2018: Against Worldbuilding Fight The Snob Art of the Social Climbers!

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By Nick James Scavo · December 13, 2018

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In 2018, do we laud our creations enough to call them *worlds*? As we turn the knob of a Breville BOV650XL toaster oven and scrape strawberry jam over the 1,000 nooks and crannies of an english muffin, are we vain enough to proclaim a new *world*? Our special individuality suggests that *our* world is made up of billions of particular worlds. Our bizarre social ingenuity demonstrates that there is a world-network that compartmentalizes, associates, and connects them. All the while, there is an infinite amount of quantum worlds swirling in microcosm beneath the starry sky of an equally infinite macrocosm. Within this reflected infinity, exactly which worlds did we build? Or are we merely at war with an existing world in an effort to proclaim a more profound one — one distinctly of our making? Must we devour the multiplicity of worlds to build even one solitary one? Are we worldeaters or worldbuilders?

We look up from our world, the planet Earth, and our curiosity bores into the expanse of non-living worlds circling around us. Yet, even our centuries of research and recent astronautics can't seem to reveal a single discovery other than a plentitude of dead worlds. We get excited by a possible subsurface lake near the Martian south pole or carbon-containing compounds in ancient sediments. However, our search for other worlds, and our attempts to build new ones, leap from our own sense of despair and isolation with regards to the exceptionalism of our own. The Earth, a celestial body composed of the same atoms that compose the rest of the cosmos, simply contains substances that behave in a different manner from any other known world — atoms that form combinations among themselves in ways varied to an almost unimaginable level. Still, we speculate. Clearly, there is no shortage of *possible* worlds. Our speculations produce these *ad nauseum*, as if fueled by more sinister efforts to replicate ourselves and soften the isolation.

"Our search for other worlds, and our attempts to build new ones, leap from our own sense of despair and isolation with regards to the exceptionalism of our own."
Against the grain of our world, can we adequately stand behind our established "creations" and speculations confidently enough to call them "worlds," as confidently as Sun Ra proclaimed: "There Are Other Worlds?" In music, which already presents itself like a spectral hallucination to our ears, we often demand sonic cogency so that sound can establish itself as a substance to us — a world to be built and to be occupied. Specifically, in an era of sound making with a clear industrial background, have we become totally dependent on the constructed legibility of music? Must we read and design sound to listen to it? Must music impress us with its stability as an explorable, colonizable, harvestable world, one that's constructed with novel production, rich with demonstrable cleverness or "beauty," a unique use of assumed signs, and a stylized implementation of musical tools and techniques? Can a "world" even exist in vibratory waves — in "wiggly air"?

At the close of 2018, this essay will selectively survey the precedent and current state of sonic "worldbuilding," simply defined here as the process of constructing an imaginary world in sound. In many kinds of design, worldbuilding is done in the thorough development of unique images, textures, characters, settings, buildings, etc. that results in a viewer's cognitive linking of those items as establishing a specific world: it develops a gestalt through a succession of images. In fiction, worldbuilding is similarly done through the description of surroundings and the implementation of a setting that supports narrative. In this essay, I'll be arguing that worldbuilding in sound is done by extensively "overcoding" and associating sonic signals into legible units with established symbolic efficacy — an effort that involves some kind of translation or amplification that alters the signal.

Perhaps with a polemical bent (insert purple devil face emoji), the essay will offer historical examples of "worldbuilders" of sound — rowdy folk who attempt to dredge up unique worlds from the muck. I'll discuss some reactions to these nefarious composers and offer alternative perspectives against the "form" of a sonic "world." Following, I'll discuss a contemporary example of a worldbuilder — one who could be heard as a modern ally or disciple of the aforementioned historical builders — specifically TMT favorite Oneohtrix Point Never. Lastly, I'll

discuss recent music made in 2018 that outsrips the worldbuilders of their mission to build in sound, music that uses wholly different methods in its production and manages to come to vastly different conclusions in its form, its discursivity, and, ultimately, its social and cultural meaning. I'll briefly discuss DeForrest Brown Jr. & Kepla's _The Wages of Being Black Is Death_ , Klein's _cc_, Jaclyn Miller's "Hyper-Articulation," die Reihe's _Vocoder_, Stine Janvin's _Fake Synthetic Music_, and C. Spencer Yeh's _The RCA Mark II_.

