

In the mid-1980's, Noise music seemed to be everywhere crossing oceans and circulating in continents from Europe to North America to Asia (especially Japan) and Australia. Musicians of diverse background were generating their own variants of Noise performance. Groups such as Einstürzende Neubauten, SPK, and Throbbing Gristle drew larger and larger audiences to their live shows in old factories, and Psychic TV's industrial messages were shared by fifteen thousand or so youths who joined their global 'television network.'

Some twenty years later, the bombed-out factories of Providence, Rhode Island, the shift of New York's 'downtown scene' to Brooklyn, appalling inequalities of the Detroit area, and growing social cleavages in Osaka and Tokyo, brought Noise back to the center of attention. Just the past week – it is early May, 2007 – the author of this essay saw four Noise shows in quick succession – the Locust on a Monday, Pittsburgh's Macronympha and Fuck Telecorps (a re-formed version of Edgar Buchholtz's Telecorps of 1992-93) on a Wednesday night; one day later, Providence pallbearers of Noise punk White Mice and Lightning Bolt who shared the same ticket, and then White Mice again.

The idea that there is a coherent genre of music called 'Noise' was fashioned in the early 1990's. My sense is that it became standard parlance because it is a vague enough category to encompass the often very different sonic strategies followed by a large body of musicians across the globe. I would argue that certain ways of composing, performing, recording, disseminating, and consuming sound can be considered to be forms of Noise music. The Noise sub-themes behind Christian Marclay and DJ Olive's turntablism, DJ Spooky's illbient 'electroneiric otherspace,' Masonna's body-based performance, Philip Samartzis' live mix of specially prepared CDs combined with real time synthesis and abstraction, Wolf Eyes' 'wailing, tortured dungeon sound'

(Ben Sisario in SPIN), Scot Jenerik's fire-fuelled display of noisy destruction, Oren Ambarchi's guitar experimentations, and the classics in the genre's history, Throbbing Gristle, SPK, Z'ev, and the Haters clearly illustrate this point. I wish to state that it is the entire socio-cultural and historical matrix within which Noise is chosen, combined, and listened to that defines the genre.

## NOISE IN THE SOCIETY OF SILENCE AND SPECTACLE

According to French cultural theorist Guy Debord's powerful analysis, life in late capitalism presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles.<sup>[1]</sup> Everything that was once directly lived has moved into representation. The society of the spectacle eliminates dialogue; the organization of the monologue by political and economic organizations isolates and prevents direct, localized, non-repeatable communication. The society of the spectacle, Jacques Attali claims in his pioneering book *Noise*, is also the society of silence.<sup>[2]</sup> These considerations enable us to theorize the rise of Noise music as a form of cultural disturbance in the silent and silenced deindustrialized space of late capitalism. Therefore, I will construct the beginnings of Noise performance as an aesthetic production that challenged social and cultural institutions, collapsed genre boundaries, and had broader socio-political implications.

Noise music in its most uncompromising form is different from other forms of resistance musics such as punk, New Wave, hardcore, or dark metal. In these musics, the voice, the logos as truth, has constituted the ideal point of a politicised voice by claiming to speak the truth of its audience's situation. Noise has no such claims; it is a radical deconstruction of the status of artist, audience, and music.<sup>[3]</sup> It is 'the grain of the voice',<sup>[4]</sup> a refusal of representation, a refusal of identity. Noise, at the very least,

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[1] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995).

[2] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985). See also Csaba Toth, 'The Work of Noise' in Amitava Kumar (ed.), *Poetics/Politics: Radical Aesthetics for the Classroom* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999) 201-218 and 'Sonic Rim: Performing Noise around the Pacific,' in Kathleen Ford and Philip Samartzis (eds.), *Variable Resistance: Australian Sound Art*, with compact disc, (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 14-23.

[3] For an exploration of these questions in theory, see especially Chapter Three in Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson, *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

[4] Roland, Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice,' in *Image – Music – Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 179-189.

disrupts both the performer and listener's normal relations to the symbolic order by refusing to route musical pleasure through the symbolic order (symbolic relations are defined here as an aggregate of guilt, the law, achievement, authority figures). We can call this musical pleasure anti-teleological *jouissance*, achieved by self-negation, by a return to the imaginary or the pre-subjective (the stage that precedes ego differentiation) – which, in our context, is a sonorous space. As for its 'musical' parameters, Noise is conceived to be anti-teleological in the sense that it digresses from the reified desire for the telos-driven formula of tension and release that characterizes most western musics, and particularly tangible in rock and pop performance. Instead, Noise speaks to and through our imaginary register of auditory, visual, haptic perceptions, and fantasy creating a chaos of sensations and feelings.

