car keys
knows, there is no experience of time to compare with that spent looking for
something. The freedom is in the potential of the beginning, before there actually
is a work, and in the end of the work, in the audience’s reception, experience and
use of it, but not in the work itself. In a way, the improvising performer is ‘held
 captive’ by the performance (quite literally) in a way fundamentally different to
that experienced by the audience. It is here that Peters argues the ‘irony’ of
improvisation constitutes one of its signal values, in that it ‘speaks in order not to
speak’ (2009, p. 70). This he associates with the ‘hyper-awareness’ of the
improviser to ‘the positioning of the self within this work’ (Peters, 2009, p. 98).
For me, this irony is bound up with the nature of sound work as time-based, as
opposed to object-based, art. This is heightened by both the improvisational

---

3 There is a further discussion of this in Chapter 3 with reference to the Performance at Westspace 2008.
aspects of my work, and the importance of performance. The work in its own process of becoming is both deceptively protean and impossibly ungraspable, it can be experienced in real time but neither reduced to a score, nor analysed intellectually in any meaningful level of detail. It can be recorded and played back, but that experience will never recapture ‘the moment’. Perhaps it is that failure which is its strongest virtue (contradicting the famous and tedious debates about the value of recording improvised music, in which this ‘failure’ is seen as a negative outcome) (Bailey, 1993, p. 102). By drawing attention to the way in which listening to a recording can use time differently to listening to a performance, we draw attention again to the fact that our experience of all elapsed time is not equal, whatever the socially mediated value-concept of capitalism may have to say on the subject. It is also worth reflecting that in the economy of late-capitalism, the commodity-as-object (the recording) is not the real receptacle of value, that palm goes to the intellectual property underpinning the ‘object’, in the case of improvisation this is the ability of the improviser; something which, like sunshine, is hard to bottle.

On a broader level, the political importance of time has returned to me again and again in the least-informed but most frequent kind of criticism that my work engenders: the argument that ‘it all sounds the same’. My most commonly-advanced and glib response to this is: ‘Yes, great, isn’t it?’ But after much reflection, I have concluded that this impression of ‘sameness’ in the audience’s experience is (glibness aside) indeed a signal virtue.

To refer again to Agamben’s essay, he argues that Debord’s cinema, by allowing recorded time to ‘happen again’ through repetition, is in fact a way in which he ‘opens up a zone of undecidability between the real and the possible’, and that this is an art-form that induces its audience to understand that ‘repetition restores possibility’ (2004, p. 316). The same argument is present in Benjamin, as in his assertion about the role of editing in film, that: ‘the formula in which the dialectical structure of film - film considered in its technological dimension - finds
expression runs as follows. Discontinuous images replace one another in a continuous sequence’ (2008, p. 340).

Agamben argues that this is the opposite to the message of the media, that notorious agent of the spectacle, which wishes to present only facts before which the audience is powerless, understanding only that it was and must be the way it is shown. Repetition and stoppage as tools of montage show how freedom can reclaim a space from what is given, and as my own unfolding career has afforded me an extended perspective I can begin to see how my practice (viewed ‘totally’) embodies precisely this truth.

I have never shied away from acknowledging openly that a great part of my creative practice consists of endlessly repeating myself through a limited sound palette, continually beginning a work that could always be ‘anything’, but in an ironic way is always the same thing; and doing it for what seems like a long time, then stopping - until I do it again some other time, in conditions of the same freedom, but with the same result. This is a critique of time under the rule of the spectacle at the ‘macro’ level, not a matter of hours but of years. Only with the benefit of hindsight can I appreciate the extent to which my persistence in pursuing such a ‘career’ in the absence of commensurate financial return, is itself a ‘work of art’. Furthermore, in terms of my relationship to tradition, there is a deep irony in the changes which have taken place in our relationship to time during the years of my long march away from what I see as the wreckage of rock culture.

In the ‘golden age’ of garage rock - ‘the quartier of perdition where my youth went as if to complete its education’ (Debord, 2004, p. 21) - the dominance of the neoliberal economy over our time was still in its infancy. As a result, everyone concerned (almost all of whom were children of the welfare state; students or unemployed) had relatively large amounts of time to devote to gratuitous activities.

The story of my subsequent career has been one of attempting to surf the crest of the wave of the economy’s unfettered dominance, which has swept away free time.
Chapter 2: Time's carcass

as the “short twentieth century” came to an end. In a very real way my adoption of mis-competent improvisation is a significant strategy to economise time use, while maximizing creative outcomes. The path of this neo-liberal “tsunami” has recently been memorably described by Jonathan Crary (24/7: Late capitalism and the ends of sleep, 2013). In particular Crary has described how this has led to:

...a temporal alignment of the individual with the functioning of markets... [which] has made irrelevant distinctions between work and non-work time... Under these conditions, the relentless financialization of previously autonomous spheres of social activity continues unchecked (Crary, 2013, p. 74).

Crary goes on to observe how this process has eroded and circumscribed what Lefebvre and others theorized in the 1950s as “everyday life”, a left-over part of time that might ‘have a core of revolutionary potential’ (2013, p. 70). I see an heroic aspect in the devotion to self-expression of any artist through this period, given the irresistible impression that the spectacle wishes to erase individuality, as it has ‘succeeded in raising a whole generation moulded to its laws’ (Debord, 1990, p. 7).

So it is through my prolonged and Sisyphean labour as an artist that I have tried to draw attention to Benjamin’s ‘chips of Messianic time’, the ones which offer ‘every era’ the chance ‘to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is about to overpower it’ - and make the impossible (yet necessary) dialectical ‘leap in the open air of history’. (Benjamin, 1968, pp. 253-264). This is the value of making the audience raise the objection: ‘that’s not music!’ It enables the other almost-unspeakable question to be aired: ‘so what is music?’ Questioning cultural presuppositions, in a society where almost all culture is ultimately harnessed to the economy through the means of production, distribution and consumption, is all of a piece with questioning political and ideological presuppositions.

Anti-spectacular cultural practice serves to prepare for this ‘leap in the open air’, as Benjamin observed in his ‘Work of Art’ essay in connection with the cinema: ‘the function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions
needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily’ (2008, p. 26). The extension of this argument to technologically-mediated forms of sound practice requires no great stretch of imagination⁴. Benjamin was professionally involved with German radio, and so is unlikely to have been unaware that Walter Ruttmann had composed the first edited electro-acoustic composition for radio broadcast in 1930, using optical film sound track (Ruttmann, 1930). This recording expands the hearing of all auditors, even today, and for that reason has been reissued as part of the Metamkine label series: Cinéma pour l’oreille.

Case study 2: No mean city

The original impetus for this project was an opportunity to make an installation work for the 2014 Audacious Festival of Sonic Art, organized in Christchurch by the Cantabrian Society of Sonic Artists (of which I was the figurehead president). The CSSA was established following the Christchurch earthquakes of 2010-11 to set up a sound installation gallery (the Auricle) and to obtain public arts funding to benefit sound work in the devastated city. The challenge was to devise works that could be installed outdoor in a CBD that was largely empty lots, previously occupied by buildings. My idea was to make an analogue tape collage that used texts about cities and their role in culture, and install it in the entrance to an alleyway near the Auricle, which led between two buildings to an open space where other buildings had previously stood. The work as installed as two mono loops of uneven length, one on each side of the door to the alley. The loops were synchronized at the start of the three day installation (with my voice reciting the same text in each channel, one in French, one in English), but made so as to remain varyingly unsynchronized for the entire duration. In other words, an open-ended generative work.

Afterwards I made a stereo mix for release on LP, starting the same way but running for only 14 minutes. This was accompanied by a ‘dub’ consisting of one of

---

⁴ I will develop this argument later in Chapter 5 with reference to the theory of the dérive and the construction of situations.
the component work-tapes played backwards at low speed to create a gauzy and slightly drunk-sounding introduction to the main piece, which has a more insistent and hectoring tone. In addition the work was reinstalled in the Auricle later that year as an interactive work. The two mono channels were reinstated, and in addition two tape machines sat on plinths with original component tape loops set up so visitors could play them at will while listening to the mixed final version. The original five-day process of recording and mixing the work, including setting up the studio in the Auricle, was documented by a film crew, and will form part of a documentary examining the creative process, to be entitled *On an unknown beach*. The footage used in this documentary clearly illustrates how work in the studio may be considered as performance, as multiple machines are ‘played’ to produce mixes and sub-mixes, in a sequence of procedures analogous to instrumental stage performance.

The work was intended as a meditation on time, as understood within a setting in which large amounts of collective social history (as embodied in buildings) had recently been destroyed. I had been doing some writing on this subject for some small-press periodicals being published in the city as a way of providing a voice for citizens seeking to participate in the increasingly bureaucratic and ‘top-down’ planning process for the so-called ‘Rebuild’. The texts used were by St-John Perse (extracts of *Anabase* dealing with the establishment of cities), Georg Buchner (quotes from *Danton’s Death* which dealt with Paris as an actor in the Revolution) and Guy Debord (extracts from *The Society of the Spectacle* discussing the role of cities in the history of capitalism). The sound elements included fanfares for drum and vuvuzela recorded on the site of several demolished buildings previously used as art spaces and clubs, along with electronic and acoustic instruments recorded in the studio. The texts were all read by me, but recorded in various ways to highlight the variable fidelity of the recordings, in order to emphasize their physical existence as recordings.

The process of assembling the two mono work-tapes that formed the basis of the piece was quite complicated. There were various sessions recording electronic and
acoustic sounds in the Auricle (a reverberant unfurnished room). These were edited into loops and then sub-mixes were made where multiple loops were played through speakers and again recorded in the acoustic environment of the room. I ensured that the sound of tapes being turned on and off was preserved in the final mixes. The outdoor fanfare recordings were then edited (physically, using razors and splices) with sections of the sub-mixed recordings and elements from the various vocal recordings. Some texts were repeated within the mono work-tapes, and some were repeated between the two mono tapes. Others occurred only once. The same went for the fanfare recordings. The sub-mixed recording of the instrumental tape loops was edited into sections by duration and spliced into the other components as required. The outcome was two edited analogue tapes that were digitized for reproduction and installation, as well as a number of component loops and sub-mixes that were used in the later Auricle installation as well as the LP presentation (for example the Chinagraph #2 piece, named after a note on the original tape reel).

So this work took time as its subject and as its substance, in quite an unusual way. The process of making the recordings was foregrounded at every turn (ultimately in the Auricle installation by including actual tapes and machines used in making the instrumental sub-mixes as interactive components in the gallery). This places them into Agamben’s category of a ‘pure means’. In addition, the selected texts allow an overlay of history, in the gabble of voices (all one voice). These clearly stretch from prehistory (‘foundation of the city, stone and bronze’), through the eighteenth century (‘a knife for the rich, who whore with the daughters of the people’) and up to modernity (‘universal history was born in cities, and attained its majority with the town’s decisive victory over the country’). Finally the setting of the installation within a festival of sound in a city destroyed by the twin forces of nature and capital (hence the ironic fanfares, like farts of escaping gas), which placed the work into layers of memory and action, both collective and individual. The work as a whole, within the festival setting, was intended as a response to top-down urban planning and its trampling of grass-roots autonomy.

55/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Chapter 2: Time’s carcass

The structure of repetitive loops, within an overall (if cyclical) progress of the piece clearly establishes the repetition and stoppage which Agamben identified in cinematic montage as its ‘messianic task’ (Agamben, 2004, p. 318), while transferring them to a purely audible medium. In this way the work acts as a signpost to the ‘zone of undecidability between the real and the possible’ (2004, p. 316). And finally it is this realm of the possible that allows a flavor of utopia to creep in. The social project of the CSSA, the Auricle, and the Audacious Festivals (it was repeated in 2015) together serving to assemble a sub-culture of artists working in sound, in the decidedly adverse circumstances of disaster recovery, and to use that opportunity as a way to build participation in, as well as engagement with, an emerging art form is nothing if not ambitious. This is where the potential for an un-recuperated art form to build new kinds of social relationships can be seen in action.

Creative constraint

*Argument may retard science while deception is necessary for advancing it. Add to this what we have learned about the ordering principles of myth, religious enthusiasm, abnormal experiences, and one will be strongly inclined to believe that there are many different ways of approaching nature and society and many different ways of evaluating the results of a particular approach, that we must make a choice, and that there are no objective conditions to guide us.*

*Against method*, P. Feyerabend. (1975, pp. 195-6)

The irony which Peters identifies with improvisation is also linked to the aspect of deconstruction, which he sees as related to performative auto-critique (2009, p. 95). As I have indicated, the latter is especially significant in my practice. This critical aspect is highlighted because, as a developing practice, a form in search of its own form, such sound work is inherently self-critical. I was once memorably heckled by a musician I greatly respected with the line: ‘you wouldn’t play like that if you didn’t know what you were doing!’ (P. Gutteridge, personal communication, c.1992). This was both true and false at the same time. While the facile assumption might be that anyone playing like that simply did not know any better (and this was demonstrably false, since I was well acquainted; as a
published critic moreover, with the work of many skilled and talented musicians), yet at the same time, I did not know ‘what I was doing’ in the sense that my performance was open-ended, and intended to uncover experientially more about what I might, indeed, best be doing. This experimental aspect of my practice is ongoing, and it is precisely this ‘both/and’ aspect of it (as opposed to ‘either/or’) which I think ensures its sharpness as a tool for exposing reification in other forms of culture. The process of performance itself is really not ‘the only thing going on’, and its inherent questionability is thus foregrounded as the only possible point to the whole exercise. This “breaking of the fourth wall” will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter’s examination of my Performance at Westspace, 2008.

For me this suggests strong analogies to Paul Feyerabend’s argument concerning the undesirability of upholding the distinction between a context of discovery and the context of justification in science, and the related distinction between theoretical and observational terms (Feyrabend, 1975, pp. 165-169). In the history of science it has been argued (for instance by Karl Popper) that different rules of logic need to govern how new theoretical knowledge is generated and how it is subsequently proven, while Feyerabend famously argued that ‘intuition’ needs to be allowed at all stages of the knowledge process, and not somehow restricted to the phase of discovery. While I do not wish to over-emphasise this argument, which is one of analogy rather than identity, I do feel that Feyerband’s arguments suggest what I am calling a ‘both/and’ approach.

In music, there are strict rules which limit what sounds can and should be made, these in my view unreasonably restrict artistic freedom and in important ways limit the works that can be created. These presuppositions include that lingering (if no longer acknowledged) assumption that harmony is somehow ethically and/or aesthetically superior. In terms of the history of music, this ethical presumption derives from Renaissance ideas about the ‘harmony of the spheres’ as a reflection of divine design (Hallyn, 1993). Within the discourse around minimalism in music, these concealed presuppositions have been critiqued by Tony Conrad in both print and practice (Conrad, 1995). Conrad’s example supports my argument that this

57/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Chapter 2: Time’s carcass

may be achieved through ‘immanent critique’, making work that simultaneously embodies positive ideas about art and criticizes alternative forms.

Peters suggests that both the auto-critical and the deconstructive impulses can be amplified by the foregrounding of ‘tradition’ in the sense that limited generic tropes (semantic potentials) are deliberately and repetitively highlighted in improvisation. The discussion points towards jazz in the context of Adorno’s critique of that form of improvisation, but rock or electro-acoustic composition could equally well be inserted in the equation. Inherently implicated in this auto-critical aspect of the work is my determined lack of musical prowess, which is a kind of freedom that results from constraint. It is, in the language of the foregoing discussion, restricted to the ‘ironic’ consideration of what can be done, leaving aside the broader and more properly aesthetic questions of what ‘should’ be done.

This concept of a creative constraint is a very potent one. It has been explored within the realm of literature, and the entire collective oeuvre of the Oulipo is a testament to it (Motte, 1986). Indeed, their thinking on the subject, despite being directed at the concept of literary form, is quite relevant. The Oulipo was a group of French avant garde writers founded in 1960, devoted to the invention of new literary forms. Their goal, as stated in their second manifesto, was to ‘raise the problem of the efficacy and the viability of artificial literary structures’ (Motte, 1986, p. 30). Their method was to invent new rules for literary forms, such as a thirteen-foot Alexandrine, or the lipogram – a work from which one or more letters have been excluded. The general rule of thumb seemed to be that inspiration was only so much use, and besides that difficult to bottle. Or, as Raymond Queneau put it: ‘inspiration which consists in blind obedience to every impulse is in reality a sort of slavery’ (Motte, 1986, p. 41). Surprisingly this remark starts to impinge on the dilemma of the free improviser as analysed by Peters:

The truth is that any art worthy of the name will contain within it unwonted moments of originality, interruptions of the given and exemplary acts of ingenuity, lodged within a mimeticism that, in reality,
can by no means be crudely opposed to origination and originality. (2009, p. 35)

I had discussed the problems of beginning and originality in my own 1993 manifesto (Russell, 2009, p. 21): how does one even begin to enact creative originality in a universe of radical freedom, where everything is permitted (and worse, one in which every previously-chosen option will soon be available to freely download and replay at will). By what criteria are we to choose? In actual fact, I had already arrived at an answer to this question through a process of praxis-based experimentation, by (to paraphrase Derek Bailey) accepting the implications of the most logical and appropriate developments of my playing. My conclusion was that arbitrarily-adopted constraints permit the activation of the potential implicit in absolute freedom. This is evidenced in the preceding discussion of the Report on the Construction of Situations (1957) project.