It must be said that my hope is not to set up a faux-dichotomy between "worldbuilders" and "anti-worldbuilders" as a false binary; rather, this essay is simply trying to problematize worldbuilding as a dominant method for the construction of new music, music that's often being made from the throes of industry and in the very pit of our desires to colonize, control, apprehend, read, bend, and behold sound. Also, despite the combative tone of this essay, I must in good faith relinquish that there is nothing wrong with attempting to build worlds — no shame in speculating our escape, no scandal in building alternatives. However, in _music_, a form that we must often theorize to behold, the simple act of listening usually implies a medium for sound, and that medium must likely be beheld as _the world_. We are often alone in the exercise of listening, although we can relate and report our experiences to each other in discussion and in writing. In such solitary conditions, so too can we build worlds and attempt to express their grandeur to each other.

Still, even in 2018, the thematic frames for our listening are uncertain. Style, aesthetic appreciation, and the technological production and social consumption of music all incongruently condition our reception, aurality, and agency for listening. A signal emerges, and we can listen to that signal, registering it as it vibrates within. Is to listen to worldbuild? Or, is to listen to experience a shared sonority within our existing world? As composer Tony Conrad playfully mentions in his notes on a 200-hour piano composition "Music And The Mind of The World": "God help the young violin student who forever has to play all by himself without the supportive sonorities of another instrument!"

In our "Age Of," we may rely all too heavily on our will to build worlds, to play the violin alone, such that the hubris has become innate and our assumptions concrete. A lot of writing, music criticism, and artist statements use the phrase. I myself called Elysia Crampton a "worldbuilder" in a review of _American Drift_ in 2015. But I believe these uses of the word are confused and altogether wrong. So, at the dusk of 2018 — as our own very world crumbles around us, from flames in the West and hurricanes and bomb cyclones in the East — let us pour one out for the sonic worldbuilders.

Fight The Rich Man's Snob Art!

Henry Flynt delivering the lecture "From Culture to Veramusement," February 28th, 1963. Walder De Maria's Loft. (Photo: Diane Wakoski)

In 1963, philosopher, musician, and anti-art activist Henry Flynt, along with multimedia artist/violinist Tony Conrad and filmmaker Jack Smith, protested against NYC cultural institutions MoMA and Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Their picket signs read "Demolish Serious Culture," "Abolish Art Museums," and, the more explicitly elegant, "Demolish Lincoln Center." In the words of scholar Branden Joseph, the protests took "the iconoclastic program of [Henry Flynt's] acognitive culture into the streets," asserting Flynt's particular blend of Marxism and class struggle, advocacy of civil rights, and anti-art cultural criticism into a direct action against the culture industry. Without getting into the weeds with the fascinating particularities of Flynt's thinking — "Concept Art," "acognitive culture," "Veramusement," and "Brend" among them — we can readily say that these activities were motivated by a sentiment that concerned "the valorization of socially and politically marginalized" peoples, specifically as it relates to his interactions with NYC's downtown experimental culture, support of non-European music, and involvement in the Workers World Party. Later, in 1964, formalized into a group called "Action Against Cultural Imperialism," Flynt and Conrad, along with Marc Schleifer, Takako Saito, and George Maciunas, staged another protest at a concert of composer Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Originale* at Judson Hall sponsored by the West German government. This time, the signs read "Fight Racist Laws of Music!" and "Fight the Rich Man's Snob Art." Outside, they chanted "Death to All Fascist Musical Ideas," and, apparently, they presented an accompanying leaflet that stated outright "Stockhausen—Patrician Theorist of White Supremacy—Go To Hell!" Outlined in scholar Benjamin Piekut's "Demolish Serious Culture: Henry Flynt and Workers World Party," the event marks a crucial action toward highlighting complicated articulations of collective struggle and self-determination within and

