

'Noise' has become the expedient moniker for a motley array of sonic practices – academic, artistic, counter-cultural – with little in common besides their perceived recalcitrance with respect to the conventions governing classical and popular musics. 'Noise' not only designates the no-man's-land between electro-acoustic investigation, free improvisation, avant-garde experiment, and sound art; more interestingly, it refers to anomalous zones of interference between genres: between post-punk and free jazz; between musique concrète and folk; between stochastic composition and art brut. Yet in being used to categorise all forms of sonic experimentation that ostensibly defy musico-logical classification – be they para-musical, anti-musical, or post-musical – 'noise' has become a generic label for anything deemed to subvert established genre. It is at once a specific sub-genre of musical vanguardism and a name for what refuses to be subsumed by genre. As a result, the functioning of the term 'noise' oscillates between that of a proper name and that of a concept; it equivocates between nominal anomaly and conceptual interference. Far from being stymied by such paradox, the more adventurous practitioners of this pseudo-genre have harnessed and transformed this indeterminacy into an enabling condition for work which effectively realises 'noise's' subversive pretensions by ruthlessly identifying and pulverising those generic tropes and gestures through which confrontation so quickly atrophies into convention. Two groups are exemplary in this regard: To Live and Shave in L.A., led by assiduous American iconoclast Tom Smith, whose dictum 'genre is obsolete' provides the modus operandi for a body of work characterised by its fastidious dementia; and Runzelstirn & Gurgelstock, headed by the enigmatic Swiss deviant and 'evil Kung-Fu troll'<sup>[1]</sup> Rudolf Eb.er, whose hallucinatory audiovisual concoctions amplify the long dimmed psychotic potencies of actionism. Significantly, both men disavow the label 'noise' as a description of their work – explicitly in Smith's case, implicitly in Eb.er's.<sup>[2]</sup> This is not coincidental; each recognises the debilitating stereotypy engendered by the failure to recognise the paradoxes attendant upon the existence of a genre predicated upon the negation of genre.

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[1] See the interview with Smith online at <http://www.toliveandshaveinla.com/bio.htm>

[2] Smith's own description of Eb.er in an interview available at <http://pragueindustrial.org/interviews/ohne>. Eb.er is a qualified martial arts instructor.

Like the 'industrial' subculture of the late 1970s which spawned it, the emergence of 'noise' as a recognisable genre during the 1980s entailed a rapid accumulation of stock gestures, slackening the criteria for discriminating between innovation and cliché to the point where experiment threatened to become indistinguishable from platitude.<sup>[3]</sup> Fastening onto this intellectual slackness, avant-garde aesthetes who advertised their disdain for the perceived vulgarity of the industrial genre voiced a similar aversion toward the formulaic tendencies of its noisy progeny. But in flaunting its artistic credentials, experimental aestheticism ends up resorting to the self-conscious strategies of reflexive distancing which have long since become automatisms of conceptual art practice – the knee-jerk reflexivity which academic commentary has consecrated as the privileged guarantor of sophistication. This is the art that 'raises questions' and 'interrogates' while reinforcing the norms of critical consumption. In this regard, noise's lucid anti-aestheticism and its affinity with rock's knowing unselfconsciousness are among its most invigorating aspects. Embracing the analeptic fury of noise's post-punk roots but refusing its coalescence into a catalogue of stock mannerisms, Smith and Eb.er have produced work that marries conceptual stringency and anti-aestheticist bile while rejecting sub-academic cliché as vehemently as hackneyed expressions of alienation. Each implicates delirious lucidity within libidinal derangement – 'intellect and libido simultaneously tweaked' – allowing analysis and indulgence to interpenetrate.<sup>[4]</sup>

The sound conjured by To Live and Shave in L.A. is unprecedented: where noise orthodoxy too often identifies sonic extremity with an uninterrupted continuum of distorted screeching, Shave fashion what are ostensibly discrete 'songs' into explosive twisters of writhing sound. On a song like '5 Seconds Off Your Ass', the bracing opener from 1995's demented *Vedder, Vedder, Bedwetter*<sup>[5]</sup> (whose 'oafish bluster' Smith has since partly disavowed), the music seethes forth in a relentless cacophonous blare that

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[3] For an overview of industrial culture see the *Industrial Culture Handbook*, Re# 6/7, edited by V. Vale and A. Juno, San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1983. The best insight into the nascent noise scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s is provided by the magazine *Bananafish*, edited by Seymour Glass, which has only recently ceased publication with issue 18 (2006). An anthology of issues 1-4 was published by Tedium House Publication, San Francisco, in 1994.