I also wish to stress the performativity of Noise. It is enough to allude here to Francisco Lopez's blindfolding his listeners, Christof Migone's 'corporeal glitches' (Will Montgomery in *The Wire*), Runzelstirn & Gurgelstock's releasing an amplified turkey laden with contact microphones during a live show, the humorous head-dives by the Incapacitants' 'big man,' Fumio Kousakai, and the fanciful masks, headgears, and 'choreographed' movements of Lightning Bolt, the Locust, and White Mice. Why performance? What is the value of performance to Noise practitioners? I construct performance as an aesthetic production that challenges cultural institutions and genres, and has broader social implications. As queer performance theorist Ann Cvetkovich suggests, performance inhabits different locations – both discursive and material: the nation, the stage, the body.<sup>[5]</sup> What version of late capitalism is contested in the rise of Noise-based musics? Noise performance, in our view, exercises a culturally coded and politically specific critique of late capitalism, and offers tools for

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[5] Ann Cvetkovich, 'Comments,' at the Annual Meeting of the American Studies Association, Nashville, TN, November 1994. In author's possession.

undoing its seemingly incontestable hegemony. To be sure, Noise performance operates in the shadow of recontainment by the very commodity structures it intends to challenge. But resistance to such commodification continues to occur, and what cultural critic Russel A. Potter says about hip-hop appears to be true also for Noise music: 'the recognition that everything is or will soon be commodified has ... served as a spur, an incitement to productivity.'<sup>[6]</sup> Let it be enough to mention here the hundreds of recordings by Merzbow, Francisco Lopez, Muslimgauze, and, most recently, the endless stream of cassettes and CD-Rs released by Wolf Eyes.

It is worth noting that Noise has become a transnational global cultural form capable of mobilizing diverse constituencies. I wish to give a measure of historical specificity to Noise music by claiming that the rise of Noise was coeval with deindustrialization in the USA, Western Europe, and parts of the Asia-Pacific region.

## NOISE AND HISTORY

The birth of Noise culture can only be understood in the context of the collapse of the industrial city. Noise is a profoundly metropolitan genre (even in its ecological form) that first registered its presence amidst the ravaged urban-industrial landscape and reactionary cultural climate of the Thatcher and Reagan years, and, perhaps to a lesser degree, the Yasuhiro Nakasone period. Concomitant with deindustrialization in the West and Japan was a development that went hand in hand with a globalizing process: the emergence of a global information network and immense transnational corporations. Saturation with consumer goods and informational simultaneity wove a web far finer and smaller scale than anything imaginable in the classical industrial era.

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[6] Russell A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (Albany, NY.: State University of New York Press, 1995), 8.

Deindustrialization continued to hit the Fordist economies of late capitalist societies between the late 1960's and mid-1990s. Although the roots of industrial collapse are complex, the demise came with the changes global restructuring wrought. Cities such as Manchester, Leeds, (parts of) London, the Rust Belt in the United States (Pittsburgh, Detroit, Cleveland), major heavy industry centers in Australia such as Whyalla and Elizabeth in South Australia, Newcastle and Wollongong in New South Wales, had been particularly adversely affected by retrenchment and capital flight, becoming ghost towns of late capitalism.

With the collapse of traditional industries, venture capitalists heavily invested in the new wave of 'cyber work,' producing North Carolina's Research Triangle, Silicon Valley in the San Francisco Bay Area, and the 'model' city of the 1990's, Seattle. We have witnessed the increasing concentration of the functions of 'information capitalism' in central Tokyo. Australia began 'to confront the realities of world markets' (Paul Keating, Labor Prime Minister) by simultaneously deregulating its industries and advocating the mantra of cyber-work under the sugar-coated slogan of 'Clever Country.' In reality, the selling points with which these cities tried to lure back capital sounded like whimpers coming from a desperate 'underdeveloped' country: promises of lower wages, lower rents, tax abatement or tax breaks, and corporation-friendly local office holders.

The economic 'upswing' cycle since the mid-1990's has been, statistically, characterized by a dramatic rise in employment. What these statistics hide though is that most new jobs represent flexi-work, that is, partial employment with no benefits. While this economic 'boom' has produced harder times for the middle sectors, it solidified the stagnation or further submergence of the labour pool hit by earlier processes of

deindustrialization. Also, perhaps crucially, it reinforced racial/ethnic bifurcation (Berlin, Budapest, Pittsburgh) and a multi-dimensional fissure of space, race, and class (Chicago, London, Paris, Sydney) in the post-Fordist city.<sup>[7]</sup>

A new regime of representation set out to celebrate the 'visible and audible rehabilitation' of the city, and, in the process, shifted attention away from the arid row houses, impoverished ghettos, bleak projects, and the neubauten that had loomed so large in the 1980's, early 1990's. And while, as music scholar Adam Krims states, representationally, a new music-poetics marked the 're-conquest' of the city,<sup>[8]</sup> forces of law and order imposed materially a brutal silence on the city's subaltern subjects from New York to Paris as sky-rocketing rates of incarceration for petty crimes, anti-immigrant hysteria, and paramilitary presence in certain neighborhoods have shown.

I will argue that Noise music, although not always unproblematically, intervened into this silenced space, and functioned as a resistant cultural form. Performers produced, found, and invented new Noise instruments, and applied guerilla tactics of street theater (Einstürzende Neubauten's disassembling a part of the Autobahn, for instance). Their work was collective; what was played was not the work of a single creator – audiences initially barely knew the names of those behind most of these groups. Recordings were made on 'production sites' set up by industrial performers (see Throbbing Gristle's Industrial Records; Manny Theiner's SSS label in Pittsburgh; Load Records in Providence; etc.). Groups stayed together for a short time, and dissolved only to regroup for another intervention. To be a Noise performer meant a day-to-day and subversive activity, a guerilla tactic, a constant war of position.

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[7] Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *New York, Chicago, Los Angeles: America's Global Cities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 357.

[8] Adam Krims, *Music and Urban Geography* (Routledge: New York, 2007), 123.