against the cloistered contexts and world of musical "high culture." The event was especially charged, as experimental luminaries Allen Ginsberg, Charlotte Moorman, Dick Higgins, Nam June Paik, James Tenney, and Alvin Lucier were in attendance. As Piekut highlights in his essay, many thought that the protest was a part of the performance — effectively placing Flynt's attempt at subversion and protest within the conceptual expanse of Stockhausen's *world*. But still they proclaimed: "Fight The Snob Art of the Social Climbers!"

Flynt's choice of Stockhausen as his target is extremely relevant to the conversation at hand: worldbuilding. Distinct from traditions of American improvisation, jazz, or Fluxus art, Stockhausen employs a premeditated formal approach that strives for unified and coherent composition. Having invented *Formelkomposition*, a complex consideration of formal reasoning with roots in Germanic philosophical and literary traditions, Stockhausen valued the strong organization of his material based on the firmly defined principles of serialism, *Ausmultiplikation*, unified time structuring, and more, outlined in *Four Criteria for Electronic Music* and other lectures and texts. Through his use of overlapping formulas, Stockhausen's works rely on the preponderance of a closed, self-contained totality-form (forme-totalité) — *a world*. In works like his lifelong project *Licht* — a cycle of seven operas that function as an "eternal spiral" — Stockhausen approaches developing something like the Wagnerian model of the Gesamtkunstwerk — the "total artwork," which is also something like a world. However, to the question, "What does Wagner's music mean to you?" Stockhausen responded, "Very little. Twice in my life I've gone to one of Wagner's operas and both times I left after a short time, truly disgusted." Clearly a worldbuilder, the composer couldn't stand the sight of another human's conception of a world, and this is precisely why worldbuilding yields closed-network, rockstar-isms that separate forms that are otherwise matrixed, networked, open.

As Brandon Joseph outlines in *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage*, "the reason put forth for [Henry Flynt and Tony Conrad] protesting Stockhausen [...] was quite specific: his ability to produce legitimating concepts ("invent 'scientific' Laws") that perpetuate Western music's pretension to advancement and supremacy [...] enunciated in his theoretical organ Die Reihe and elsewhere." The establishment of sonic worlds is conspired through the invention of these "Laws." Therein is an effort to translate, bend, amplify, and expand the original signal of sound. We can see a contemporary extension of this very tactic — mainly in assumed laws that have been dormant within industrialized music — at play in much of today's albums: loud, grandiose, highly symbolic, filled with references, bent on asserting dominance as a world unto itself, separate, distinct, and special.

"Music criticism has altogether confused attempts to "worldbuild" within recordings as a kind of "objectivity." We as critics often measure this pseudo-world to appraise and judge its cogency according to various criteria, as unclear and groundless as they may be."
To worldbuild in sound is to amass a sonic readability that ultimately allows listeners to "read" it as an independent, isolated experience with a unique form — as categorically distinct. Taking much from the history of Western music, music criticism has altogether confused attempts to "worldbuild" within recordings as a kind of "objectivity." We as critics often measure this pseudo-world to appraise and judge its cogency according to various criteria, as

unclear and groundless as they may be. The act of worldbuilding is highly related to the myth of "the musical genius" — sonic independence — and the sublime as an extension of the worlding of reason: absolute totality, total freedom in a readable, cogent form. Therein is the image of the uncanny soundsmith who toils away at making an opus, simultaneously overthinking how the work or recording will be received "in the world" while also asserting it to be "a world" unto its own — a doomed project that forms the crux of modern humanity's ideologies, regimes, follies, and oppressive tactics.