At the same time it must be acknowledged that mis-competent improvisation as a strategy in sound work is not only a creative constraint considered from the point of view of the universe of possible artistic strategies open to a potential artist. Mis-competent sound also (as evidenced by Peter Gutteridge’s heckle of 1992) serves to delegitimize music per se. In this sense it is an example of what Bourdieu (citing Henry Flynt) has called ‘ritual sacrilege’, when an artist calls attention to the universally-accepted but publically disavowed rules of the game – which Bourdieu calls ‘the one unforgivable transgression’ (1993, pp. 80-81).

Destructive practice

Practice has a logic which is not that of the logician.
The logic of practice, P.Bourdieu (1990, p. 86)

Although the reliance upon arbitrary constraints may have initially been one of my least-considered decisions (deriving in the first place from a fundamental lack of musical ability which assumed the status of an unavoidable necessity), it is one that has had some of the most significant consequences. There were certainly others that could have been made. In the end, what I believe determines the value
of the decision is whether the consequent actions will benefit the collective good: will they tend to increase the quantum of real freedom available to us in society? As Pierre Schaeffer put it: ‘I urge composers of concrete music... [to] not be just anyone churning out just anything. And to think about who will be helped or harmed by their work’ (2012, p. 166). I feel this is imperative because I strongly agree that: ‘the obscure and difficult path of critical theory must also be the path of the practical movement that occurs on the level of society as a whole’ (Debord, 1995, p. 143). My adoption of artistic constraint as a strategy was, as I have said, on one level no choice at all, since I did not have the technique to enable many other choices. Lacking the innate skill to play with executive fluency in a range of styles, it was easy to opt to play with creative skill in no defined style at all. So I replaced stylistic choice with arbitrarily-chosen parameters such as predefined duration, or choosing to play an instrument in which I was unversed. In doing so I was happy to place myself in a position of opposition to ‘music’, since I had the feeling (borne out by subsequent events) that the tradition of music in which I was personally invested had exhausted much of its cultural value.

Before we may adequately discuss the question of the social value of such an auto-critical art practice, we need to look at the place of culture in society. Since (as we have already argued) the originality of the work lies in the domain of art and the relationships that exist around it (Peters, 2009, p. 104), and since in classic Marxist theory art belongs in the determined sphere of the superstructure: how can this be important?

Raymond Williams has provided an eloquent and useful summary of the arguments against the facile determinism often argued equally by unsophisticated Marxists, and their opponents. In essence he points out that social relations of production form part of the ‘base’, and that it is thus not a purely objective construct: ‘the “base” is the real social existence of man’ (Williams, 2005, p. 38). Included in this must be art, since its meaning is based in social relations, and part of its raison d’etre is to help us to understand the world: ‘art is a relationship between subject and object. The exercising of this relationship is the very stuff of art’ (Schaeffer,
Chapter 2: Time’s carcass

2012, p. 130). Williams goes on to invoke Lukács’ concept of the social ‘totality’, which he says may be an adequate model for the unity of both base and superstructure if we take into consideration the notion of social intention (2005, p. 41). This brings me back to my own artistic decision-making process, because Williams believes passionately that this concept of totality can be valid only if placed alongside the Gramscian category of hegemony. And if hegemony is the social reality wielded by the totality in the interests of one class, then in and of itself it poses the challenge of resistance; resistance within all parts of the totality - or to use the simple language of the vulgar model, within both the objective/determining and the subjective/determined levels of social reality. This was what Debord meant in 1957 when he wrote: ‘a society’s “culture” both reflects and prefigures its possible ways of organizing life’ (Situationist International, 2006, p. 25). It is this prefiguring that concerns me.

My commitment to free improvisation in sound over the last three decades (as exemplified in my current research) has been, in Benjaminian terms, destructive, destructive that is, of the hegemonic consensus. The received musical tradition, within which I found myself, was in William’s terms a ‘selective tradition’, an effective dominant culture passing itself off as the only common-sense option. In this the ‘low culture’ of popular music merely abrogated to itself by imitation the prerogatives already claimed by music in ‘high culture’. Music performs many roles within society, hence the immense variation of forms contained within that category. What is most relevant here is the role that it plays in ‘constitute[ing] a sense of reality for most people’ which is ‘incorporated’ through education and ‘wider social training’, and which furthermore serves to ‘select and organize and interpret our experience’ (Williams, 2005, pp. 43-44). This training occurs at a deep level, that of socialization and acculturation, it does not need to be explicitly ‘taught’. The challenge is to offer alternative structures with alternative effects on the consciousness of real people. Within this ‘selective tradition’ exist other possibilities, these are what Benjamin called ‘chips of Messianic time’. There are two options:

61/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Some pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus conserving them, others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them. The latter are called the destructive. (Benjamin, 2007, p. 302)

Thus the passing on of ‘situations’ (in itself a highly suggestive term) is the oppositional strategy which may enable the growth of ‘emergent cultures’ (Williams, 2005, p. 45), but before we can discuss the process of their emergence, we need to consider the choices implicit in selecting tools for the job at hand.
Chapter 3: Tools

In this chapter the discussion turns to considerations around tools and technologies. Starting from a discussion of Walter Benjamin’s ideas about the revolutionary potential of the ‘outmoded’, and following a line of argument advanced by Rosalind Krauss, I discuss how the use of obsolete analogue technologies may offer a way to escape from the established habitus of technologies (understood as a mechanism of reification under capitalism). The discussion then turns to a discussion of what constitutes a medium, and how media follow “life-cycles” and may thus be subject to ‘re-invention’. Finally I return to a discussion of the role of mis-competent technical practice and how that may enable technical practices to become art practices through the application of the category of intention. Case studies illuminate these points through a detailed discussion of my practice in relation to the antinomies of music and sound, as well as art and technical process.

The outmoded

*There is an essentially modern tragic symbol: it is a sort of large wheel which is spinning and is no longer being steered by a hand.*

*Paris Peasant*, Louis Aragon, 1926 (1987, p. 133)

The current hegemonic ideology as described by Williams in the previous chapter has recently been dubbed ‘capitalist realism’ by Mark Fisher. This he has usefully defined as: ‘a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action’ (Fisher, 2009, p. 16). This is the ideology which at once supports and masks ‘the order prevailing in the field of power’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 44) within what Fisher wittily calls ‘Really Existing Capitalism’ (2009, p. 45).

63/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Pierre Bourdieu memorably summarised this ideological social phenomenon when he observed that while ‘ordinary experience of the social world is a cognition, it is equally important to realize... that primary cognition is misrecognition’ (1984, p. 172). One of the key lessons to learn about cultural criticism is that few things are as they appear, or are represented; and that the order of the day is this ‘misrecognition’. Bourdieu’s trenchant formulations relating to the ‘theory of practice’ within society’s ‘field of power’ will substantially inform the analysis which follows.

My analysis of the problem of ideological falsification and its possible solution adopts a framework of theory which incorporates Guy Debord’s conception of the revolutionary role of ‘minority tendencies’ in culture. Specifically in his estimation of the potential for the advance of revolutionary consciousness ‘beyond what was immediately given’ (Lukács, 1971, p. 72) - that is, beyond the apparently limitless (but in reality, misrecognized) boundaries of the spectacle. This aspect of Debord’s theory will be explored in more detail in the concluding chapter.

Because any meaningful socially-engaged theory must be grounded in practice - the actual life-activity of historically-specific individuals - this analysis will also consider Walter Benjamin’s insights into the revolutionary potential inherent in outmoded technologies. These insights are the key to my current understanding of my own analogue sound practice and what I hope might be its potential social significance.

I attempt to start from a definite point of view, that of a ‘unified critique of culture’. I do this both as an artist and as a critic of social practice. This point of view derives from what Debord termed the ‘unified theoretical critique that goes alone to its rendezvous with a unified social practice’ (1995, p. 147). This is precisely the ‘trick’ by which Benjamin, in his Surrealism essay, says that ‘this world of things is mastered’ - the replacement of the historical perspective with the political (2007, p. 182). But this gives rise to two apparently unrelated questions which have both concerned me for some time. How might this ‘trick’ be
made manifest within the realm of “really existing sound practice”? And why am I so addicted to the use of obsolete technology - is this merely a fetishized affectation, or does it serve some real purpose?

Rosalind Krauss has furnished us with one of the most perceptive analyses of art in what she terms ‘the post-medium age’ (1997, p. 5). She has both formulated this problematic and identified one of the most potentially useful strategies adopted by visual artists seeking to escape from it. In this she draws liberally on Benjamin’s analysis of the history of photography and in addition on his very fertile insights into the revolutionary role of the ‘outmoded’ (1999). In the essay on Surrealism already alluded to, Benjamin famously (if gnomically) wrote of ‘the immense forces of “atmosphere” concealed in these [outmoded] things’ which artists may bring to ‘the point of explosion’ (2007, p. 182). Krauss’ development of these ideas over several journal articles at the close of the last century provides many suggestive analogies to the praxis associated with improvised sound work.

Krauss bases her analysis on the history of photography, so extensively studied by Benjamin in the 1930s. She argues that after its initial flourishing as a fully-developed artistic medium photography entered a period of decline, becoming eventually what she calls a ‘theoretical object’ (1999, p. 290), and that this was due to a combination of economic and aesthetic desuetude. A theoretical object is not, she argues, either an historical or an aesthetic object, but an activity in which copies are made which have no originals - which she describes as one in a series of ‘so many ontological cave-ins’ (1999, p. 290). In thus becoming a theoretical object, she argues, a work of art ‘loses its specificity as a medium’ and becomes a purely subjective act of intention, a ‘framing’ of reality analogous to looking down a view-finder whether or not a photograph is taken. This concept is highly suggestive of some of the cultural trends associated by Reynolds with the concept of ‘retro’: the recreation of a musical past that does not exist, the endless chain of plagiarism exemplified by the recent court case between the estate of Marvin Gaye and Pharrell Williams (Associated Press, 2015), and the entire structure of legal
argument built around intellectual property in the wake of the sampling ‘boom’ of the 1990s.

This may be considered analogous to the art of the ready-made. The provocation of R. Mutt could only achieve its maximum impact once, each subsequent repetition risked becoming increasingly facile unless tied to a specific political subtext. In terms of sound practice, sampling’s aesthetic currency had a long pre-history and a surprisingly short-lived maturity. As a conceptual dead end it was might be compared to some of the Fluxus-related ‘word pieces’ being promulgated by advanced artists around 1960-61 (Joseph, Beyond the dream syndicate: Tony Conrad and the arts after Cage., 2008, pp. 91-101). These worked briefly as a kind of conceptual minimalism, before becoming increasingly empty gestures. Significantly, the way forward from this purely ‘theoretical’ impasse of avant-garde composition was described by Branden Joseph as ‘the social turn’, in which collective authorship and improvisation became important (2008, pp. 101-108). He identified this ‘turn’ in the work of a group of artists, of which Tony Conrad is his chosen exemplar. Specifically Joseph has argued that three of LaMonte Young’s word pieces, which required the audience to become involved in the performance, provide a seldom-noted point of origin for this ‘turn’ and one that was not ultimately welcomed by that composer. As I will explain in the following chapter, it is the nature of the relationship of a practice to its audience, as well as the collaborative relations that occur within the practice that remain tell-tale indicators of highly-developed praxis. This is what Krauss meant by ‘retaining specificity as a medium’, since all media are defined by social relations surrounding technologies, and such social relations will always be framed politically.

In the same way that photography once again risked losing its aesthetic specificity under the impact of digital convergence, so too has sound recording technology. This is almost complete in the case of the analogue technologies for making and reproducing sound. Only twenty years ago they were the last word in electronic sophistication, the sites for the embodiment of breathtaking quantities of capital
(so-called “state-of-the-art” recording studios, for instance): now they lie abandoned in the dust like the vast stone legs of Ozymandias. The digitization of sound recording has levelled the playing field by reducing the price of admission to the field of “professional recording”, at the cost of destroying much of the actual aesthetic potential of recording, replacing it with so many ‘emulations’ of technologies or procedures. We can hear any sound as though it were recorded in Notre Dame cathedral at the click of a mouse, even scratching records can be emulated with digital media, and entire compositions can be constructed from pre-existing recorded works or their emulations by means of algorithms; all undertakings of such epic pointlessness as to clearly warrant Krauss’ ‘ontological cave-in’ tag.

Reinventing the medium

_Being part of a music culture or subculture appealed to me more than staying outside and commenting on it in a work of art._

_Is it my body? Kim Gordon, 2014 (p. 164)_

Yet now under the influence of the ‘social turn’ (dealt with at more length in the next chapter) and in the hands of artists willing to employ old technologies to radically new ends, these outmoded ‘objects that have begun to be extinct’ (Benjamin, 2007, p. 181) have taken on a new life. And in the process the relation of the originator to cultural production has become, in the ‘post-medium age’, paradoxically more ‘authentic’ due to the very decay of the medium itself, which necessitates: ‘under precisely the guise of its own obsolescence... what has to be called an act of reinventing the medium’ (Krauss, 1999, p.296). To consciously sail against the triple wind of cost-benefit analyses, “labour-saving technology” and common-sense (understood as the “best practice” of Really Existing Capitalism) requires a conscious act of artistic commitment that needs to be counter-weighted with some form of unthought-of pay-back. This comes in the form of “freedom”: only when I know I’m not doing what “they” want can I really feel at ease with my life-activity, knowing that it is not part of what Crary has called ‘the theft of time.”
from us by capitalism’; that is time that has escaped being ‘colonised and harnessed to a massive engine of profitability’ (Crary, 2013, pp. 10-11).

Krauss goes on to quote Benjamin as observing that the rejuvenation of photography in the interwar period ‘had an underground connection with the crisis of capitalist industry’ (Benjamin, 2008, pp. 274-75). She need hardly add that this analysis might apply even more forcefully in the era of the decay of industry itself, amidst today’s comprehensive binary triumph of the spectacle. As manufacturing is replaced by knowledge services, entire media collapse in upon themselves. (“First they came for physical recording media, and I did nothing. Then they came for broadcasting, and still I did nothing...”). This reinvention of the medium of photography, once its novelty had dissipated, was accomplished by, and further enabled, the release of the concealed and pent-up Benjaminian forces of ‘atmosphere’. It is probably no accident that one of the most-lauded photographs of the post-war era, the photograph that really put colour into art photography, William Eggleston’s Greenwood, Mississippi, 1973 (The Red Ceiling) was used as the cover of the second Big Star album, and in this way failed (as their critically-lauded but commercially-doomed career terminally stalled) to enter homes across the USA. Simultaneously that album was being enshrined in critical consensus as one of the most significant rock albums of the early 1970s - a pinnacle of analogue studio practice in its golden era, and an aesthetic touchstone for generations of garage musicians to come.

The rejuvenation of media described by Krauss has been underway across the entire field of art for nearly two decades; she herself describes at some length how William Kentridge has reinvented the palimpsest as a “new arrow in art’s quiver” (“The Rock”: William Kentridge’s drawings for projection, 2000). Yet there is still little clarity on exactly what is unfolding. My contention is that this process is highly advanced within the ‘most autonomous’ sector of the field of sound culture, the so-called ‘noise underground’. Here entire cadres of artists exploit terminally defunct modes of sound production, vintage equipment is fetishized (for instance platoons of noise artists employ entire arsenals of cassette Walkmans as

68/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
performance sound sources); and “inferior” modes of reproduction are ubiquitous. In line with this, a recent commentator has observed that ‘in the mid-1980s, Noise music (sic) seemed to be everywhere’ and furthermore that two decades of growing social and economic dislocation have ‘brought Noise back to the centre of attention’ (Toth, 2008, p. 26). This attention is due in part, I contend, to the ‘advanced’ developments which I am describing here.

As I have already observed, one reality that everyone working with ‘noise’ or ‘sound’ has to address frequently is the firm assertion by individuals outside the field of production that what we do has no value because it’s ‘not music’ (Russell, 2009, pp. 85-87). Over time most of us come to understand that this is in fact a positive or defining reality - which still leaves the question: ‘so what is it’? For some time I have been working my way via practice towards an answer for which Krauss provides a full theoretical rationale: it is a distinct medium in its own right.

In her discussion of South African artist William Kentridge, Krauss defines a medium as ‘not only a set of material conditions, but also a dense layering of economic and social history’ (Krauss, 2000, pp. 9-10). This she echoes elsewhere in saying that: ‘a medium is a set of conventions derived from (but not identical with) the material conditions of a given technical support’ (Krauss, 1999, p. 296). This identification of a medium not only with a defined set of technologies, but also with an over-arching set of social relations, is brilliantly developed by Jonathan Sterne in his magisterial work on the original social meanings of sound reproduction. He defines a medium as ‘a recurring set of contingent social relations and social practices’, which therefore provides ‘the social basis that allows a set of technologies to stand out as a unified thing with clearly defined functions’. He further observes that ‘cultural context is essential to understanding the articulations of machines to forms of social organisation’ (2003, p. 182 & 192), and it is his account of the malleability which he attributes to sound technologies in their infancy which I find remarkably suggestive of the kind of media re-invention which Krauss ascribes to Coleman and Kentridge.

69/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
A parallel discussion by Crary of the rise of television provides another suggestive example of this. Hitler and Goebbels were convinced that communal TV viewing was the way to subjugate an entire nation’s will. Although this technology existed in the early 1920s, it took nearly 30 years to achieve ‘significant changes to an external social world and to an interior psychic landscape’ (Crary, 2013, p. 81), in other words to become a medium. It did so by invading the living room of the bourgeois atomic family, not by replacing the cinema.