[4] *Vedder, Vedder, Bedwetter*, Fifth Column Records, 1995

[5] <http://www.toliveandshaveinla.com/bio.htm>

seems to mimic the Gestus of noise. Yet barely discernible just beneath its smeared surfaces and saturated textures lies an intricately layered structure coupling scrambled speech, keening oscillator, and disfigured bass shards, intermittently punctuated by mangled pop hooks, absurdly disembodied metallic arpeggios and sporadic electronic roars, over which Smith spews out reams of splenetic invective. Where orthodox noise compresses information, obliterating detail in a torrential deluge, Shave constructs songs around an overwhelming plethora of sonic data, counterweighing noise's form-destroying entropy through a negentropic overload that destroys noise-as-genre and challenges the listener to engage with a surfeit of information. There is always too much rather than too little to hear at once; an excess which invites repeated listens. The aural fascination exerted by the songs is accentuated by Smith's remarkable libretti, featuring verbal conundrums whose allusiveness baffles and delights in equal measure. Typically cross-splicing scenarios from obscure 1970s pornography with Augustan rhetoric, Smith's ravings resist decipherment through a surplus rather than deficit of sense.<sup>[6]</sup> And just as Shave's sound usurps formlessness by incorporating an unformalizable surplus of sonic material, Smith's words embody a semantic hypertrophy which can only be transmitted by a vocal that mimes the senseless eructations of glossolalia. Refusing to yield to interpretation, his declamation cannot be separated from the sound within which it is nested. Yet it would be a mistake to confuse Shave's refusal to signify and their methodical subtractions from genre for a concession to postmodern polysemia and eclecticism. Far from the agreeable pastiche of a John Barth or an Alfred Schnittke, the proper analogue would be the total materialization of linguistic form exemplified in the 'written matter' of Pierre Guyotat or Iannis Xenakis' stochastic syntheses of musical structure and substance. Indeed, the only banner which Smith is willing to affix to Shave's work is that of what he calls the 'PRE' aesthetic. PRE is 'a negation of the errant supposition that spiffed-up or newly hatched movements supplant others fit for

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[6] Smith: 'My libretti are not random, owe nothing to stochastic or aleatory operations, and in their specificity are rigidly fixed to character. My approach is strictly cinematic.' <http://www.toliveandshaveinla.com/bio.htm>

drawn by Hans Bellmer, but Eb.er's paintings are executed with a technical proficiency worthy of artists like Nigel Cooke. Are these contrived and consequently inauthentic tokens of derangement? Or genuinely psychotic but therefore stereotypical symptoms? Over-familiarity has rendered the iconography of Viennese actionism banal: blood, gore, and sexual transgression are now tawdry staples of entertainment. Ironically, even *art brut* looks formulaic to us now. But Eb.er's judicious leavening of the freakish with the cartoonish and his disquieting transpositions of psychic distress into infantile slapstick betray a suspicion of stereotype and a lucidity about the ineliminable complicity between wilfulness and compulsion, perversity and pathology. The embrace of such ambiguity is the voluntary risk undertaken by a man acutely aware of the paradoxes attendant upon his own *mot d'ordre*: 'art not crime'. In this regard, Eb.er's approach is the symptom of a tactical rather than psychiatric dilemma: How to produce art that confronts without sham; art that is unequivocal in its refusal to placate or appease? 'We do not care about any behaviours, standards or civilisation. I don't want new ones. Just none. Bye bye.'<sup>[10]</sup> Such an exemplary refusal is as likely to be chastised for its irresponsibility as to be patronized for its aberrant, pathological character. It abjures moral condemnations of social psychosis as well as pathetic revendications of victimhood. But perhaps a psychotic who is lucid about the degree to which his estrangement is socially manufactured is a more dangerous political animal than any engaged artist or authentic lunatic?

Debates about noise's subversive or 'critical' potency unfold in a cultural domain whose relationship to the capitalist economy is at once transparent and opaque. Socio-economic factors are obviously relevant here; but their role is easier to invoke than to understand precisely and in the absence of detailed socio-economic analyses,

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[10] From an interview with Drew Daniel, 'Aktion Time Vision', published in *The Wire* 227, January 2003, pp.21-25.

the stakes of such debates continue to be largely played out in cultural terms. In this regard, the 'noise' genre is undoubtedly a cultural commodity, albeit of a particularly rarefied sort. But so is its theorization. And the familiar gestures that vitiate the radicality of the former are paralleled by the reactionary tropes which sap the critical potency of the latter. Much contemporary critical theory of a vaguely *marxisant* bent is compromised by conceptual anachronisms whose untruth in the current social context is every bit as politically debilitating as that of the reactionary cultural forms it purports to unmask. Just as 'noise' is neither more nor less inherently subversive than any other commodifiable musical genre, so the categories invoked in order to decipher its political potency cannot be construed as inherently 'critical' while they remain fatally freighted with neo-romantic clichés about the transformative power of aesthetic experience. The invocation of somatic and psychological factors in accounts of the (supposedly) viscerally liberating properties of 'noise' reiterates the privileging of subjective (or inter-subjective) experience in attempts to justify the edificatory virtues of making and listening to experimental music. But neither playing nor listening can continue to be privileged in this way as loci of political subjectivation. The myth of 'experience', whether subjectively or inter-subjectively construed, whether individual or collective, was consecrated by the culture of early bourgeois modernity and continues to loom large in cultural theory.<sup>[11]</sup> Yet its elevation by idealist philosophers who uphold the primacy of human subjectivity, understood in terms of the interdependency between individual and social consciousness, impedes our understanding of the ways in which the very nature of consciousness is currently being transformed by a culture in which technological operators function as intrinsically determining factors of social being. Technology is now an invasive component of agency. Neurotechnologies, including cognitive enhancers such as modafinil, brain fingerprinting, neural lie-detectors, and nascent brain-computer interfaces, are giving rise to phenotechnologies which will

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[11] See for instance Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).