In stark contrast, in a 1970 interview between American composer Morton Feldman and Françoise Esselier, Feldman reminisced, "I told John Cage that Stockhausen always wanted me to write music on a large scale, orchestra pieces, do you remember? And I told him that I was trying to write a piece for piano, to be played with one finger [...] If I only had one goal in life, it would be to scare Stockhausen." Feldman's writing of a piece for piano to be "played with one finger" coupled with Henry Flynt, Tony Conrad and others' protests establish a practical argument against "the worldbuilders" to be used for the purposes of this essay. They create an ideological counter-force against the manipulation and structuralist development of totality-forms: "The Snob Art of the Social Climbers," as they called it. Together, their efforts and statements against cultural imperialism sought a music whose material itself should determine the outcome of its form — not as *a world* of their making, but as *the world* under our stewardship, as a shared sonority we access. Before looking to music that follows in their lineage, we will embark on a brief polemic of one of 2018's most unabashed worldbuilders.

2018: The Last Known Image of a Worldbuilder

Tony Conrad in "Action Against Cultural Imperialism" at Judson Hall 1964, superimposed on *Age Of* LP

In May 2018, I attended Red Bull Music Academy's annual "taking of New York" to witness the debut of Oneohtrix Point Never's large-scale work ["Myriad"](#) at the Park Avenue Armory. I attended the performance with no vendetta against 0PN's work and, in fact, considered myself a fan (evidenced in a glowing review of 2015's *Garden of Delete*). Not only that, but I've also been a critical supporter of his assembled band, consisting of keyboardist Kelly Moran, synthesist/foley-ist Aaron David Ross, and percussionist Eli Keszler (evidenced in reviews of ADR's *Deceptionista* and Eli Keszler's *Last Signs of Speed*). Still, I attended with a sense of unease toward the scale of the concert, which described the piece as a "project of unprecedented scope," "a hyperstitial concert-scape imagined from the perspective of an alien intelligence," and his most "ambitious project to date." More specifically, I flinched at reading that Oneohtrix would be expanding upon his "worldbuilding approach to creating works [that] span across the mediums of film, poetry, and visual art." *Worldbuilding*! In my review of *G.O.D.*,

I (perhaps incorrectly) expounded on precisely how the artist *destroyed* worlds. In his review of *R Plus Seven*, Birkut described how Oneohtrix *flattened* worlds. But build worlds? Such a statement seemed contrary to everything that I had once valued in 0PN's music — imagistic subversion, musical compression, symbolic deflation, cascading negation.

Park Avenue Armory, "the single most important collection of nineteenth century interiors to survive intact in one building," is alike to the NYC institutions that were picketed by Flynt *et al*. in the 1960s. "Part American palace, part industrial shed," the space exaggerates certain tensions that implicitly exist within performance and aesthetic production in the American context, clinging to gaudy, European magnificence while simultaneously desiring expansive, post-industrial "shed-like" flatness. The space is meant "to consume epic and adventurous presentations that cannot be mounted elsewhere in New York City," and it formed the architecture that housed the ambitions of 0PN's "Myriad."

The audience was greeted with an expensive-looking, Risograph-like printed program embellished with incomprehensible Medieval-revivalist iconography — tortured insectoid and frog-like figures in wizard cloaks positioned in Hieronymous Bosch- or Chaucer-like scenes. The archetypal character imagery recalls early sprite-like *Final Fantasy* RPG archetypes, except the "roleplaying" in this case is within the actual shackles of contemporary feudal life. (My first thought was that the program was printed so beautifully, it could possibly be worth something post-performance. After the concert, I ended up throwing it away in a subway trash can.) Tortured Giger-like alien sculptures writhing in various contorted shapes hung from steel wires, positioned in front of a Live Nation stage and a fragmented, angular screen display.

The combination of corporate iconography via Red Bull, the magnitude of the Armory space, and 0PN's mission for a "project of unprecedented scope" all established a neo-feudal aesthetic that was further suffused into the symbolic artifices of his 2018 album, *Age Of*. Despite the artist's efforts to grandly proclaim how we can "survive the last days of excess" — as articulated in 0PN's interview with critic Colin Joyce — excess was on display during "Myriad." Haphazardly branded as "Myriad Industries," the piece was a terrifying example of how industrialized music propels our symbolic artifice forward into hubristic and, quite frankly, suffocating worldbuilding — *excess*.