It is this fixing of the malleable relationships between technologies and their surrounding ‘cultural context’ which creates such a medium. Sterne explicitly and tellingly links this fixing to the thought of Georg Lukács, describing this as reification (Sterne, 2003, p. 182). While we may think that certain technologies are inextricably tied to specific social uses, this is in reality another example of Bourdieu’s ‘misrecognition’ - or in Marxian terms, it is ‘fetishism’: magical thinking. As Sterne points out, amplifying the argument of Crary with regards to television, in the past point-to-point telephony was used for broadcast programming, while today mobile telephones are in fact broadcast radio devices. In each case a given technical support has become the basis of an entirely opposed form of social use. So in fact, this ‘phantom objectivity’ (Lukács, 1971, p. 83) serves to disguise the potential fluidity of social relations around the use of technologies to serve human ends. The subjective effects of this have been well-analysed elsewhere in relation to the role of the worker under capitalism, but it is worth remembering that in that example ‘the worker’ finds the technological support ‘already pre-existing and self-sufficient, it functions independently of him (sic) and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not... [and] his activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative’. Lukács goes on to note that this reified relationship of humanity to what in this context we are calling media is a ‘perfectly closed system’ (1971, p. 89). It is this ‘contemplative’ relation to technologies which hinders their use in socially critical or artistically original ways. Even a brief survey of the so-called digital arts today will reveal their aesthetic poverty, the decline in aesthetic quality of band posters in
Christchurch and Dunedin between 1981 and 2015 provides an instructive example, which has been mirrored in many other local scenes. The supposed revolution wrought by their ability to and make complex and time-consuming processes both instantaneous and easy has often merely resulted in a generalised artistic laziness, endlessly repeating a few clichéd tropes: the triumph of the pre-set and the filter. For what are these software “pre-sets” but pre-existing independent functions to which individuals conform their life-activity? In pop music this is most obviously reflected in the ubiquity of auto-tune vocals, actual singing by specific human subjects (artists) is almost extinct in the most commercially-successful genres.

As Benjamin and Krauss have explained, media have what are in effect life-cycles, and their ‘malleability’ comes into play both before and after their hey-day in terms of their relevance to capital-accumulation. When media are essential to the functioning of capital-accumulation (when their technical supports are highly marketable commodities) then this reification is complete and the ‘system’ is closed, but as ‘the vogue has begun to ebb from them’ (Benjamin, 2007, p. 181) an opportunity appears to envisage an ‘outside to the totality of technologized space’ (Krauss, 2000, p. 34). In this space ‘outside’ the reified relations which surround technologies, the possible shape of other media are at least potentially open to contestation. As Crary has put it, it is clear that ‘agency itself is a mutable and historically determined notion’ (2013, p. 83).

A good example of this trajectory of media comes to mind when I reflect on my own life. I am confronted with the variegated continuity of my relationship with broadcast radio. As a young man I was able to indulge in free-form music radio broadcasting because a section of the frequency range was reserved to non-commercial “student” radio, in the pre-1989 landscape of restricted commercial licensing. When the Broadcasting Act 1989 opened the entire NZ frequency range to commercial exploitation, the space for format-free music broadcasting inevitably disappeared, and the student radio network was commercialised. During this period my engagement with radio as a broadcaster was restricted to earning my living as a sound archivist and an occasional specialist curator/commentator on
non-commercial public networks. It was only once the value of frequency bandwidth declined with the rise of broadband internet streaming that free-form programming on limited broadcast frequencies was once again viable, and in 2010 I once again became a frequent broadcaster on ‘community radio’.

As we have seen earlier, Krauss argues that this redeployment of ‘outmoded’ technological supports within the subjectively-established field of cultural production - in association with a new set of social relations - may constitute an entirely new medium. And (as I shall argue later) it is the invention of a new medium, with its correspondingly new social relations, which offers a chance for what Lukács termed the ‘advance beyond’ in terms of previous forms of thought and humanity’s self-understanding.

**Case study 3: Electro-magnetic feedback study #1 (Strange house in the snow)**

This piece, included in the album *Cooling Board Rags* which forms part of the *No more Driver call me* box, was originally commissioned as part of “Cloudland: Digital Art from Aotearoa New Zealand”, an exhibition presented at the International Symposium of Electronic Art 2008, in Singapore. The theme of *Cloudland* was radiophonics, so I decided to devise a radiophonic work which developed my previously published radio work *Tunnel Radio* (2001). This looked at the sound produced by radio receivers in an environment in which no broadcast signals could be received.

The technical set-up was designed to minimise the broadcast input and focus on the radio receiver as an autonomous sound-producer, as I had previously done in the tunnel setting. To do this I hand-wound a 150mm diameter coil of galvanized wire of about 100 turns, and this was hung over the back of the amplifier’s speaker. With this coil “aerial” attached to the powerful magnet of the speaker, all broadcast signals were obliterated, though they could still be heard very clearly if the coil was unplugged. Plugging this electro-magnetically excited aerial in to
the radio generated in its place an entirely different set of audible outputs from
the ‘feedback ecosystem’.

Every receiver is also a ‘speaker’, giving voice to the broadcast signals ripped from
the ether. The idea in this piece was to focus attention on the receiver itself, and
away from the relationship to broadcast signals. This was a conscious
intensification of the determining constraint of the commission - a stripping back
of the concept to just focus on the radio itself.

In one sense this method effectively détourned the technology, and by creating the
feedback loop, transformed the receiver into a signal generator in its own right - a
‘Moebius strip’ of simultaneous utterance and reception. The following diagram
depicts the technical set-up:

Figure 1: Electro-magnetic feedback loop.

Once the coil was made and the input plug attached, the session entered a period
of experimentation, in order to discover what audible indicators of system status
(if any) the apparatus would produce. This took about an hour, during which I
discovered that the best results were to be had in the ‘X-band’ (extended AM
broadcast band) at the upper end of the AM frequency band, where there are no
commercial broadcast signals in reach - above 1600kHz. Here there were no direct
broadcast inputs, yet at the same time there were sheets of audible response from my electro-magnetic feedback system. The final piece was recorded in one take, slightly edited at head and tail.

Perhaps the unusual technical support for this piece was suggested almost subliminally by Toshimaru Nakamura’s "no-input mixing desk” improvisations (Marley, 2002), though I do not recall this being in my mind at the time. It could almost be described as a “no-input” amplifier, since the input is actually the output, transformed from sound to purely electro-magnetic signals. What I see as its main value is as a pure example of mis-competent technical improvisation (see the discussion later in this chapter), and here the analogy to Nakamura is very strong. In this case the technical support also clearly reveals the blurring of the line between what constitutes a technical practice, and what is an artistic practice; the “line of intentionality” which Bourdieu termed: ‘the always uncertain and historically changing frontier between simple technical objects and objets d’art’ (Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste, 1984, p. 29).

The use of not just any radio receiver, but the ‘deluxe’ Tivoli Model 1 (a “classic of design”) also highlights how the ‘universe of forms of experience’ associated with the ‘universe of products’ is limited (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 230). Mis-using such a self-consciously “designed” device serves to foreground the ‘habitus of technologies’, which tends to otherwise hold sway so universally.

**The habitus of technology**

I felt the great power that certain places, certain sights exercised over me, without discovering the principle of this enchantment.

Some everyday objects unquestionably contained for me a part of that mystery. I loved this intoxication which I knew how to put into effect, although ignorant of its causes.

*Paris Peasant*, Louis Aragon, 1926 (1987, p. 128)
But to step back for a moment to further our understanding of how the process of reinventing a medium works in practice, there is clearly a mechanism which must provide the glue for fixing social relations around technologies, which permits this invention and destruction of media. Neither Sterne nor Krauss attempts to analyse this in detail, and Benjamin characteristically only describes it elliptically and by implication. It is Bourdieu, in his analysis of what he elsewhere calls the ‘logic of practice’, who provides an intellectually brilliant and practically useful formulation which appears most compactly in the following equation (1984, p. 101):

\[
(\text{habitus}) \times (\text{capital}) + \text{field} = \text{practice}
\]

If we understand the technological support as part of the <capital>, and the social relations as constituting the <field>, then the other factor which makes practice possible is the <habitus>.

Bourdieu’s classic definition of this term (borrowed from Norbert Elias) states that it is comprised of:

...systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.

(Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53)

Bourdieu introduced this category in the context of his analysis of taste as a manifestation of class distinctions in French society (Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste, 1984). He later went on to explain its functioning in relation to his cutting of the Gordian knot represented by the false dichotomy of subjectivism and objectivism. This he described as: ‘an analysis of the specific logic and the social conditions of possibility of scientific knowledge in the social sciences... [also] inseparably, an analysis of the specific logic of practical knowledge’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 29). He linked this explicitly to the perspective famously enunciated by Marx in the Theses on Feuerbach - stating that to apply

75/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
this analysis ‘one has to situate oneself within ‘real activity as such’ (1990, p. 52). Bourdieu subsequently showed how the concept might be applied to the analysis of art practice, observing that ‘collective invention’ creates the position of artist within a given field of practice and that this results from ‘the objectification of past discoveries’ in the field (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 63). The actual work undertaken by the artist relates to an act of ‘position-taking’ within the field, which is governed by ‘the structure of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which govern success’ (1993, p. 30). This talk of ‘position-taking’ speaks strongly to anyone who has ever had to defend his or her ‘art practice’ against criticism that sought to invalidate it ‘as art’. In that case one is painfully aware that one is approaching the place where Kant says that ‘a new rule is claimed for art’. This is when the rebuttal that can be offered to the assertion “that’s not art”, is: “it is now”.

It is my contention, in the light of the foregoing discussion regarding the invention of artistic media, that while Bourdieu does not explicitly discuss the relation between habitus and specific art practices, the adoption of this category as a ‘structuring structure’ or ‘an acquired system of generative schemes’ (1990, p. 55) with relation to the technological supports of specific art practices is wholly in accord with his aim to use this category to transcend: ‘the usual antinomies... of determinism and freedom, conditioning and creativity, consciousness and the unconscious, or the individual and society’ (1990, p. 55). This view is strongly supported in a section of Distinction entitled ‘The correspondence between goods production and taste production’ in which Bourdieu writes that:

\[
\text{It is always forgotten that the universe of products offered by each field of production tends in fact to limit the universe of the forms of experience... that are objectively possible at any given moment.}
\]

(1984, pp. 230-31)

This passage, in its mention of limitations to ‘experience’, also irresistibly reminds the reader of Benjamin’s tireless analysis of the Parisian arcades and the links he saw between their design, contents and use as templates for the development of
modern consumer society in the nineteenth century. It also recalls Fisher’s words regarding the invisible barriers which ‘constrain thought and action’ (Fisher, 2009, p. 16).

It is precisely this limitation of the ‘universe of forms of experience’ associated with the ‘universe of products’ that points towards the significance of what I am calling the ‘habitus of technologies’. To give an example, when we talk about ‘structuring structures’ associated with a form of technology or medium, the example of Christian Marclay is useful to consider. His work with turntables and records is homologous with mainstream DJ practices yet produces work that is totally different on every level (Licht, 2007, pp. 279-281). This is startling, when we consider the ubiquity of dance-floor DJ practices, and the non-musical outcomes produced by Marclay in a gallery setting. The economic and cultural incentives to undertake ‘proper’ practice in this field are immense. I believe that route to Marclay’s success in stepping outside this paradigm (the established habitus) lay in his use of discarded and outmoded technologies. His interest in records was piqued by finding a ‘badly damaged’ Batman soundtrack in the street, and on playing it, being struck by the audible quality of destruction inherent in it (Licht, 2007, p. 280). He then began to ‘abuse’ old lo-tech turntables which were not technically capable of supporting the modes of use associated with ‘real DJs’. This, I argue, is precisely the ‘revolutionary’ potential that Benjamin identified in the ‘outmoded’.

In my own practice, the key moment was buying a $60 guitar amplifier in 1984. This ‘broken’ piece of equipment (cheaply made in 1960, and by 1984 unfit for any conventional use) distorted input signals so badly that “every chord sounded the same”. In fact it was that slightly shamefaced admission by the vendor which convinced me that I had to buy it. At the same time this amplifier sustained any input almost endlessly, feeding back unpredictably at any volume. It was playing through this which enabled me to step outside of the habitus of ‘guitar playing’ and approach the instrument non-musically as a resonating signal generator. I was enabled thereby to step inside the sound of electric guitar, freed from any
strictures of musical style. Improvisation was required of me by two imperatives: my lack of technical knowledge, and the tendency of the amplifier to randomize any inputs. The ongoing fertility of the relationship between this broken technological support and my practice is attested to by the relatively recent developments in that practice discussed in the ‘mock-stereo guitar’ case study below.

In addition to this ‘habitus-subverting’ directly-mediated relationship to a technology, I was also enabled by my participation in a set of social relationships outside of conventional musical or commercial structures (an underground scene). More will be described of this in the following chapter but it is worth noting that Marclay was also enabled to develop his revolutionary practice within the then-vibrant downtown NYC underground scene of artist-run spaces, alternative cinema and improvisational music. It is inconceivable that he could have found any audience for his work within the club scene, even though this was geographically and socially proximate to where his work was being made. In both these examples we can see for a moment what Krauss called ‘a chink in the armor’ of the **habitus** surrounding a technology, through which we can see ‘outside’ (2000, p. 34). Krauss’ language gives the irresistible impression that technologies in the first flower of their exchange value are actually traps, within which we are confined.

So if we speak in this way of a **habitus** associated with a specific medium, this refers to the mode of use, and the social or aesthetic understanding associated with a given technology; as well as the characteristic structures of social relations which result from it, and which in turn determine its further use. Bourdieu notes how the distinction between an aesthetic object and a technical object is a product of intention. And he goes on to say that:

\[ \text{In fact, this “intention” is itself the product of the social norms and conventions which combine to define the always uncertain and historically changing frontier between simple technical objects and objets d’art.} \]

(1984, p. 29)

78/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
This argument also applies not only to what is a ‘technical object’ and what is a ‘work of art’, but also to what constitutes a technical practice, and what is an artistic practice (such as, in my argument, ‘improvised sound work’). He observes that ‘the habitus... enables an intelligible and necessary relation to be established between practices and a situation, the meaning of which is produced by the habitus through categories of perception and appreciation’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101). This strikes me as a persuasive summary of how Krauss’s ‘redemptive re-invention’ actually happens, and how one form of relation between people mediated by a reified technology can give way to another, once the economic and social underpinnings have become realigned in such a way as to permit what Lukács in the context of class struggle referred to as the ‘advance beyond’.

Sterne’s revealing discussion of the cultural context within which sound recording was invented, that is the inventory of actual goals and intentions in play, supports Benjamin’s contention that new technologies are always imbued with utopian promise. He argues that the repeated tropes of early sound recording experimentation - that the new technology might teach the deaf to speak or enable us to preserve the voices of the dead - were ‘wishes that people grafted onto sound-reproduction technologies’ (Sterne, 2003, p. 8). And furthermore these ‘wishes’ reflect the intimate connection between technologies and social ‘practices and institutions’ (2003, p. 8). It is hard not to see in these ‘wishes’ the ‘intention’ which Bourdieu identified as marking the entrance to the realm of art.

In the case of photography Benjamin notes that ‘the flowering of photography... came in its first decade... the decade which preceded its industrialization’ (Benjamin, 2008, p. 274), and that the arc of time which follows during which photography succumbs to commercial exploitation builds the forces of ‘atmosphere’ inherent in the potentially correct alignment of technology and social relationships until the point at which the medium ‘discharges its historical tension’ (2008, p. 295). He further explains that the genius of early photography lay in its social role as a portrait medium, at which period ‘subject and technique were as exactly congruent as they became incongruent in the period of decline which
immediately followed’ (Benjamin, 2008, p. 283). This congruence is fundamentally a matter of the positioning of the technology and the artwork it supports within a field of social contestation, since as Bourdieu points out, every artistic field is also a ‘field of struggles’ (1993, p. 30).

**Case study 4: Howling, instability and motor-boating at high volume settings**

As I have already explained, my improvisational guitar practice was born from expedience, enabled by technology and driven by mis-competent inclination. Of special importance to this discussion is the issue of technical support - specifically my reliance on the borderline malfunction of my original guitar amplifier. Over the first twenty years of my practice I developed a stripped-down language with the guitar, one that placed feedback at the front-and-centre of sound production. As Byron Coley put it in a review of a Dead C album:

> ...at the time they emerged, the brutality of The Dead C’s technique - stripping rock’s form and function away until all that remained was a gush of amplified power - was almost without precedent.

(Future artists: review, 2007)

In the course of this exploration I discovered a lot about how guitar pick-ups work with speakers, and how different types of guitar resonate under different circumstances. I also started to work with a second smaller amplifier of the same make (Concord, a cheap NZ brand established in the 1950s in response to import licensing). This amp was more efficient for touring as it could be carried as hand luggage on long-haul flights. While its capabilities were quite different to my original amp, it shared the “hot and thick” overdriven sound characteristic of vintage valve amplifiers, albeit with a distinctive voice. It was playing with both these pieces of equipment alternately that gave me the idea for using both simultaneously, since their “voices” were so easily distinguished, no matter what signal was being input.

I set about a series of performances in 2009-12, which provided me with proof of this concept. A selection of these comprises the album *Howling, instability and*
motorboating at high volume settings, included in my No more Driver call me project. Its title comes from the trouble-shooting section in the original Concord amplifier workshop manual, now available online (Concord Electronics Ltd, 1963), these being the three most common “faults” with the range. I was inspired to use this as my title because these same “faults” are the cornerstones of much of my performance practice. In my conceptual vocabulary, this clearly comes under the rubric of ‘mis-competence’.