Still from "Myriad" trailer video for RBMA Park Avenue Armory Show

During the RMBA concert, 0PN was the rockstar bandleader leading a genius ensemble of some of the world's most talented musicians. In between sections of the program, he granted each band member a premeditated, pseudo-improvisational "guitar solo" that was described as a "cusp" moment between world zones, brackets of songs from *Age Of* that were divided into four categorical, archetypal epochs: Ecco, Harvest, Excess, and Bondage. The performance had the general confidence of neo-arena rock, the obvious materialization of 0PN's previous tours with Soundgarden and Nine Inch Nails. Whereas I took these signifiers on *Garden of Delete* to be subversive anti-matter, it has become clear with his recent work that these oblique references were actually structural axioms of 0PN's musical ambitions. The references had become synonymous with his craft — at this point, big-budget, industrialized, high-definition electronic music. Somewhere along the way, 0PN's cultural commentary had subsumed the music to reveal that his subversive tendencies and criticality had collapsed to reveal the "world' he has been trying to create all along — a self-contained mythology of "sublime" art, created as an inefficient, sad musical horcrux of the grandiose ambitions of auteur-like, Christopher Nolan-esque cinema directors: worldbuilding.

0PN's attempts to polymerize sound into an incisive "world" in "Myriad" yielded a sonic onslaught that mirrored the general direction of *Age Of* — a last bastion of cryptic aesthetics in 2018's fraught climate. This is evidenced in the album's smatterings of Medieval iconography and country music — reclaimed but backwards white tropes — all wrapped into a vision of excess that establishes a poisonous skeleton to the album's general direction. 0PN fans may proclaim that the album "pushes the genre of experimental electronic music to a point at which few are taking it," but this is precisely the kind of thinking that problematizes worldbuilding altogether. The dialectical "pushing" of a genre forward and toward an idealized world-form that somehow is thought to exist in sound implies a trajectory that simply cannot be accounted for within experimental music. If *Age Of* contains the meta-narrative of pushing a

bygone historical "ecco" (idyllic) world forward, harvesting our creation of excess worlds, and placing "bondage" of our current world, the album's abstracted handling of this narrative in sound mirrors the very gestures it attempts to subvert.

The title track's harpsichord transition into the glazed drawl of "Babylon" is a truly gruesome picture for how overdetermined sound can yield hollow forms — devoid of their intended affect — and transparently "try hard" in their world-like, sonic-rococo embellishment. It expounds its own suffocating commentary through the literal use of gas-mask breaths on "Black Snow" or the "cinematically" ascendent, minimalist hocketing of "Warning." With virtuosic production "shredding" techniques, materials, and symbols that have been combined and recombined countless times in virtually thousands of recordings in modern music, *Age Of* is a "flex," an intended opus that clinically systematizes 0PN's mythos into a choked amalgamation of his tropic industrialized sounds and motifs.