I considered these experiments under the general heading of “mock-stereo guitar”. It is ‘mock-stereo’ in the same sense that early stereo versions of albums by groups such as the Beatles were actually made without recourse to the multi-track masters (where these even existed). This was done by duplicating the mono mix across two slightly a-synchronised and separately-filtered channels, rather than making a full stereo mix. These recordings were marketed at the time as “duophonic” or “electronically re-channeled for stereo”. For a period this approach was even used for classical recordings. When Pablo Casals Six Cello Suites by JS Bach was re-mastered from mono 78rpm acetates for LP release on HMV in the 1960s it was ‘electronically reprocessed to give a stereo effect’, though this information was later (perhaps in the 1980s) censored in the liner notes with an erratum sticker, when it became unfashionable to admit to such arrant tampering (The Six Cello Suites, 1936-39).

While Rickenbacker and other manufacturers did make true stereo guitars in the sixties, which took separate outputs from the different pickups to a pair of amps, my set-up used a split mono output from a conventional instrument to two amps, hence “mock stereo” - in effect this performance set-up was analogous to the duophonic process in recording. This is a very clear example of the repurposing of one of Benjamin’s ‘objects that have begun to be extinct’ (2007, p. 181): only in this case the ‘object’ is itself a sound-processing technology. Duophonic sound only made commercial sense when mono masters which could not be remixed had to be given a veneer of “hi-fi sophistication” in order to prolong their life in the market place. To reinvent it as a technical support for live improvisation with sound does,
I argue, serve to liberate the practices associated with it from their accustomed *habitus*, and thus potentially frees up their latent ‘revolutionary energies’.

The duophonic process was invented as a technical object, with purely expedient commercial intentions, which was rapidly rendered obsolete by developments in multi-track recording and market demand for ‘real’ stereo recordings. But mock-stereo guitar - using essentially the same technical means - has been transformed by my intention to an artistic object. In part this is the product of different social relations wrapping around a given technical support: ‘the meaning of which’ as Bourdieu put it ‘is produced by the *habitus* through categories of perception and appreciation’ (1984, p. 101). These are social categories of meaning, conferred through position-takings within the field of cultural production.

The technical set-up works with my accustomed limited palette of signal-processing: wah, distortion, tremolo, octave-modulation and ring modulation. The signal from the guitar is split into two channels by the octave-modulator, enabling one side to be moved up an octave, and the other down, followed by duplicated chains of similar but distinctly-voiced effects.

When I started using this kind of set-up I expected that I would get two “voices”, which I knew I could probably cause to sound as though they were being separately “played”. This is possible in part because of the variable amount of sustain and “apparent delay” which the adroit use of volume, tremolo and distortion can produce. I am sometimes asked by other artists, “what kind of delay do you use?”, and my answer is always: “none, it’s a trick”. I also knew that using two signal chains to two amps would increase the area of the stage that would be “alive” for the purposes of generating feedback. This area is essentially determined by the “ranges” of both the speaker and the receiver (pick-up) in the feedback loop. With a Concord amp there is an especially noticeable change in voicing when this range comes into play. This was really brought home to me in 2007 when I saw Shayne Carter playing through a Concord Cloud 9 - a 50 watt combo. The entire guitar sound altered as he walked across the stage from the central microphone towards
the amp, which was placed off to his left, past the bass amp. This confirmed my very strong - but hitherto overly-subjective - suspicions, formed from my own onstage experience.

What I did not foresee was that a “third voice” would be produced by generating feedback to a variable degree across two speakers (spaced across a stage, not adjacent to each other) and one receiver. In this configuration there are two overlapping feedback loops which exert dominance over each other in a variable ratio determined by their relative power and distance to a moving and highly-directional receiver (the guitar). Their relationship is further mediated by the differing equalisations, amplitude fluctuations and filtering of overall timbre by the separate signal chains within the two loops. But what produces the “third voice” in addition to the normal direct “closed” loop between each amp and the receiver, is the variable amount of input from each speaker, which they are also receiving via the pick-ups. This causes sounds to “cross” from one amp to the other, blending with the signal loop to the opposite amp. This is best thought of as a “doubling” of the feedback loop.

The effects of this are to some extent under my control, through the normal “tai chi” involved in managing the feedback relationship. But the limit of this control over the whole sound is determined by the variable delays and relative influence of the two feedback loops involved, plus the wild card of the “third voice”, which will be heard in both loops, but is usually being driven by an earlier event in the last-most-dominant loop. The tendency of the sound is to “multiply” itself in this way, and the remedy is to cut the volume from the pick-ups briefly using the in-built guitar volume knob, in order to let the signal chain “calm down”. I have elsewhere argued that this form of performance can be seen as a kind of analogue tactics (2009, pp. 112-114). The latter word is used in the sense promoted by de Certeau, as the means to ‘use, manipulate, and divert these spaces (where social operations take place)’ (1984, p. 30). We will have cause to return to this in the next chapter.
It is this cybernetic aspect to the whole set-up that gives it the ability to produce unexpected results: unexpected to everyone, including me. To quote Brian Eno, it is characterized by ‘the type of organization that typifies certain organic systems’ which he defines as ‘changing environments requiring adaptive organisms’ (2004, p. 232) - which I have also termed “feedback ecosystems”. I have always felt that the most exciting and successful moments in any performance are those where I have managed to create a self-generating, adaptive and self-sustaining sound, which I can simply seek to “ride” in the same way that a surfer catches and rides a wave. The complexity of the feedback relationship in the mock-stereo configuration is a kind of ‘adaptive organism’ which delivers these moments with considerable frequency.

I can only characterize this as an “approach” to the guitar, because it is not a technique of playing - the kind of activity we might describe as “goal-oriented” - it is an heuristic, a set of instructions for reaching a goal which remains unknown until we reach it. This is quite simply a practical demonstration of what Bourdieu calls ‘the sense of the game’ (1990, p. 81), which he rather more fully describes when he writes that the logic of practice:

...is able to organise all thoughts, perceptions and actions by means of a few generative principles, which are closely related and constitute a practically integrated whole, only because its whole economy... presupposes a sacrifice of rigour for the sake of simplicity and generality...

(Bourdieu, 1990, p. 86)

The guitar itself can be addressed in many ways, picking the strings, percussing the strings and body, activating with a slide, or simply addressing to one or other amplifier. This de-emphasis on playing “actual notes” serves to bring the concept of mis-competence to the fore, because mock-stereo guitar using two valve amplifiers and guitars selected or modified to generate excessive feedback is by most estimations a foolish idea. It is an approach which will hamper or even nullify the conventional playing of most instrumentalists. Even I have found that it is an approach that works best in solo performance, but the multi-vocality, sheer
density and partially uncontrolled nature of the sound makes it problematic for duo or ensemble performance.

It does not meet Sterne’s definition of a medium as ‘a recurring set of contingent social relations and social practices’. Because the technical support is not unified with a specific and distinct basis of social relations, mock stereo guitar cannot serve alone as an example of a medium standing as a ‘new rule for art’, but as I hope to show in my conclusion, it may form part of such a medium, alongside other related mis-competent heuristics for working with sound.

**Mis-competence**

> These are days when no one should rely unduly on his “competence”. Strength lies in improvisation. All the decisive blows are struck left-handed.

*One-way Street*, Walter Benjamin, 1928. (2007, p. 65)

There are two main aspects to my consideration of mis-competence as an allied method to improvisation in sound. One concerns performance - the technical embodiment of sound, and the other concerns the documentation of performance - its recording and production. Clearly our environment influences or limits what we think and do, and in that connection it is important to note that the history of sonic experimentalism in New Zealand, at least as far as it concerns original contributions, was initially dominated by technical improvisation in production. That academic strain or mis-competent production faded, only to return in sublated form from within popular music after punk. Improvisation in performance, however, other than its prolonged and complete dominance of indigenous music in pre-history, disappeared largely from performance practice in New Zealand (except for some use in the context of jazz) until the advanced decay of rock music allowed it to become established, like a weed, among the ruins.

The first piece of academic electronic sound fully recorded in this country, *The Return* (1965), employed very limited technical means which were specifically created by Douglas Lilburn, working with a pair of dedicated radio technicians -
Wallace Ryrie and Willi Gailer. They relied on manipulated studio and field recordings, white noise, and standard broadcast filters - to produce a fully-realised sound world. Reading Lilburn’s descriptions of these early efforts, what strikes me is that Herculean efforts of imagination were devoted to working out how to misuse audio equipment to realise his compositional ideas (Lilburn, 2004).

Naturally, as ‘proper’ resources could be got hold of, this technical improvisation faded from the work of what became the VUW/EMS. But what interests me is the way that, despite such an unpromising start, technical improvisation eventually spread like a virus through New Zealand sound culture, from this first appearance within the walls of the Conservatory. It has more recently become pretty much the defining feature of indigenous sound production.

In the wake of the cultural revolution of punk there was a great upswing in DIY activity, first in England but then also in peripheral markets such as New Zealand, independent labels mushroomed, as artists organised to manufacture and distribute their own work, in a way that had never been done before on any real scale. Even before this new tendency resulted in the establishment of Flying Nun Records in 1981, Chris Knox and Alec Bathgate (ex of Toy Love, the most commercially successful of the New Zealand post-punk groups) had taken the decisive step of abandoning professional studio recording as an obstacle to self-expression. Knox purchased a TEAC 4-track and taught himself how to use it. Crucially, his only real skills were as a vocalist and lyricist. He not only knew nothing much about audio engineering, he couldn’t even play any instruments. As a result, he turned to kitchen sink experimentation, using many of the same simple manipulations earlier employed by Lilburn, including the looping of sounds, which Knox was to raise to the status of a signature gesture (Coley, 2012).

In early 1981 Knox and Bathgate (as the Tall Dwarfs) released a self-recorded 12” single called Three songs on the Furtive label, and unknowingly started a cultural revolution. This record was quickly followed by numerous recordings of his own music and that of others, which he made for the Flying Nun label, thus establishing

86/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Chapter 3: Tools

a viable tradition of self-recording and audio experimentation. This tradition was ‘sold’ to a receptive generation by a charismatic artist who had already gained their admiration through his earlier ‘legitimate’ career as a rock star. With one stroke, ‘mis-competence’ was related directly to not only the antipodean DIY myth stretching back to Richard Pearse, but also the very punk ethos of ‘just doing it’ and ‘sticking it to the man’. This milieu of mis-competent methodologies in the context of a non-commercial community of practice centred around post-punk garage music provided a uniquely fertile environment within which new practices could develop. The role of the ‘scene’ in this process will be addressed in the following chapter. In this context it is worth noting that it was the ‘self-produced’ status of much of this music that seized upon by the media and the music industry as a pretext to critique this new underground. ‘Poor production values’ became a pretext to reject and exclude from access to the mass media what was instinctively seen as cultural subversion. Conversely, for some, the allegedly ‘undesirability’ of this approach offered a double advantage, it was both affordable, and instantly demarcated the line between ‘us and them’ (Dale, 2011).

Allied to this adoption of technical improvisation in production, but less widely emulated, was the idea that improvisation in performance might be a legitimate strategy. In New Zealand the insistence that the song was somehow central to audible cultural work tended to limit the role of improvised performance, but some fringe groups, inspired by the idea that music performance might be ‘art’ in the same way that film could be considered ‘art’ (and often was in association with the nascent field of music video production) were moved to adopt looser approaches to ‘making sound’. Even so, I felt uncomfortably exposed when I began to improvise from a basis of extremely limited technical ability. It was only the fact that my efforts were initially disguised by being embedded within a group (one that more or less passed as a rock band) that enabled me to develop a practice. A practice which, moreover, eventually satisfied me that I could begin to develop an alternative competence through improvisation - a ‘mis-competence’. Central to this was a focus on the sound of amplified electric guitars considered as a

87/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
‘semantic potential’ quite independent from any underlying musical content. One of the other artists to adopt this approach in the more recent past is the Australian, Marco Fusinato. For Fusinato, as for me, the sound is fundamental, but allied to this is the iconic cultural status of the guitar (Joseph, 2014, p. 213). To perform on a stage with a guitar is to inhabit a role.

For me, the whole tedious myth of the ‘guitar god’, the ‘phallic genius of technique’, represented the pinnacle of everything there was to despise in rock music, one moreover that contributed in the early 70s to the milieu in which punk became a necessary cultural corrective. Foregrounding my unsuitability to be considered such a ‘god’ is as fundamental to my performance as the sound of what Byron Coley called ‘the gush of amplified power’. My rejection of any hierarchy of skill vis à vis the audience is always the point of the performance. In effect it is a form of abjection, a refusal to inhabit the role which the commodity-spectacle has created, the role that killed Jimi Hendrix.

**Case study 5: Performance at Westspace, 2008**

All of this self-critical performativity is on display in the video recording of an otherwise representative solo performance undertaken at the Westspace gallery in Melbourne on 29 August 2008. This video demonstrates the ‘keeping on show’ of the ‘dialectic of contingency and fixity’ which Peters has argued is central to the irony of improvisation (Peters, 2009, p. 96). This performance was recorded in 5.1 surround sound (of which a stereo mix also exists), as well as being video-taped with a separate in-camera stereo recording. It is the latter documentation which is submitted as part of this research.

The performance includes the use of pre-recorded tape loops. A selection of these can be seen hung of the wall behind my amplifier. The Uher play-back machine is on one table, while a selection of oscillators and other signal-processing equipment sits on a separate plinth in front of the amp. The performance lasts for about 48 minutes, opening with oscillators and tape loop, before I switch to guitar and loop, and then solo guitar up to the 27th minute, at which point Marco Fusinato joins me.
Chapter 3: Tools

on table-top guitar for a 21 minute improvised duet. While I had performed once before with Marco in 2002, there was no mutual discussion or preparation of any kind.

I had been performing solo with tape loops since the start of 1997, and a year after this performance, in June 2009 I undertook the first mock-stereo guitar performance, which replaced the ‘second voice’ of the looped tape machine with the ‘third voice’ of over-lapping feedback loops. So this performance represented a well-developed performance style, in which the stage area became a kind of studio or atelier, in which the ‘performer’ worked with a number of tools, moving from one to the other during the performance, tending to the overall sound. The inadvertent display of ‘builder’s crack’ above the belt of my jeans only served to heighten this workaday impression.

Studying the video reveals that much of the performance took the shape of technical processes, connecting equipment, choosing loops from the rack, determining from their markings which way they run forwards, setting up the playback machine and arranging the length of the loop to avoid knotting. This of course presents one of the more comedic moments of the show, as I repeatedly try to untangle the tape with one hand while playing the guitar with the other, before abandoning it in annoyance to play an extended and evidently not foreseen guitar ‘solo’ of about 13 minutes. This ‘solo’ demonstrates a number of basic mis-competent techniques of guitar playing, including percussive playing on open strings, bottle slide, and a variety of signal processing variations aimed at varying the extended decay of any note (for most of the time a more significant consideration than the attack of any actual notes played). At the end I ‘unsling’ the guitar and begin to present the pickups to the speaker of the amp, manipulating it freely in three dimensions in order to stimulate feedback responses.

At its peak this aspect of performance may attain a level of what I regard as “rock’n roll tai chi”, described thus by Keenan in relation to the encore of a recent

89/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
show in Brussels: ‘Russell pulled off a remarkable solo: he removed his guitar jack and slid it down the back of his T-shirt while performing an alternately macabre and mesmerizing dance in front of his amplifier’ (Keenan, 2013, p. 29). To describe this as a ‘solo’ simultaneously contextualizes the performative event, while cracking wide open the category of instrumental interaction attached to the term. Throughout the performance my engagement is 100% with the equipment, I am not ‘playing to the crowd’, I am simply doing whatever is necessary to develop the unfolding sound and keep it interesting to me. This is part of the ‘hyperawareness’ referred to by Peters, which he describes as: ‘an acute consciousness of the working of the work, the being of the work, and the position or positioning of the self within this work’ (2009, p. 98).

Once Marco has also taken the stage at around 30 minutes I completely unplug the guitar and reconfigure the set-up, including another set-to with tangled tapes and guitar leads. This is precisely the kind of thing that most guitarists seek to relegate to between ‘numbers’, though in most cases they will not even condescend to acknowledge their equipment at those times, discreet foot-switching is the most interaction that is usually countenanced. For me, behaving in a less “artificial” manner (that is, with less artifice) is an important part of performance. The audience must be given every chance to ‘look under the hood’, because the performance is not on any level intended to present an illusion, least of all one of competence. After that, I begin to assault the guitar with my fists and elbows, culminating in a ‘pendulum’ finale, with the suspended guitar swinging into the wall.

This form of performance with prerecorded tapes has the virtue of foregrounding some of the time-distorting possibilities implicit in jump-cut editing and looping, as discussed in relation to Giorgio Agamben’s reflections on repetition and the possibility of breaking free of cyclical time given to us under the rule of the commodity (Agamben, 2004). However, it also makes it much more difficult to establish the kind of cybernetically-developing systems that I described in connection with the mock-stereo guitar practice. There are moments of this kind
of unwilled interactivity in the duo interactions with Marco Fusinato (aided by his willingness and ability to ignore my performance to a very considerable degree), but establishing this kind of sound ecosystem is difficult to achieve consistently without a lot of time spent playing together, and also seems related to the number of performers engaged together. Three improvisers seems optimal for developing unexpected but sustainable sequences of unwilled sound interaction.