"As an attempt at a kind of "science-fiction," *Age Of* tries to build a world through exposition, summarization, and description — a pervasive technical agenda that new music adopts in order to be heard in industrialized musical conditions."
And so, *Age Of* — further dissected in TMTer Hydroyoga's excellent review — is a cynical attempt at a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a total work of art, an ideal work of art within 2018's dilapidated cultural conditions. Further, it is a contemporary extension of Stockhausen's provocation of *Formelkomposition*, but instead of laws, it musters a kind of worldbuilding that exists solely in the successions of sonic images and after-images blurred in stock musical gestures. This is specifically rendered within the album's compartmentalized use of R&B rhythms, vague songcraft, and depreciated use of Spectrasonics' Omnisphere VST synthesizer. As an attempt at a kind of "science-fiction," *Age Of* tries to build a world through exposition, summarization, and description — a pervasive technical agenda that much new music adopts in order to be heard in industrialized musical conditions, our current "Age Of." This sound-making condition — one that I'd extend onward to Amnesia Scanner's *Another Life* and much of the now-ubiquitous "deconstructed club music" — is "formal" only in the sense that it overcodes sound *structurally* into a legible unit fit for consumption, novel registration, or titillating dissolution and dissection. Unlike Stockhausen, this music can no longer "formally" induce laws outside of the totalizing memetic exchange of our socially-determined communicative efforts, and yet it still strives for establishing a world within the impossibility of a "total" signal of culture. More in line with Grimes's new single "We Appreciate Power" than Ryuichi Sakamoto, a worldbuilding message rails on. What will it take to make you capitulate: "Black Snow" or the quest to reach "Babylon"? No, don't capitulate, always Fight The Snob Art of the Social Climbers!
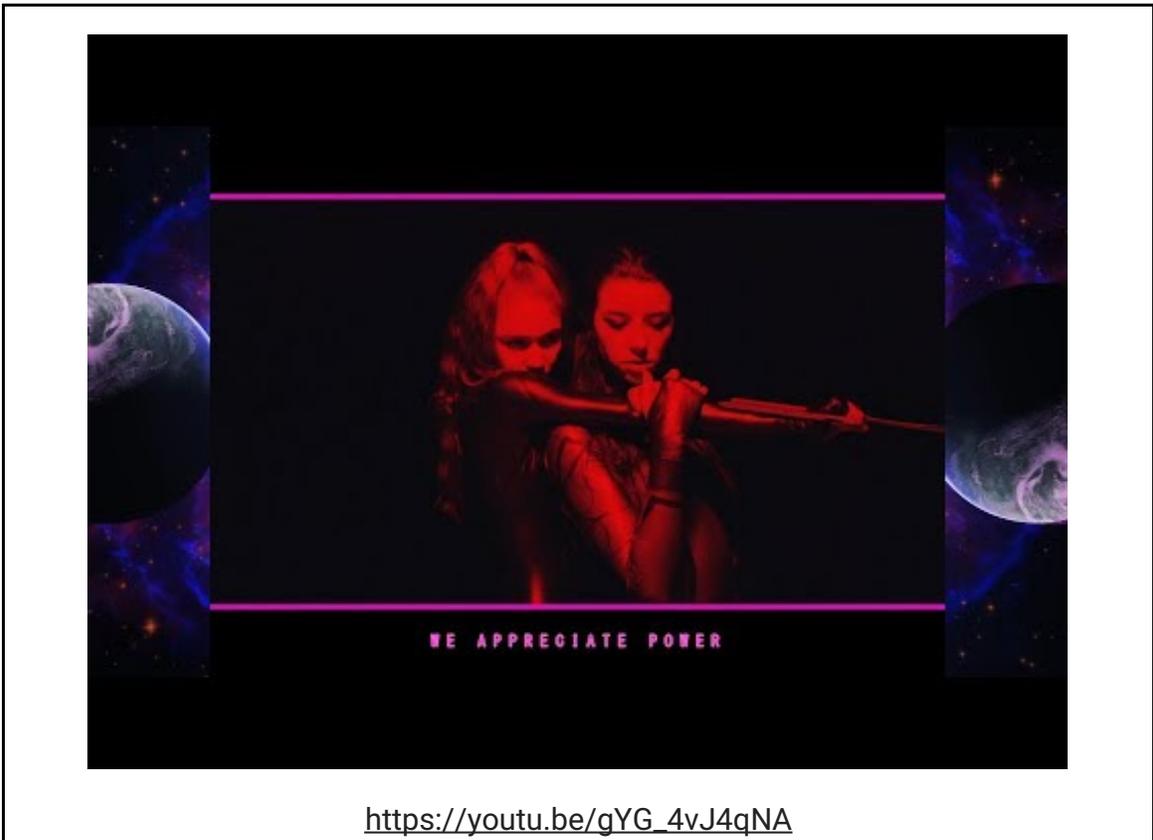
https://youtu.be/gYG_4vJ4qNA