As a record of live mis-competent improvisation in front of an audience, the Westspace video provides a very complete document.
Chapter 4: Society

This chapter builds on the earlier observations on the role of technological supports and the glue that binds them to social relationships. It focusses on the role of those relationships in simultaneously arising from and supporting the further development of the work. Beginning with a discussion of how ‘scenes’ work, it then looks at Bourdieu’s analysis of ‘restricted production’ in culture, drawing on my previously-published ethnological analysis of the Lines of Flight festival. This examination is developed through the case study of No more Driver call me understood as a potlatch. The discussion expands on how artistic collaboration builds infrastructure within the ‘underground’ and in turn enables more work. Another case study looks at the working of collaboration using the studio as a tool and site of collective authorship. Finally I turn to a discussion of collective improvisational strategies as a form of ‘consciousness raising’ or collective psychic training, considered as an analogy for the role of dérive in post-Lettrist cultural practice.

Scene ecology

The production of discourse about the work of art is one of the conditions of production of the work.


For me as an artist coming from a background in criticism, and also because of facts about my personal biography (the circumstances in which I began to practice), my understanding of the process of making work is that it is always the product of reflection and discourse, that is: socially-realised. And the more social it is in terms of its genesis, distribution and context of consumption, the better it is, as artwork.

92/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Central to this understanding has been the process of self-publication. As others have pointed out, this is one of the homologies between independent music and contemporary art over the last three decades (Davis, 2015). In terms of my practice, self-publication of recorded works has always been accompanied by self-publication of writing. This impulse was driven from the beginning by my urgent if not always clear understanding that we had to ‘clear a space’ for what we were doing. Both Xpressway and Corpus Hermeticum, the two ‘record labels’ with which I have been most closely associated in a directing role, began their operations with the publication of manifestoes. Corpus Hermeticum went much further, with the publication of a ‘mock academic journal’ Logopandocy: the journal of vain erudition, included with the early releases. This both signaled a point of difference (always a valuable selling point) and also created a context of ideas, however ill-defined, within which the work could be appreciated. It was this - along with the rigorous design aesthetic - that moved Marco Fusinato to liken the label in 1999 to ‘a hardcore art project’ (Russell, 2009, p. 56). I had by that time begun to understand that to sustain a career well outside what were then the accepted parameters of ‘underground music’, I was going to have to position myself within the contemporary art space (understood both as a field of practice and a kind of physical site for performance). It was around that time that I began to promote performances in the old Robert MacDougall Art Gallery in Christchurch, and later the Physics Room. In this I was aided by a number of my associates who were already thinking the same way, The Dead C first performed in the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 1987, and in 1999 Alastair Galbraith promoted a national tour by himself and American artist Matt de Gennaro, ‘playing’ gallery buildings by means of tensioned long wires, a tour documented on three compact discs, including one of rehearsals released on Corpus Hermeticum (Galbraith & de Gennaro, 1999).

Sian O’Gorman, following Nardi and O’Day (1999) has characterized how ‘scenes’ centering around independent record labels function as ‘ecologies’ or systems in continual evolution, rather than ‘communities’, a model suggestive of static states of relation (O’Gorman, 2012). This scene ecology happened for post-rock

93/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
improvisation according to a process homologous to that which had earlier developed within the post-punk garage rock community, only without the fragmentational forces which nascent commercialism had injected, as evidenced by the connected but contrasting histories of the two labels O'Gorman analysed (Creative Ecologies: Flying Nun Records 1981 - 1997, Xpressway 1988 - 1993).

The complexity of this process for the hegemony of culture in a given society and the ways in which the dominant culture admits or overlooks alternative or even oppositional tendencies has been discussed by Raymond Williams. He characterizes such alternatives as ‘emergent cultures’, which he defines as ‘new meanings and values, new practices, new significances and experiences, [which] are continually being created’ (Williams, 2005, p. 46). These will be incorporated into the hegemonic culture to a greater or lesser extent, depending where that culture sees its limits of control, and whether it defines any particular emergent culture as ‘alternative’ or actively ‘oppositional’. He goes on to observe that ‘in capitalist practice, if the thing is not making a profit, or if it is not being widely circulated, then it can for some time be overlooked’ (2005, p. 49). This is an accurate description of the autonomous field of cultural production within which I am situated, even though Crary and others have been at pains to point out how the ‘the relentless financialization of previously autonomous spheres of social activity continues unchecked’ (Crary, 2013, p. 74). This was the process described by Debord as part of the ‘integration’ of the concentrated and the diffuse models of the spectacle (Debord, 1990, p. 8). Williams goes on to stress that to analyse such a practice or ‘object’ we must not, as bourgeois theorists tend to do, begin by ‘isolating the object and then discovering its components. On the contrary we have to discover the nature of a practice and then its conditions’ (2005, p. 53). And foremost amongst these conditions are the social relationships that give rise to it: the ‘conditions of a practice’ trump the ‘components of a product’ in our search for a social understanding of culture and its rationale.

Since, as I’ve already said, the art practice which characterizes improvised sound work is largely free (as much as this is still possible) from the constraints imposed
by value-producing capitalism, the social relationships which support it are in part activated gratuitously, leaving to one side considerations of personal profit and substituting an inverted economy, which Bourdieu pithily described as ‘a generalized game of “loser wins”’ (1993, p. 39).

The field of struggles

*Self-consciousness exists in and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or “recognized”.*


I have argued elsewhere that Bourdieu’s concept of the ‘field’ provides a workable tool for conceptualising the cultural phenomena grouped under the broad heading of ‘sound culture’ (Russell, Lines of flight: ‘the most perfectly autonomous sector in the field of cultural production’, 2011b). In the following figure the two axes are methodological continua stretching from ‘composition’ to ‘improvisation’ and from ‘music’ to ‘noise’. In each case the first term is heteronomous and dominant (+), that is - close to the dominant economic pole of hierarchization; and the second is autonomous and dominated (-) - and hence structured in opposition to purely economic principles.
Benjamin had already, in a different context, provided an excellent justification for why avant-garde tendencies such as improvised sound work might be crucial to an understanding of audio culture under post-industrial capitalism. In the prologue to his *Habilitationsschrift*, he expounded in some detail how the ‘authentic’ essence of a cultural product is most reliably identified in its most extreme, even aberrant forms.

> The authentic - the hallmark of origin in phenomena - is the object of discovery... and the act of discovery can reveal it in the most singular and eccentric of phenomena, in both the weakest and clumsiest experiments and in the overripe fruits of a period of decadence (Benjamin, 1998, p.46).

To understand on a more objective basis how this field is constituted, I undertook a small exercise in ethnographic research in 2010 (Russell, 2011b), interviewing participants in the biennial *Lines of Flight* festival, held in Dunedin since the beginning of the present century. In this study I established that like me, the other
participants were exiting from a shared culture of practice and discourse around ‘alternative music’ and moving towards an improvisational practice allied in some way with the perspectives of ‘contemporary art’. This phenomenon is also evident in other countries, as is evident in my discussion of the work of Los Angeles-based artist John Weise in a recent catalogue of his work (Russell, 2015). The parallels between the kinds of performances organized under the Lines of Flight banner, and the early ‘room above a Sheffield pub’ explorations by the Joseph Holbrooke group referred to earlier are also pretty clear.

The following section of this study is worth quoting here:

What has become apparent is that the festival, by virtue of its longevity, its discrimination (however problematic that may be) and its organic connection with its own practice community, has itself become a mechanism of what Bourdieu calls “degree specific consecration”. This is a measure of “the degree of recognition accorded by those who recognise no other criterion of legitimacy than recognition by those whom they recognise” (1993, p. 38). In addition, it serves to mark the existence of, and sets boundaries to, a field of restricted cultural production.

As one insider observer (Clover, 2006) perceptively put it in an online review:

the Lines of Flight thing has become a big benevolent family reunion. ... Almost ‘everyone’ is there apart from the notorious recluses who have ignored the call-to-assembly and are discussed in absentia in the most hushed of tones. ... At Lines of Flight .... it's like you're home now. You are loved and accepted. Not uncritically... but most definitely unconditionally... because the audience is your whanau5.

(Russell, 2011b, p. 278)

It is clear from this excerpt that where autonomous fields such as this one are defined without institutional consecration (publicly-funded curation, university endorsement), it is mutual recognition among participants that determines legitimacy. Bourdieu makes clear that what he calls a ‘charismatic economy based on... [no] determination other than the specifically aesthetic intention’ (1993, p.

5 A Maori word in common use in New Zealand, meaning ‘extended family’.

97/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
40) is functionally equivalent with Williams’ definition of the emergent culture which is ‘overlooked’ by the hegemonic power. And in this light, the fundamental relations referred to by Williams which define the object are those that prevail within what Bourdieu called the ‘field of restricted production’ - they are relations between artists, and between associated critics and curators. Bourdieu specifically states that in at the autonomous pole of such a field the ‘sole legitimate profit’ is ‘recognition by one’s peers’ (1993, p. 50), furthermore defined as one of those qualities which we only acquire through the judgements of others, understood ‘as the circular relations of reciprocal recognition among peers’. Moreover he observes that in an autonomous sector of a field agents of consecration (capable of anointing artists) do not need to institutionalized, merely accepted by all legitimate actors, and thus may be of the order of ‘literary circles, critical circles, salons, and small groups surrounding a famous author or associating with a publisher, a review or a literary or artistic magazine’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 121). This is precisely the kind of field described in my discussion of the Lines of Flight scene.

One of my interests in editing the *Erewhon Calling* book (Erewhon calling: experimental sound in New Zealand, 2012) was to show how this field had been constructed through complex networks of ‘nodes and connections’ such as venues, concert series, radio stations, labels, friendships, practice rooms and magazines. All these infrastructural elements contribute to the building of ‘scenes’ and permit the collaborations and exchanges of ideas that breed precisely the kind of generalized creativity which so significantly marked this whole diffuse ‘field’ over the last couple of decades.

It is thus precisely these kinds networks of relations between positions within the field that determine and describe what the work is and who is permitted (by definition) to undertake it. And the glue that fixes these relationships is that of the gift, the potlatch, that which Bataille called ‘a sign of glory’ (1991, p. 65). At its purest this is immaterial, simply recognition, though it may also be embodied in work. The latter, in spectacular society, is fundamentally understood as a gift of time.
Case study 6: No more Driver call me

The epitome of the high-status recorded artifact is the boxed set. This status derived from the eponymous ‘albums’ that gave the format its name - the unwieldy ‘books’ of 78rpm shellac discs, each coming in its own card pocket, sewn into a hardbound presentation volume. Once LPs became the common medium of reproduction, it became customary to collect them in sets which mimicked the multi-disc album format. I became very familiar with the latter during my time working in sound archives. As a retail assistant I had sold plenty of the more modern boxed LP sets in the 1980s; EMI had an extensive range of classical sets in the twilight of vinyl, including those duophonically re-mastered Pablo Casals Bach cello suites referred to earlier. In the end-game period of the Xpressway label we had licensed a set of 45rpm EPs to a Belgian label, and had been handsomely repaid when a manufacturing blunder saw them boxed in the top flight ‘opera’ quality hard boxes which the Belgians had been unable to afford to order, but which the plant delivered regardless. As a result this has since become a much sought-after collectible.

When I came to consider the project that became No more Driver call me it didn’t take long to decide that a box was the only format that made sense: intrinsically high-status and able to contain diverse types of artifact. My prime motivations were two-fold: to make a summary of my recent solo creative practice, and to make it in such a way as to draw attention to what I thought was the most important aspect of the social relationships surrounding the work.

The first goal was fairly easily achieved. My work curating of independent labels over the previous two decades, coupled with my panoptic view of my own work, meant that I could rapidly assemble a representative overview of both my tape compositions and my live experimentation in both audio and video documents. In addition I used my connections with the risograph imprint at the University of Canterbury’s School of Fine Art to produce a short-run monograph of writing to accompany the documentation. This compiled essays that address in various ways
the social and historical context of my work. The only really unknown or open-ended part of the project was the packaging, which involved some research and thought, and in the end used a readymade pizza box, and some of my architectural photography. Buildings embody social relationships in space on a scale greater and harder to ignore than any other commodity, and have served as a metaphor for so much work within the realm of sound.

The second goal was harder to summarise, but was to my mind much more profound and useful. So much of my work has been devoted to ‘market interventions’ that it would be easy to misunderstand me simply as a fairly second-rate businessman who has run some independent labels that failed to prosper. But the honest truth is that even when I did make money from these activities, this was always a by-product of what I understood to be the main value of publishing work in this way: building a network of social relationships around a creative practice that would not otherwise exist, and in this way enabling the production of more work, leveraging the collaborative opportunities created by these networks. This is made clear in Jon Dale’s discussion of both Xpressway and Corpus Hermeticum (Success story: scenes from the south island, 2011, pp. 198-202).

From the perspective of the hegemonic ideology, the monetary consequences of the activity must be the goal. This is because value, the form of wealth in capitalism, is not a social relation, it is a form of abstract domination which appears to us as ‘objective’: its presuppositions are ‘natural’, it cannot be otherwise (Postone, 1993, p. 125). So art, for me, has worth when it points to social relations not mediated by value (in terms understood by capitalism); and the more explicitly it does that, the better. Having undertaken so many projects that employed the production and distribution of ‘alternative cultural goods’ through the mediation of the market (albeit as asymmetrical guerilla interventions intended to turn the market’s strength against itself) - I felt I wanted to do something that made much clearer how art could happen in a social setting free of market constraints and assumptions. There was perhaps even an aspect of wanting to clear my name of unworthy imputations. Hence the framing of this project as an
immanent critique of commodification: a high status collectible that *cannot be bought*.

Central to this was my reading of Bourdieu’s analysis of the structure of cultural production. This made explicit many dimly-understood assumptions about exactly how ‘scenes’ function as autonomous fields, that is, distant from or largely independent of the dominant principle of economic domination. The key point, which echoed my reading of the Situationists, was the concept of a ‘charismatic economy of consecration’. My solution to the problem of addressing social relationships was to make them the guiding principle of the work: by framing it as a potlatch.

One of the two most significant international connections that I had made which influenced my understanding of my role ‘as artist’ occurred in 1995, when I received an unsolicited parcel in the mail from Germany. I received a fair number of parcels in those days as I was selling and exchanging recordings extensively, and as the curator of a label, I received demos and proposals of all sorts reasonably often. This one was different. The artist in question was Ralf Wehowsky, of whom I had heard but with whom I was unfamiliar. In the box were a surprising number of CDs and vinyl records, around 15-20, and an unusual proposal. Ralf wanted me to engage with his work and produce a recording that used the material as a starting point, raw material or inspiration of any kind, and if possible a piece of writing about his project. This project was framed as a broad international collaboration with many artists aimed at a five-CD compilation loosely-themed around his work, involving artists whose work he respected. The project became known as *Tulpas* - a title which I unwittingly contributed via the essay I wrote for it. A *tulpa* is a psychic emanation projected by a Tibetan llama - in this context a metaphor for the reciprocal recognition at the heart of the project.

He didn’t want an exchange based on value, he wanted to give me a gift, and the opportunity to respond in kind, if I chose. The gift was not the physical contents of the package, it was his acknowledged respect. This was actually no choice at all,
but rather a stark challenge: I had to demonstrate myself worthy of his freely-given regard, or lose face in the gaze of the most significant witness, myself. That challenge had a profound effect on my attitude towards what I felt I could legitimately achieve on the ‘world stage’. This was despite the fact that I had been actively recalibrating the size of the world stage in a downward direction for about five years at that point. Coming from the provincial end of a peripheral and innately provincial country, it is easy to overestimate the scope of any cultural field until you are personally acquainted with it. Regardless, whatever its size, no one can feel entitled to play a role within a given field until consecrated by other recognized producers, and the project that became *Tulpas* played an important role in that.

While reflecting on that process during the development of the *No more Driver call me* project, I realised that a luxury project of this sort would have to be given away in an explicitly gratuitous manner. In this I was unconsciously following the example of Guy Debord, who solely disposed of his first book *Mémoires* by means of gift in 1958 (Kaufmann, 2006, p. 151). Furthermore I decided that I would not number the edition, since that smacked of the artificial creation of perceived scarcity. The scarcity of this luxury good would be established purely by it not being publicly offered for sale or exchange in any forum, so that whenever it was seen by someone with knowledge of the field, it would be apprehended with the frisson attending the aficionado’s simultaneous comprehension that here was something new and unlooked-for under the sun. So I decided to sign them, without numbering. The rule was firmly established that I would give them to people I wished to have them, when I wanted to give them, and that the box would include a card detailing the conditions of the gift. This included a quote from Bataille’s essay, *The Gift of Rivalry*, and the following statement:

*There is only one obligation.*

*The recipient of this article must not sell or exchange it.*

---

102/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
If you wish to dispose of it you are free to do so, but only by means of a further gifting to someone whose deserts you judge to be the equal of your own.

In other words, the project was an experiment directed at attempting a gratuitous intervention in the structure of the field of production, with the secondary purpose of highlighting how other earlier experiments, apparently less gratuitous, had in fact been directed at the same ends.

This is another example of de Certeau’s ‘making do’, as when he talks about the North African immigrant who ‘creates for himself a space in which he can find ways of using the constraining order’ (The practice of everyday life, 1984, p. 30). All of my “market interventions”, up to and including this, the most radical one, have been ‘strategies’ to subvert a space within the market for the deployment of ‘tactics’. De Certeau goes on to explain that the goal is ‘to create a certain play in the machine through a stratification of different and interfering kinds of functioning’ (1984, p. 30). Creating ‘play in the machine’ is a very precise analogy for the social outcomes of this form of cultural practice. This is the point of No more Driver call me, its real goal is to strengthen the autonomous zone within the field of practice by inspiring an ongoing collaborative potlatch - a way to symbolically liquidate the most valuable of commodities: time.

**The social turn**

*Constructed situation: a moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambiance and a game of events.*

From ‘Definitions’, Anon, 1958 (Situationist International, 2006, p. 51)

Collaborative authorship of works is another consequence of the particular constellation of tools, forms of practice and social relations surrounding ISW. This was a consequence both of the move away from ‘composition’ as a privileged activity and the move towards artists adopting the role of ‘auteur’ - or artist/producer/distributor. Taking complete control of production was de facto a political position with respect to the music industry (established labels,

103/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
distribution channels and their symbiotic integration with all the media). But it also meant that there was a corresponding de facto equivalence or levelling of hierarchies across the field of position-takings.

Following, though not necessarily caused by, the publication on Corpus Hermeticum in 1996 of the Creative NZ-funded and well-distributed compact disc Le jazz non: a compilation of nineties NZ noise (Various, 1996), a raft of ‘bedroom artists’ were able to commence international recording and touring careers, well outside the sphere of the rapidly-developing New Zealand music industry. While the actual production varied in style and instrumentation, there was a coherence of approach that emphasised collaboration, independence, home-recording, electronic or electro-acoustic means, and a wholesale rejection of ‘musical ability’.

The subsequent growth of this pragmatic experimentalism in sound has of course been a factor of the simultaneously increasing integration with international networks, including touring options, yet the most significant outcome has been seen to be that of a defined ‘national tradition’ of sound experimentalism. This has been in turn supported by local initiatives such as (among many others): the Super 8 collective, the Audio Foundation, the Lines of Flight festival, the Cantabrian Society of Sonic Artists and underground venues such as the Frederick St. Sound and Light Exploration Society. These initiatives have, in the context of a ‘field of restricted production’ favoured the growth of both audiences and the pool of available artists.

One of the consequences of this has been to encourage collaboration as a strategy. In the period from 1988 to 2000 I released only one album in collaboration with an artist with whom I did not share an ongoing project. In the next 15 years I released eight one-off collaborations, evenly split between international and domestic collaborators, and only two of these were recorded outside this country. This pattern of collaboration is very characteristic of the artists working within the ambit defined roughly by participation in the Lines of Flight festival. In my small
study, seven of the nine artists interviewed had collaborated with other artists within that group, and all identified collaboration as central to their practice (Russell, 2011b, p. 277).

I would argue that collaboration in this way is a key instrument of mutual consecration, and can be seen as a form of potlatch, in that artists freely ‘liquidate time’ in processes of creativity that by any objective measure could be more quickly, easily and cheaply achieved alone. This is especially true in cases where the collaboration is undertaken at a distance. The value of this lies in the creation of relationships between artists with common interests, and generally common ‘career goals’. These are the new forms of social relation that surround the technical supports of the work - and corresponding new forms of consciousness accompany its practice. These both structure the developing medium, and are structured by it - deriving their charge from neither personal profit nor social advancement, but because they are (in the words of Tony Conrad) ‘structured around pragmatic activity, around direct gratification in the realization of the moment’ (Joseph, 2008, p. 104).

As I have argued earlier, these new forms of cultural production are anti-hegemonic, collaborative, and directed towards personal freedom because they are relatively independent from the almost seamless and irresistible ‘totality of technologized space’ which Krauss perceives as determining the individual’s sphere of action in spectacular society. It is only outside this, under the influence of the utopian charge released from outmoded technologies that we can: ‘think our way back down the path of “progress” to... earlier, stranger forms of expressiveness’ (Krauss, 2000, p. 34).

And if my argument is not ‘on everyone’s lips’ even within the field of ISW, or noise practice, then that is in itself no disqualification. Bourdieu makes plain that the operation of the habitus is not dependent on individual consciousness. Instead it ‘generates representations and practices which are always more adjusted than they seem to be to the objective conditions of which they are the product’ - and
this situation always precedes the ‘raising of consciousness’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 244). Or as Krauss puts it, the artist’s specific choice of outmoded technology ‘lodges itself in the domain of expression... the traces of bodily production in the midst of the apparatus’ (2000, p. 35). Which is more or less equivalent to Lukács’ observation, following Hegel, that history has its own ‘cunning’, and that ‘the historically significant actions of the class as a whole are determined in the last resort by this [collective] consciousness and not by the thought of the individual’ (Lukács, 1971, p. 51).

Case study 7: Virginia Plane

This album was the result of the longest-running studio collaboration in which I have engaged, starting in February 2007 and eventually being judged complete in July 2011. The process began in a queue at the 2006 All Tomorrow’s Parties festival in Minehead, England. I was there to perform and Lasse Marhaug, a Norwegian noise artist, was there as a fan. The first recordings of Lasse’s on CD were released on the Smalltown Supersound label in 2001, as this was a label I had been distributing in New Zealand, I knew some of his work. Like me he is not a skilled instrumentalist, but still uses a range of instruments in his work. His practice is in part mis-competent. My recollection was that in our brief discussion we agreed to work together, and the first recordings used in this project were made in Norway by Lasse in February of the next year.

Mail collaboration was a staple tactic of the post-punk ‘industrial underground’ from the early 1980s. Groups such as Ralf Wehowsky’s P16.D4 undertook many such distant collaborations, entire albums such as the Three Projects CD on RRRecords (which compiled P16.D4 contributions to three records made in 1987) were produced by one group or artist organizing sound sources provided by another (P16.D4, 1993). In those days this was generally accomplished by the exchange of cassettes via the postal service. Despite both parties using computers for editing sound, the transfer of our recordings was still done via CDRs in the mail, mainly due to poor bandwidth and upload speeds at my end.
I wanted to see what could be achieved using improvisational strategies to collaborate outside of ‘real time’ (that is over a sustained period) with a sound artist from another regional tradition. Norway seemed a good fit due to similarities in size and our comparatively peripheral geographical locations. Contacts between our countries had grown in the late 90s, and Smalltown Supersound had even compiled a Norwegian version of Le Jazz Non. While I knew a couple of NZ artists who had toured Norway, I had not done so; and indeed my only meetings with Norwegians had been very fleeting. My interest was in seeing how their “tradition” and established *habitus* would intersect with my own.

The collaboration was completely open-ended. We had no plan on how we would proceed, no rules regarding who could do what. I was eager to allow the process to be determined by both parties, I reasoned that it would be ‘over’ when we both agreed there was no more to be done. I assumed without asking that Lasse was willing to use the studio as a site for open-ended improvisation, and I was not disappointed. In this I was no doubt aided by the fact that he was very familiar with my work. In the same way that I value free group improvisation in live performance, and cybernetic outcomes in electronic sound circuits; for me it is always important to participate in a process in which I control only part of the outcome.

The original disc sent by Lasse in early 2007 contained ten discrete tracks of electronic noise. In April 2008 I returned to the project and decided to treat these in a number of different ways:

- One basic track was played from CDR on a portable discman through a small guitar amp. The track was played once only from start to finish. I improvised in real time while the track played. Room sound recorded direct to digital video tape.
- One basic track was played from CDR on a portable discman through a small guitar amp. I improvised in real time while restarting the basic track repeatedly. Room sound recorded direct to digital video tape.

*107/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?*
Chapter 4: Society

- One basic track was played from CDR on a portable discman through a small guitar amp. The track was played once only from start to finish. I improvised in real time while the track played. Room sound recorded direct to digital video tape, and the digital video recording was re-edited with the basic track to produce a collage.

- All ten basic tracks were played from start to finish on a portable discman through a chain of analogue electronics. The resulting signal was driven by the CDR, but rendered largely unrecognisable. This was monitored through a small guitar amp and the room sound recorded direct to digital video tape. The digital video recording was auditioned and edited into three new tracks.

- One basic track was played from CDR in my Landrover Discovery, with bass frequencies boosted to cause the truck’s body to pick up on certain low harmonics. This track was played twice as I drove through the 1.4km Lyttelton road tunnel, with the windows down. The recording was done on digital video tape inside the truck. The resulting recording was edited to select the most successful portions. This stereo track was then imported into a multitrack sound mixing application. Edited portions of two other original LM tracks were also imported and mixed into this, to produce the finished piece. It was the only piece at this point to have mixed multitrack audio.

This process represented a good example of my way of integrating live improvisation with recorded elements. It produced seven tracks, which I sent to Lasse on a CDR, with a summary describing the processing I had applied. The tracks were all named using détourned titles of Roxy Music songs, and I proposed that the overall project be called Virginia Plane, a simultaneous reference both to the first Roxy single and the Modern Lovers’ Astral Plane. This ‘framed’ the project, which we always envisaged as an LP record, as a rock album, referencing two of the crucial intersections of art concepts and popular music from the era when both participants were children - bands moreover that were generally seen as among the few acceptable antecedents of punk. The cover art, which I specified to the illustrator should depict Roxy Music as they appeared in the gatefold of their
second album ‘as though drawn by Ralf Steadman’, further visually strengthened the conceit that this was in some way a deformation of classic rock. In my mind, this pointed to the shared origin of almost all participants in the ‘noise underground’ as post-punk rock fans. Interestingly, in the event the mainly dismissive reviews of the resulting LP were almost all offended by this détournement, which they seemed to view as a kind of lazy and inauthentic fraud.

In December 2008 I received Lasse’s reworking of the seven tracks. At my request he had made notes of what he had done. His main responses had been to:

- Select loops from my versions, then record new instrumental tracks over these (two tracks).
- Simply add another instrument (two tracks).
- Edit and EQ my track (one track).
- Edit and EQ my track, and add another instrument (one track).
- Run each stereo channel of my track through a signal chain of effects, then cut up the result, made a loop of one section, pitch-shifted the cut-up track down 40% and mixed with the loop (one track).

This step had added considerably to the variety and interest of the sounds, while preserving the overall feel of my versions. I was really unsure quite how to proceed, and in the absence of any pressure of time, I put the project aside until July 2011, by which time I had interested a label in releasing the final album. My final proposal to Lasse for the finished record consisted of:

- Leaving his versions intact (four tracks).
- Using all of his versions, but cutting my versions together with his (two tracks).
- Cutting the opening of my version together with the finish of his, while gradually slowing the pitch throughout the second half (one track).
- Constructing a new version or ‘dub’ of one of the unchanged LM tracks (*The Numberer*) by retaining the opening and closing sections, while constructing...
Chapter 4: Society

a new middle portion by collaging short excerpts from his original 2007 recordings (one track).

The resulting album thus contained three tracks which were in whole or significant part substantially as I had them in 2008, as well as one track that was in large part based on Lasse’s first 2007 recordings. The other half of the record were substantially Lasse’s reworking of my reworking of his original sounds. Every phase of the process was thus represented distinctly in the final version, making it truly a collaboration across four years of time. At the request of the label, the recordings were mastered prior to cutting. While neither Lasse nor I were convinced that this was essential, I felt that the mastering did open up the frequency range and reveal a lot of layered detail that resulted from multiple over-recordings. To meet Lasse’s stringent technical requirements, the cutting was done by his nominated engineer in Berlin, and pressed in the US, and the result was regarded by both of us as technically a very successful reproduction of the original recordings we made. Interestingly, Lasse’s comment on the long-drawn-out process was that ‘taking a long time on these mail-based collaborations gives better results. Like good wine aging. It’s different than in-person collaborations, which I like to do fast and spontaneous’ (personal communication 14 July 2011). I couldn’t agree more.

For me, the signal virtues of this project were the following. The collaboration succeeded in producing a record that mimicked a ‘rock album’ by means of homology. By this I mean it is comprised of a number of short pieces that were ‘composed’ in the studio using traditional instrumentation, and which evoked different moods in the listener, while working overall as a unified whole sharing a common collective ethos. Despite this, the process and intentions of the participants were far removed from any usually encountered in rock music. The project demonstrated in considerable variety how improvisational techniques can be used with both instrumental performance and using the studio ‘as instrument’. This satisfied Tony Conrad’s twin requirements of ‘pragmatic activities’ and ‘direct gratification’. The resulting album was like nothing which the two participants had produced separately, in that the final product was the genuine result of an
heuristic process with distributed authorship. And finally, even without any set decision-making process or agreed rules regarding collaboration, the outcome was successful for both parties on the basis of a potlatch of mutual respect.

**Theory of the dérive**

**Cowboy 1:** What are you busy with exactly?

**Cowboy 2:** Reification.

**Cowboy 1:** I see, very serious work with thick books and lots of papers on a large desk.

**Cowboy 2:** No, I wander; mainly, I wander.


One further observation remains to be made about ISW as a cultural activity within the most autonomous part of the field of restricted production. In this situation, as we have said, most of the audience are either other producers or are at least those ‘whose understanding of works of art presupposes an identical “creative” disposition’ (Bourdieu, The field of cultural production, 1993, p. 114). This consideration leads me to reflect on some unproven hypotheses regarding ‘structural homologies’ that seem to relate improvisational performance practices to one of the central Situationist practices - the dérive.

To be clear, I am one of those who sees ‘art practice’ on a fundamental level as an irreducible part of Debord’s activities. He was, in Kaufmann’s phrase, one who: ‘responded to his era as a poet, as someone who was always concerned with the question of communication in all its forms’ (2006, p. 151). And in this light, it is not unreasonnable to consider, as I am trying to do here, what might be the political value of any given art practice, and how political practices might in fact be identical with art practices. This identity could be achieved at some future point on the level of totality, by means of a revolution that abolished art through its total realisation. Or it could be accomplished on a more modest level within the practice of everyday life, by art practices that are also ‘ways of operating’ that ‘create... play in the machine’ (de Certeau, 1984, p. 30).

111/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
As such it is not a great stretch to consider the dérive, that central practice of psychic mapping, or ‘pointlessly’ exploring urban environments, as one among several potential strategies for accessing ‘the wealth of pre-spectacular experience’ which was becoming obscured by the modern conditions of everyday life (Debord, 1990, p. 29). Even the ultimate dériveur, Ivan Chtcheglov, admitted that there was a necessary parallel between the dérive and psychoanalysis, with the important distinction that the latter was a collective activity (Kaufmann, 2006, p. 120). The point of the activity as originally conceived was as a sort of psychic training directed to the production of a new form of consciousness, one that was ‘non-spectacular’. It achieved this by being a kind of society in microcosm, an exemplary freedom-directed activity which gains its significance because ‘there can be no freedom apart from activity, and within the spectacle all activity is banned’ (Debord, 1995, p. 21). So the value of the dérive lay in its emphasis on collective activity and the creation of new kinds of experience. It is these two characteristics that distinguish it from a visit to a modern shopping mall. It has been my observation, over a long period of time, that the same exemplary status could be claimed for both the practice and the systematic observation of improvisation in sound performance, as a strategy to create ‘a space in which [we] can find ways of using the constraining order’ (de Certeau, 1984, p. 30), a strategy, moreover, that is associated with ‘a specific type of knowledge’ (1984, p. 36).

Kaufmann and Jappe (1999) are prominent among the commentators who have emphasized the centrality of time (as objectified in value-form) to Debord’s critique of the spectacle. I have already discussed the centrality of time to the analysis of improvisation in connection with the views of Peters (see above, Chapter 2). When Debord discusses the value of the dérive he does so in terms that led Kaufmann to characterise it as ‘the projection onto space of a temporal experience’ (2006, p. 109), and this is a description to which I would also lay claim for sustained performances of improvised sound. I have already discussed how this entire sphere of activity remains un-coopted - not yet ‘approached or attacked’, in
Williams’ phrase (Williams, 2005, p. 49). This creates a chink in the dominant hegemonic cultural paradigm (potentially outside the ‘totality of technologized space’), within which potentially a “free activity” might happen. All the complex infrastructure of gratuitous relationships both within and between scenes in this community of practice exist within this space, which is simultaneously both immaterial and real, and the conscious direction of that activity by individuals towards the radical social critique I am imagining is not necessarily a requirement to satisfy my argument, thanks to both the operation of *habitus* and the ‘cunning of history’.

For me, free improvisation has always been more than simply a powerful metaphor for genuinely radical freedom, it has been a homologue for a displaced freedom. After prolonged reflection, which began as far back as 1993 when I first announced to those within the emerging field (via the pages of *Bananafish* magazine) that it was time to ‘leap out’ into the realm of freedom (Russell, 2009, p. 24); I have found no reason to resile from this conviction. Like the *dérive*, it is an exemplary collective activity, and if at any given time one or more participants act as a ‘director’ of what in Situationist terms we would call a ‘constructed situation’ (i.e. performing before an audience), this is undesirable only where that division becomes ‘a permanent specialisation’ (Situationist International, 2006, p. 50), which is emphatically not the case within the autonomous field of ISW’s restricted production.

In the penultimate chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord made plain that a ‘unified critique of culture’ implied a critique of the social totality. This was his practico-theoretical method throughout his career as a revolutionary: he saw no distinction between cultural work and political work. Indeed, the insights gained from the former were seen as essential to the establishment of success in the latter sphere, when ‘this unified theoretical critique... goes alone to its rendezvous with a unified social practice’ (Debord, 1995. p.147). He had already noted in 1963 that ‘any fundamental cultural creation, as well as any qualitative transformation of society, is contingent on the continued development of this... interrelated

---

113/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
approach’ (Knabb, 2006, p.402). In terms of Situationist theory, this was always going to be the work of a tiny minority, a vanguard. As Debord noted in 1957, it was ‘in this context, [that] the avant-garde minority may be able to rediscover a positive value’ (Situationist International, 2006, p. 33).