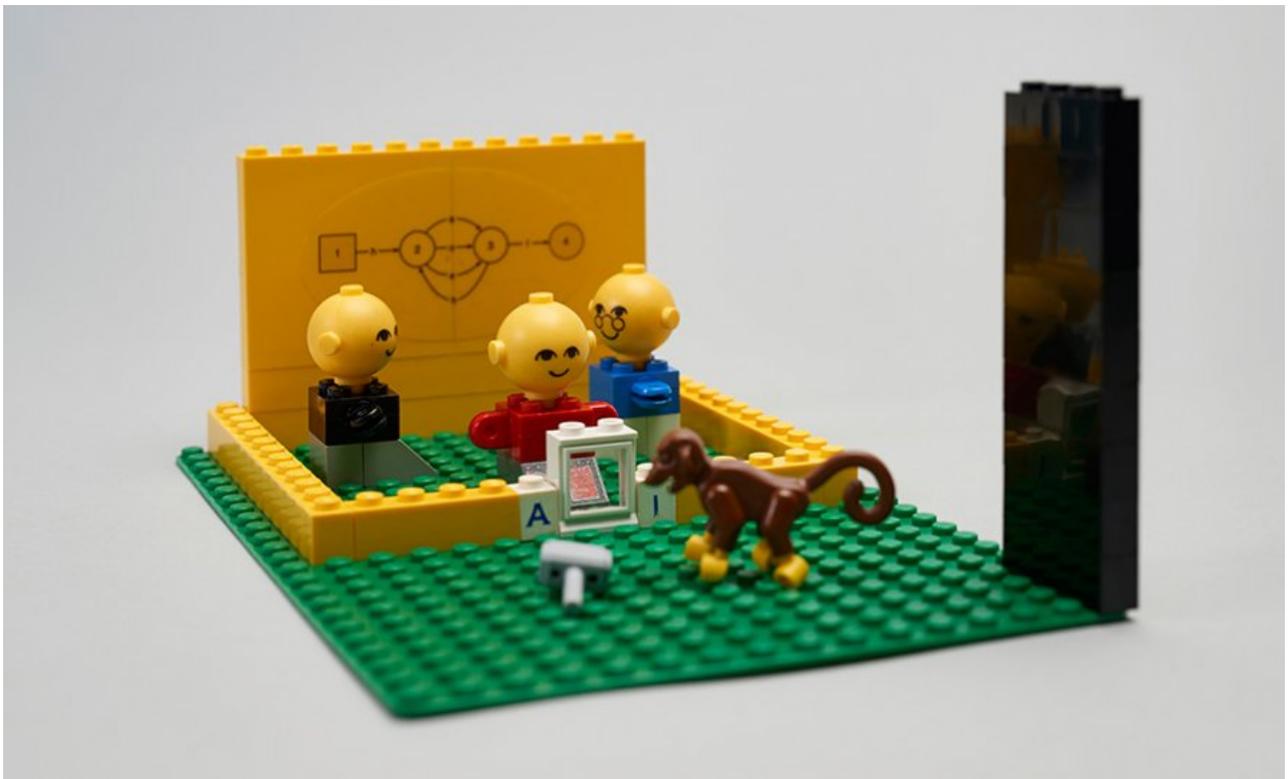Music and The Mind of the Toy-World vs. Music and The Mind of the World

Image Source: Urbanomic. "Toy Model AGI Playset gives the budding CHILD-philosopher all they need to recreate the thought experiments from Reza Negarestani's Intelligence and Spirit and begin tinkering with the automata."