Combining these two anti-hegemonic initiatives with the adoption of outmoded technologies from which the ‘vogue’ and hence the pre-ordained reificatory habitus has leached, represents an opportunity for those artists at the ‘most perfectly autonomous’ pole of the sound culture field to generate a new practice. The possibility exists, I feel, that this could align with a new habitus not built on ‘misrecognition’, one furthermore that arises from a new relation between audience and artist - albeit within a restricted field of production. The Situationist revolution is, Kaufmann argues, a revolution of subjectivisation (2006, p. 122). And this is where the Debordian ‘cadre model’ makes sense as a strategy for building an ‘immanent critique’; one that is genuinely a “work of time”, critiquing as well as détournning spectacular time within a small space within culture beneath the notice of hegemonic forces, and one that can be more broadly taken up “as and when” objective conditions favour it.
Chapter 5: New theatre of operations in culture

This chapter will tie together the preceding discussions of theory and practice and consider the affective potential which this emergent field of practice could eventually have for society as a whole, towards a Situationist ‘revolution in culture’. I will outline the three main ‘ontological characteristics’ of the emergent practice as identified in the preceding chapters. I will then draw on the ideas put forward by Krauss regarding art practice and the invention of new media (1999), and consider the consequences of positing improvised sound work as precisely such a new medium. In this regard it may be possible to consider ISW as a realisation of the cultural potential locked up within music - one that points towards personal autonomy in potentially radical ways. Debord’s concept of a ‘post-Lettrist’ or total poetics is then advanced as a model for this new medium, considered as a ‘fluid language’ of anti-ideology. This consideration sits within the framework of the ‘constructed situation’, as a means for the re-invention of life outside the rules unilaterally laid down by the spectacle. The social space of the ISW underground is considered as an example of a potential situation ‘designed to be lived by its constructors’ (Situationist International, 2006, p. 41).

Finally, the three original research questions need to be borne in mind in the discussion which follows:

• How is improvisation employed in contemporary sound practice; and what its significance, as compared to music, for culture conceived as a whole?
Chapter 5: New theatre of operations in culture

- What is the relation between sound work and ‘time under the rule of the commodity’ - and what does such work reveal about conventional social definitions of time?
- What could be the relation between social action and an improvisational art project which seeks to embody time and not expropriate it?

These questions interlock in a fundamental way, which makes it difficult to answer them independently. It makes most sense to attempt to define the key characteristics of ISW as an immanent critique of music, then to consider how this critique asks questions about both our subjective experience of time and its use as the fundamental value-form under capitalism. Finally we can consider what might be the relationship between a newly-constituted medium and forms of social action under the rule of the spectacle. To do this requires some consideration of what form of ‘positive totality’ (or in other words: true project) might negate such an all-encompassing hegemonic structure, and whether ISW could to any extent fulfill the role of the fabled ‘constructed situation’.

While no definitive answers can be posed, some outlines are visible. This analysis looks at sound improvisation as a complete social phenomenon, almost as an example of what Benjamin called a monad. And for the first time an attempt has been made to situate improvisation outside ethno-musicological genealogies of technique, to see it instead as a toolkit for social action. As a result it is at least possible to imagine how these questions might be reframed as hypotheses, so as to enable further and more productive research in this field. This is in line with the wording of the original research problem, promising work ‘towards’ a social ontology; which by its nature will only be complete as a totality.
What is essential?

"The dissolution of old ideas goes hand in hand with the dissolution of the old conditions of existence."


The preceding chapters have examined aspects of practice-led research into how improvised sound work is made. Inter alia it has considered some hypotheses about what light critical theory might bring to these pragmatic and evolving practices. As stated at the outset, my aim was to outline the key categories of improvised sound work conceived in the spirit of Lukács’ ontology of social existence. By this I mean, to cite G. H. R. Parkinson, that: ‘in studying society one is not imposing thought-categories on reality, but is discovering what is objectively there’ (Parkinson, 1977, p. 145). Reviewing this in the light of the three interlocked research questions, the key ‘ontological’ characteristics of these social practices are also threefold.

First, the work is improvised, so it remains what Peters has termed a work whose ‘primary aim is not to produce works’ (2009, p. 37). It is a process or a journey towards a goal that is never reached because it does not exist. It is ‘all beginnings’. In this way it becomes a comparatively ‘pure means’ with which to simultaneously highlight and critique the role of time within the work and also as the measure of value in spectacular society. In this regard the undifferentiated ‘sameness’ which initially strikes listeners who have not been initiated into the critical skills and expertise that mark out the field of restricted production assumes its significance in a fluid dialectic of sameness and difference. The use of the work thus depends on the existence of an audience culturally equipped to receive it. The ironic and inevitable failure that Peters sees as integral to improvisation results from the fact that improvisation gambles everything on beginning a work that can never result, since a ‘work’ in purely musical terms is seen primarily as an object of intellectual property. After the work is abandoned

117/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
unrealized, the improver is always faced again with the same stark agonistic challenge (Peters, 2009, p. 51). This contradiction (‘working without works’) is a hurdle over which listeners must jump in order to hear (or ‘see’) the work from the correct perspective. And this repetition of failure (or this perpetual deferment of possible success) is logically posited as essential to improvisation considered as such, and is what Agamben argues, writing about Debord’s cinema, can open up a ‘zone of undecidability between the real and the possible’, and thus induces its audience to understand that ‘repetition restores possibility’ (2004, p. 316).

The second ‘ontological characteristic’ identified in the preceding discussion is that the key technical supports of the work are often economically redundant. They are elements retrieved from the ‘piles of wreckage’ which confront Benjamin’s Angel of History, commodities once replete with exchange value, and ensnared in a habitus driven by fashion, but now open to mis-use and the bringing ‘to the point of explosion’ the pent-up ‘revolutionary energies... concealed in these things’ (Benjamin, 2007, pp. 181-82). Drawn in large part from the lexicons of garage rock and electro-acoustic music: modern traditions seen to be in a state of terminal decay. This decay is due in part to the decline in the value of experience in post-industrial society, the same decline perceived by Benjamin the critic in photography, literature, and other forms of cultural expression. As Wolin put it:

...the fabric of experience has ceased to be structured in an intelligible and coherent fashion... it has instead become fragmented and discontinuous, thus rendering the very concept of “wisdom” problematic (Wolin, 1982, p. 22).

One of the consequences of this for sound culture is that some technical supports are consigned to desuetude, and that some genres have lost all currency. Such is the predicament described by Simon Reynolds (Retromania: pop’s addiction to its own past, 2011), though not clearly linked by him to any specific cause. I have chosen these lexicons of technologies and associated genre tropes arbitrarily, because they have meaning for me and my contemporaries, ISW in this sense is simply another language, in the way that painting or graphic design are languages: mutually-accepted codes of meaning within a group defined by the acceptance of
Chapter 5: New theatre of operations in culture

those meanings. In the case of ISW it is, moreover, a language that seems to be resistant to recuperation by the market, and one that (in its relative distance from the constraints of ‘technical habitus’) allows a restricted area of potentially free action ‘outside... the totality of technologized space’ (Krauss, 2000, p. 34). Both the definition and acceptance of these ‘resistant meanings’ within this area of autonomy are proven by the work itself. The acceptance and currency of my work within its specific field of practice strongly suggests the validation of the assumptions that underpin it. The challenge of this acceptance remains in the overall orientation and outlook of the group occupying the field of practice. To avoid the pitfall of self-referential formalism, the forms of collective engagement with the field of practice must lead somewhere. This is precisely the situation confronting all the arts in post-quake Christchurch, as discussed earlier in connection with the No mean city project, questions relating to urbanism and collective action are starkly posed in this environment. These questions, ironically enough, were originally raised in the framing of the project Report on the construction of situations (1957) in 2008, nearly three years before the first of the seismic events that reshaped the city.

The third of these ‘ontological characteristics’ is that the work takes place essentially in performance, whether or not an audience is present. Performativity is integral to its production regardless of the presence of an audience. And here is another analogy to Situationist communication, which Kaufmann has argued is always enacted, it does not exist outside of the collective practice of the group (2006, pp. 164-65). Its preparation is continuous because it can never be ready, only in practice is it continually re-constituted and kept from becoming the one-way discourse of power, which always ‘designates something other than authentic experience’ (Situationist International, 2006, p. 150). The inherently emancipatory performativity of improvisation is underscored by the rejection of musical forms and rules, and the use of a language of sound which privileges no sound over any other. While arbitrary creative constraints may be adopted, their emphatically arbitrary forms may act as an inherent critique of society’s entrenched and often
invisible restrictions. Invisible, that is, until someone draws attention to the fact that they are hiding in plain sight. As I noted earlier, this is what Raymond Williams has termed a ‘selective tradition’, which hegemonic forces pass off as somehow naturally-mandated (Williams, 2005, p. 44). Questioning these ideological constructs, and drawing attention to their essentially ideological status is the duty of every artist who seeks to ‘speak truth to power’. My practice has increasingly focused on doing this by means of ‘mis-competent’ performance, insistently and continuously raising questions in the minds of any audience as to what the value of such a performance could be; because (in the words of the late Peter Gutteridge) ‘you wouldn’t play like that if you didn’t know what you were doing’ (personal communication, 1992). This is what Gary Peters called ‘the raw performativity of free-improvisation [which] is exemplary in the manner in which it dramatizes this aesthetic self-destruction in full view of a judicial audience’ (Peters, 2009, p. 48). This audience may be witnessing a performance or a recorded work, the ultimate effect is the same.

These three defining characteristics of ISW are significant in the discussion of the potential value of the work that follows.

A new medium

_He makes his genius sound almost accidental, I suggest. He thinks about this for a while. ‘Yes’, he nods, smiling. ‘There’s probably something to that. The “almost” is important, though._


The most important part of what I believe I am doing is the hardest to quantify and the easiest to overlook). This centres not on the work itself, but the social relations which come into being around the work. This derives in part from the ‘necessary absence of works’ that Peters sees in improvisation. This does not preclude the creation of editioned commodities, but does preclude the creation of the quintessential commodity of neo-liberalism: ‘intellectual property’. It is the issues that arise around commodification under the auspices of autonomous self-
management that gives both the ‘potlatch’ aspect of the No more Driver call me project, and the collaborative aspects of the other projects discussed here their importance to me. This is where most of the learning associated with those projects resides. The potlatch in particular is a technique for focusing attention on what is often seen as peripheral to ‘the work’ (understood as ‘the masterpiece planned and executed by the solitary genius’). It places the relations of mutual recognition at the centre of the project. These are the relations which support the free exchange of time that surrounds the making of the work, and which in turn sustain the individuals. They often represent the only quantifiable recompense that these artists accrue for their ‘self-managed’ investment in what I have elsewhere argued remains a ‘gratuitous activity’ as long as the field is successful in remaining ‘autonomous’ and organized according to ‘a collective disavowal of commercial interests and profits’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 75).

This autonomy (in the sense of the word intended by Bourdieu) is an essential part of the current possibilities for development that may be open to sound improvisers within the field of restricted production. In the same way, the Situationist International was not concerned if its work was temporarily confined to an advanced fraction of the non-dominant classes. In 1958 Debord characterized the SI as ‘an attempt at organizing professional revolutionaries in culture’ (Knabb, 2006, p.54). By this he did not mean the classic Leninist model of the ‘vanguard party’ organized separately from the mass of the people. This was opposed as ‘separation’ and ‘representation’ of the most pernicious sort: ‘the revolutionary organization… cannot represent the revolutionary class’ (Debord, 1995, p. 88).

The objection to the world, and its reconstruction, live only in the undivided nature of such a project, in which the cultural struggle, in the conventional sense, is merely the pretext and cover for a deeper task. (McDonough, 2004, pp. 149-50, emphasis added)

Where the uniqueness of the Situationist model of radical action in culture resided, was in seeking to avoid the failures of earlier revolutionary attempts by seeking to develop, prior to any mass movement, a genuinely new ‘revolutionary consciousness’ in the advanced cadres. The point of Situationist “organisation” is
not to implement existing models of social action and associated relations of power with a view to somehow changing society without changing people first. Here, on the other hand, the revolution starts from the development of new people and a new consciousness; one that ‘advances beyond’, rather than follows behind, changes in objective social structures. Debord expressed this in the largest section of *The Society of the Spectacle, The Proletariat as Subject and Representation*, in the following formulation: ‘in the revolutionary organisation’s struggle with class society, the weapons are nothing less than the essence of the antagonists themselves’ (Debord, 1995, p. 88). Their key technique in this process of collectively developing a ‘revolutionary essence’ was the dérive, a device for collectively constructing situations in which experimental behavior could occur.

Improvised sound work offers opportunities for similar experiences for both practitioners and audience, to the extent that these groups can be distinguished. These subjective results happen both within the moment of improvisation, and within a defined network of social relationships based around mutual recognition and collaboration, the armature within which Bourdieu argues that *habitus* develops. There is no real proof of the uptake of these alleged opportunities other than the suggestive parallels between the anti-market and non-hierarchical forms of organization which characterize the current growth of collaboration within the developing field of improvised sound practice. My intention is merely to indicate what may be homologies between social practices. The lack of conscious understanding or social intention on the part of position-takers within the field is in no way a disqualification of my hypothesis. As Lukács noted in his discussion of the objective and subjective bases of proletarian class-consciousness:

> *This twofold dialectical determination... constitutes an analysis far removed from the naïve description of what men in fact thought, felt and wanted at any moment in history... By relating consciousness to the whole of society it becomes... possible to infer the thoughts and feelings appropriate to their objective situation.* (Lukács, 1971, pp. 50-51)
It is the primacy of these reciprocal relationships of recognition within the field of cultural practice that led me to speculate that improvised sound work as I am considering it could be a medium in its own right. Again, there is nothing in the current study that constitutes a proof of this, but it is an hypothesis that both fits the available facts about a loose and distributed community of practitioners, and provides a plausible argument for how the specificity of ISW is constituted among other overlapping practices.

The practice takes technical supports which it shares with culturally proximate but decaying musical traditions. It directs them (often mis-competently) through distinct social relations towards intentions which are quite opposed to those of the apparent models. Sterne (2003) argued that the utopianism at the base of early experimentation in audio recording and sound transmission enabled sound recording to be invented without anyone explicitly projecting to achieve something of which they actually had no clear conception of in advance of its coming into being, He also highlighted the opposing uses to which the same technologies may be put, depending on the specific nature of the social relations and intentions around them.

Krauss (Reinventing the medium, 1999) has explained how media decay into ‘theoretical objects’ and may be reactivated through ‘an act of reinvention’ (1999, p. 296). She developed this argument in her analysis of William Kentridge’s ‘drawings for projection’, following Cavell’s definition of media as ‘automatisms’ (Krauss, 2000). Krauss argued that Kentridge is not doing animation, though he is using the technical supports of that medium. She points out that in doing so he ‘brings along with it not only a set of material conditions, but also a dense layering of economic and social history’, which produces ‘a type of drawing that is extremely reflexive about its own condition’ (2000, pp. 9-10). These are further described as ‘a form... that will generate a continuing set of new instances, spinning them out the way a language does’ (2000, p. 12). Following Cavell, Krauss goes on to discuss the relationship of chance and constraint, the role of improvisation, the feeling of watching the work unfold on its own terms, and the
way that a new medium is ‘liberated’ from tradition, and ‘cut free from its guarantees of success’ (2000, pp. 10-13). When I read these descriptions by Krauss of Kentridge’s practice, I find the parallels to my own situation vis-à-vis underground garage rock highly suggestive. And I have already discussed these at some length. The same goes for my nascent suspicions regarding ISW as a ‘new medium’. If Krauss can be correct about Kentridge, then so might I be.

This allegedly Kraussian ‘act of reinventing the medium’ forms part of what Joseph has identified as the ‘social turn’ within sound culture, away from the dictatorship of the composer and towards collective authorship, of which the locus classicus is Conrad’s collective pragmatic activity of playing and listening (Joseph, 2008, p. 104-05). So improvised sound work is not simply the criticism of music by musical means, it is an attempt at playing a ‘redemptive role in relation to the very idea of the medium’ (Krauss, 1999, p. 296). Today’s rapid decline of rock music into total desuetude is precisely analogous to the situation in art described by Debord in 1957 as ‘total ideological decomposition’ within ‘modern culture’, and which he identified as an opportunity for the ‘experimental avant-garde’ to engage in ‘revolutionary action within culture’ (Knabb, 2006, p.32-36).

While much of this remains supposition, what is certain is that what I am calling a new medium has become remarkably widespread within the most autonomous parts of the field of music. Meanwhile within parts of the bloated corpse of the ‘music industry’, various subcultures are continually vying to reanimate genres, technologies and sounds, mainly with a view to maximising market success at the heteronomous pole of the field. But the alternative to this, even though it represents the abnegation of all the goals and aspirations that motivate more heteronomous artists, is now seen as perversely attractive to many who are increasingly disenchanted with the operations of that field of more generalised production.

It is difficult to quantify the growth of any form of art practice in absolute or statistically meaningful terms in the absence of a recognized census, but I would
argue that this is anecdotally supported. For instance, by the fact that one recent publication lists over 80 New Zealand artists active in improvising with sound. This despite a focus only on the previous decade, while avowing that it is anything but comprehensive (Russell, Erewhon calling: experimental sound in New Zealand, 2012, p. 13). In an historical connection Jon Dale has elsewhere noted that twenty years earlier the NZ scene was: ‘far from alone in this endeavor. Free noise and improvised rock were showing up in the mid-1990s in many outposts… from the USA to underground acts in England… to Japanese iconoclasts’ (Dale, 2011, p. 202). In the same way we may look anecdotally at a snapshot of the changing coverage of sound improvisation in an international magazine such as The Wire (dedicated to ‘adventures in modern music’). In 1993 a typical issue devoted 5% of content to improvisation with sound (by the broadest definition), and no reviews at all; while in a representative 2013 issue with no special focus on improvisation the percentage was 12% including 14 reviews. This tends to support the general perception that a broad cultural trend has been at work, as does the publication of several academic volumes in recent years dealing with ‘noise’, such as Reverberations (Goddard, Halligan, & Hegarty, 2012).

Walter Benjamin’s theory of aesthetics also provides a strong clue to the reasons for the burgeoning growth in attention (both critical and creative) given to the more autonomous part of sound culture that comes under the general rubric of ‘noise’. As well as its location at the margins, where the dominant economic model is ‘loser wins’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 39), its ‘singular and eccentric’ status also makes improvised sound work the ideal subject to serve as an exemplar for what Benjamin defined as ‘the becoming of phenomena in their being’ (Benjamin, 1963, p. 47). This understanding leads to the definition of the essence of a cultural form, which Benjamin calls a ‘monad’; by which term he means an idea that ‘contains the image of the world’ (1963, p. 48). Which is another way of defining art as: ‘a relationship between subject and object. The exercising of [which] relationship is the very stuff of art’ (Schaeffer, 2012, p. 130). These relationships, which in another schema we might call those of the base/superstructure model, give to the
‘authentic’ work of art what Benjamin described as a ‘natural history’, which in turn ‘gives the idea its total scope’ (1963, p. 47). That ‘total scope’ of a given cultural form, understood as a monad which contains an image of the world, must include the experience and subjective consciousness of those creating and receiving the work (in other words, ‘social relations’).

What is instructive in considering the ‘natural history’ of improvised sound work in, say New Zealand across the last forty years, is how little it really took to enable a significant shift in the mode of practice, towards what I am arguing is a “new medium for art”. Any survey of what has been described as ‘New Zealand’s particularly robust [noise] scene’ (Dale, 2011, p. 202) will show that it is broadly based around radical improvisation with the semi-obsolescent technical supports of a declining medium, within a socially performative space. The verbal transmission of a limited repertoire of technical knowledge by a handful of people in the 1980s started a pattern of cultural production that eventually became quite widespread within this country. The recording technology already existed, as it had since the 1960s, although it became more portable and affordable as time went on. But as we have explored earlier, the availability of new technology alone is never enough to enable new forms of cultural practice. There has also to be a shift in the habitus associated with the technology: the necessary social relationships, ideas, and socially-probable outcomes must also exist and be available as a model before a possible mode of activity can become a likely or widely-accomplished one.

**Poetics**

*Personal poetry has had its day, with its relative sleights of hand and its contingent contortions. Let us gather up again the threads of impersonal poetry... Let us link up again the great chain that connects us with the past; poetry is geometry par excellence.*

*Poems, Comte de Lautréamont, 1870 (1978, p. 265)*

While it is not always clearly understood by those who seek to advance arguments in favour of Guy Debord as a specialist in one or other field (revolutionary, theorist, film-maker), the key category of all his work is that of ‘poetics’. This is
Chapter 5: New theatre of operations in culture

easier to grasp if we accept that the Situationists were at all times concerned fundamentally with communication, which they saw as being falsified by the ‘commodity-spectacle society’ - the ‘true project’ which has been lost. In this way we can see ‘poetics’ as central to understanding how an artistic medium might relate to socially-progressive outcomes, or in Situationist terms, a ‘revolution in culture’. It hardly bears remarking that in the same way that Leninism cannot be held as a refutation of Marx, then neither the excesses of Debord’s soi-disant ‘heirs’, nor the continuing absence of any such revolution can be taken to falsify these arguments by Debord.

Vincent Kaufmann has persuasively argued that poetics was the over-arching concept that united both Debord’s life and his works, fusing them into one (Kaufmann, 2006, p. xiii). Following his heroes Cravan and de Lautréamont, Debord held a much expanded view of poetry that for him defined the totality of any truly human life. It is, in Kaufmann’s phrase, a kind of ‘impossible Gesamtkunstwerk’ which, even though impossible, must be realised. This imperative is grounded in the understanding that a true poetics will be the positive image of the spectacle (understood as a ‘negative totality’) (2006, pp. 159-60). The only way to overcome the spectacle-commodity society, in Debord’s analysis, is to replace it with the missing ‘true project’; to restore real communication in place of the limitless supply of context-less information which is used by the spectacle to promote the ‘globalisation of the false [which is] also the falsification of the globe’ (Debord, 1990, p. 10). Not everyone will feel this way, but if I examine myself, I find that I have certainly done so since my teenage years during the outbreak of global pessimism which followed the intoxication of the 1960s. Ex-Situationists Clark and Nicholson-Smith have observed that it was the focus of the SI on ‘art’ (or what Kaufmann argues is poetics) which constituted both its utopianism and the core of it success in mobilizing support in 1968. It was this which foregrounded the question of ‘agency’ vs ‘representation’ and made ‘their politics the deadly weapon it was for a while’ (McDonough, 2004, p. 485). And it is this foregrounding of poetics and agency that offers an emancipatory model to the potential social
relations surrounding the actual practice of ISW, when we as artists ‘think about who will be helped or harmed by [ou]r work’ (Schaeffer, 2012, p. 166).

This truly human poetics is embodied in a cultural sphere which must eventually be universalized: ‘the most general goal must be to expand the nonmediocre part of life... as much as possible’ (Situationist International, 2006, p. 39), and this programme should be realized ‘using any means, even artistic ones’ (2006, p. 37). Debord was very clear, at the founding of the Situationist International, that their ‘entire program’ should consist of nothing more than working ‘to multiply poetic subjects and objects’ (2006, p. 41). I have interpreted the SI’s programme to mean that art can be a form of revolutionary action in society, and furthermore that its revolutionary potential is realized (and defined) not just through externally measurable change in society (revolutionary politics in the street) but also through psychological change in ‘poetic subjects’, those who make and consume culture: that is artists.

Kaufmann has pointed to the central role played by this (surprising) view in the 1963 text All the King’s Men. In this, Debord advances a broadly defined poetics as the antidote to Power’s falsification of communication. Poetics and ‘liberated language’ in this text include ‘music, cries and gestures’ as well as painting and mathematics (Situationist International, 2006, p. 150). In addition, ‘electronic music’ is suggestively posited as an attempt at ‘détourn[ing] machines to the benefit of [liberated] language’ – an aside which presciently but no doubt quite coincidentally points towards some of the arguments advanced here (2006, p. 150). This is later specified to be ‘a poetry necessarily without poems’ (2006, p. 151).

The centrality of this important 1963 text to the current discussion is further emphasized by the following trenchant assertion, worth quoting in full:

*Poetry is becoming more and more clearly the empty space, the antimatter, of consumer society, since it is not consumable (in terms of the modern criteria for a consumable object: an object that is of equivalent value for each of a mass of isolated passive consumers). Poetry is nothing when it is quoted, it needs to be détourned, brought back into play... The history of poetry is only a way of*

128/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
running away from the poetry of history, if we understand by that phrase not the spectacular history of the rules but the history of everyday life and its possible liberation; the history of each individual life and its realization. (2006, p. 152)

So in Debord’s argument, the goal is a ‘poetry of history’ which represents the realization of everyday life. Furthermore, this poetry is understood as a kind of ‘anti-commodity’, certainly this was how Debord understood all his own artistic productions: books that destroy other books with their sandpaper covers, films that present silent darkness for 25 minutes, comics and advertisements that replace dialogue and sales-talk with philosophy. For me, all this points consistently towards the most autonomous pole in the field of cultural production, where I have already argued we find improvised sound work and its restricted audience of other producers. These are what the Situationists described as ‘small circles of poetic adventure [which] could be considered the only places where the totality of revolution subsists, as an unrealized but close-at-hand potentiality, like the shadow of an absent personage’ (2006, p. 151). The question thus arises, what is it that such a ‘small circle’ can achieve, as the shadow of spectacular society’s ‘other’?

A fluid language

Critical theory has to be communicated in its own language - the language of contradiction, dialectical in form as well as in content: the language of the critique of totality... Not a negation of style, but the style of negation... the fluid language of anti-ideology.


Improvisation with sound fulfils the requirements of the kind of poetic practice Debord felt was a prerequisite for radical change in society. This practice was to produce forms of social relations, and more importantly kinds of relating subjects, that would be able to recover the ‘true project’. This transformation was to be the work of a considerable time, and no little dedication. As Mustapha Khayati, one of the other Situationists to write on the relation of poetics to their programme, put it: ‘the realization of art - poetry in the Situationist sense - means that one cannot
realize oneself in a “work”, but rather realizes oneself, period’ (Situationist International, 2006, p. 224). Or as Debord put it later, writing of the several years in the early 50s he spent in ‘the quartier of perdition’, seeking to ‘carry out the programme of modern poetry’ - it was: ‘where my youth went as if to complete its education’ (Panegyric: volumes 1 & 2, 2004, pp. 21-22). This intensive ‘self-education’ or psychological training was predominantly carried out by means of the dérive, which used up time through the construction of situations with an intentionally complete absence of ‘works’.

This focus on the gratuitous development of what is, to all intents and purposes, a sensibility, the feeling that no matter how long we lived ‘we would never do anything better’ (Debord, 2004, p. 26), places the Situationist project directly in line with the following observation of Walter Benjamin:

Some pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus conserving them, others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them. The latter are called the destructive. (Benjamin, 2007, p. 302)

It is in the creation of situations that may be ‘passed on’ that we catch a whiff of the irony imagined by Gary Peters: the work without works (Peters, 2009, p. 37). This he further develops, as if to initiate a discussion of Debord’s poetics, by arguing that this ‘irony’ of improvisation, which he considers to constitute one of its signal values, moreover ‘speaks in order not to speak’ (2009, p. 70). To me, this directly addresses my experience of improvising with sound; that I am in the process building a lexicon of gestures united only by their collective refusal to communicate directly. Kaufmann sees in this connection a continuity from Debord’s origins as a teenage Lettrist. Situationist (or post-Lettrist) poetics imply: ‘an external rejection of language... it challenged the false appearance of communication demanded by the power structure with an absolute form, not of communication, but of non-communication’ (Kaufmann, 2006, p. 176).

Kaufmann goes on to link this to what he calls Debord’s refusal to appear, which included a wide range of biographical peculiarities, including his lifelong care in

130/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
managing his own public visibility, his policy of managing certain relationships by means of contracts which often included idiosyncratic clauses, and his insistence on never entering into a relationship of employment. Kaufmann argued that the truth of his attack: ‘his absolute disqualification of the gaze of the Other; …is the truth of a refusal’ (Kaufmann, 2006, p. 275). In a small and perhaps not entirely legitimate way, I link this refusal to appear to some of my own practices; my insistence on self-management, my refusal to appear in performance ‘as a guitar-player’, and my refusal to communicate musically. I have been at pains over three decades to perform in a way that undercuts any expectations about performance, often immobile for long periods, (notoriously) checking my phone, unplugging and re-plugging equipment in mid-performance, or deliberately misusing my equipment in questionable ways. All of these have served as strategies to deflect the judgement of audiences towards the broadest context of cultural production, away from the aesthetic and towards the social; towards questions such as: ‘what is happening to me here, and why’?

I discussed earlier how the improviser suspends judgement when improvising freely with sound, following and shaping the sound as it unfolds through the mechanism of the technical support. Peters has argued that in the context of improvised performance the judicial reception of the audience is directed at the process of production, not the work itself (Peters, 2009, p. 45). This is because such work lacks an underpinning concept in the Kantian sense, and as such aesthetic judgements are suspended, lacking the power to verify or falsify the artwork. All of this explains how the audience within the field of restricted production is led to divert their judgement to what happens around the work, the supports, and the social situation.

This is what Gary Peters was referring to when he observed that in improvisation:

...the artwork and the artist are understood... to originate in freedom, a freedom that is always already there cognitively but only given aesthetically to those who develop a feel for this freedom and who gain a sense of its universality (Peters, 2009, p. 43).

131/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
And it is precisely this development of ‘a feel for freedom’ that I am advancing as the value of this practice. It is only in this way that we can hope to recover the true project which has been caught up in the ‘globalisation of the false’ (Debord, 1990, p. 10). Furthermore it is through ‘developing a feel for freedom’ in this way that such a practice might begin to fulfill the Situationist ideal of the constructed situation: ‘a moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambiance and a game of events’ (Situationist International, 2006, p. 51). In this connection it is no accident that Debord should have chosen to phrase the domination of the spectacle as a grammar which ensnares subjects without their being aware:

*He will essentially follow the language of the spectacle, for it is the only one he is familiar with; the one in which he learned to speak. No doubt he would like to be regarded as an enemy of its rhetoric; but he will use its syntax.* (Debord, 1990, p. 31)

This is a linguistic *habitus*, an ideological mindset, the breaking of which requires a holistic retraining of both mind and body on a par with the dangerous and heroic exertions of the *dériveurs*.

**Situations**

*The utopia in human relationships to which my philosophy is directed is unattainable in the foreseeable future. Activities are worthy, then, whose contribution is to keep the dream alive.*

H. Flynt, cited in (Piekut, 2011, p. 101)

As I pointed out earlier, my perspective on praxis (the union of theory and practice expressed as human activity) aligns with Debord’s search for a ‘unified critique of culture’ and a ‘unified social practice’ (Debord, 1995, p. 147). He had already in 1963 expressed the opinion that ‘art must not only be critical in its content, it must also be self-critical in its form’ (Situationist International, 2006, p. 406). Benjamin also addressed this imperative in his discussion of film as a newly-emerged medium when he said that: ‘the most important social function of film is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus’ (Benjamin, 2008, p.37). Thus, the significance of the work is not restricted to (or may be
almost invisibly implicit in) its content, it also resides in its social reality as a medium, and its effects on the audience.

Debord asserted the centrality of the ‘constructed situation’, as a means for the re-invention of life outside the rules unilaterally laid down by the spectacle, and for him the dérive was its epitome, but by no means its only exemplar. I also believe that any true art practice must at least strive to lay claim to consideration as a tactic for breaking outside the perfectly closed system of the spectacle. Therefore my improvised sound work aspires to the condition of a constructed situation ‘designed to be lived by [their] constructors’ (Situationist International, 2006, p. 41). It does this both in the forms of its production and of its reception.

With reference to the three key ‘ontological characteristics’ I identified earlier, this work embodies this aspiration through inevitable failures of an ‘ironic improvisation’ that speaks without speaking and represents a work without works. This Sisyphean repetition restores the very possibility of change to the minds of the audience - the idea that we might control our own fates. In this sense it is exemplary. It seeks to insinuate an example of and a socially-embodied discussion about ‘autonomy’ into a public discourse dominated by power, without drawing undue attention by ‘becoming oppositional in an explicit way’ (Williams, 2005, p. 49). Through engagement with outmoded technical supports it enables an escape from the ‘totality of technologized space’ to a restricted zone of freedom, and through a rethinking of habitus permits ‘the re-invention of the media’. In doing so it also promotes an alternative model of production and distribution suited to and situated almost wholly within the ‘field of restricted production’. Self-production, cooperative distribution and potlatch are the order of the day, since accumulation of capital is not only impossible as an outcome, but widely abjured on an explicit basis. And finally through a mis-competent performativity it seeks to subvert the experience of performance (defined in the broadest sense), reducing further the gap between artist and the restricted audience of other producers.
In these three ways, it may thereby open a small crack in the hegemonic totality of the spectacle, and promote resistance to power within an ‘advanced fraction’. This aligns with Williams’ definition of a cultural revolution: ‘directed towards the general appropriation of... the intellectual forces of knowledge and conscious decision, as the necessary means of revolutionizing ... social relations’ (Williams, 2005, pp. 287 - emphasis added). The role of the ‘vanguard’ is not to represent the alleged interests of another social group, but to promote the potential growth of new forms of consciousness as a necessary condition for such a change in fundamental social relations. It is possible to see how improvised sound work *might* allow the ‘construction of situations’ if it is considered as a medium that ‘both reflects and prefigures its possible ways of organizing life’ (Situationist International, 2006, p. 25). It is this potential prefiguring that gets me out of bed in the morning. But all this is, of course, painfully open to the criticism of radical fakery and dilettante faux-engagement. This is where the work must speak for itself, and where we must be patient and wary of premature expectations. My model in this is always Zhou en Lai’s alleged assessment of the still-unfolding outcome of the French Revolution. My thesis is not open to empirical proof, and on one level we must all judge for ourselves. However, it is very clear that objective developments in not only the economy and politics, but even in ecology, have reached a point of ‘singular peril’, and as a result ‘are no longer manageable’ (The Invisible Committee, 2009, p. 10). At such a time it is beholden on all of us to do and say whatever we can to point to and to realize any possible solution, no matter how uncertain of outcome. In other words, desperate times require desperate measures; and furthermore, as Debord himself troubled to observe in his autobiography:

*An angry queen of France once reminded her most seditious subject: “There is rebellion in imagining that one could rebel”* (2004, pp. 23, emphasis added).
References


135/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
References


136/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?


137/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
References


138/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
References


139/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?


Reed, L. (1968). I heard her call my name [Recorded by Velvet Underground]. New York NY, USA.


140/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
References


141/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
Sager, G., Smith, B., Stewart, M., Underwood, S., & Waddington, J. (1979). We are time [Recorded by The Pop Group]. Bristol, UK.


142/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?
143/ B. Russell - What true project has been lost?