As I alluded to earlier, the project of worldbuilding would do well to heed an overused message heard throughout writer's workshops across the planet: "show, don't tell." The very act of worldbuilding is an act of descriptive narrating and reasoning within our still very finite world, evidenced in our ecological crisis always subsisting against our efforts to dream-out of a flooded actuality. This very tension, and this essay's overall rudimentary argument "against worldbuilding," was altogether rigorously refuted by philosopher Reza Negarestani (collaborator of TMT favorite Florian Hecker), who gave a presentation during the symposium *Regenerative Feedback: On Listening and its Emancipatory Potential* earlier in 2018 called "Out of Bounds of Sense." The talk presented a "Kantian-Sellarsian counterfactual paradigm of living in a purely acoustic world where all you have is sound." In his talk, Negarestani gave a thought experiment that described a situation in which we only have access to the auditory properties of sound, where spatial concepts and registers are achieved by listening only — a *spaceless* world without reference to physical material. He went on to describe this purely acoustic world as phenomenally solipsistic, where we can never know if the outside world exists or not, where there is no differentiation between ourselves and the world. In effect, this world was purely narrative, authored by a mind that saw no distinction between itself and the world around it. In contrast, he spoke on how our actual reality is nothing without the ongoing labor of human beings projecting predicates, how a "purely auditory world" would instead create a counterfactual universe, a toy-world solely made of sound and without a space. Ultimately, he put forth that this condition would allow us to still determine certain regularities as necessary or rule-like, all-in-all suggesting that this world both confirms and further clarifies Immanuel Kant's main thesis of the transcendental ideality of a space — that experienced space is not real — that our acoustic world is a transcendentally ideal world. In this condition, he stated that our postulations are limited to exactly *one* world, and all of our acoustic adventures will "bottom out, get exhausted," limited from the very beginning.

Despite this unpleasant conclusion, Negarestani suggested that "whether you live in solipsistic phenomenal world or not — you can still think of new possibilities — of acoustic worlds that are alien — yet not unintelligible." Due to the primacy of our projected predications onto the actuality of our world, even if they are not *real* or transcendentally ideal as in his thought experiment, therein is a conception of reality that is not a given. Within this conception, our projections give us the outcome of an infinitely constructable reality — reality as an infinite play of making *new* projections. He proclaimed that this should be considered not as a dead-end, but as a point of liberation. In complete support of an idea of worldbuilding, he claimed that "giving up on all dogmatic metaphysical claims about reality and nature, in this case accepting the metaphysical reality of the acoustic universe as the fundamental limit of our perceptual space, coincides with the idea that we can *build new worlds*." Further, "sound engineering *as* worldmaking is tantamount to an emancipatory position […] The "world" of my experience is only real to the extent that it enables me to postulate and imagine new worlds — worlds that my be impossible, but can be rendered possible, or worlds that are possible, but can be made actual."

"Why would we emancipate ourselves by authoring worlds when we could instead emancipate ourselves from authorship itself?"

While there is much to parse through in Negarestani's thought experiment, there is a certain parallelism between this "purely auditory world" and how musicians and the music industry idealize recordings as transcendentally ideal, abstract spaces. Does the abstract space of recordings beget worldbuilding as an emancipatory position for music-making? Does the acceptance of a solipsistic condition of listening allow us to open possibilities to actually build new worlds? Granted, it was purely a thought experiment, but as many an experimental composer has revealed to us: sound simply doesn't exist without space. Hasn't history shown us that intelligence or reason does not beget liberation? Isn't this position the same as Grimes's in "We Appreciate Power"? Isn't this a myth that fits within many classical philosophical claims of the "freedom" of logic and law, that our "noetic projections" are only mountable as a kind of worldbuilding?

I argue that perhaps, at best, these can become "world versions," descriptions or views of how the world is. I dispute our authoring of them as worlds themselves. In music, the notion of authorship of sound has to be categorically challenged. Seen in the work of the aforementioned composers Tony Conrad and Henry Flynt, the founders of early Minimalism saw that "the musical legacy of Minimalism was to put the institution of authorship into question." Or, as Conrad says in Tyler Hubby's documentary <u>"Tony Conrad: Completely in the Present"</u>: "One of the things that the music represented was the absence of the composer, and that we were, in effect, eliminating the composer as a structural element from the cultural agenda." With the composer absent, the builder absent, the author absent, or, as DeForrest Brown Jr. (former TMT contributor and personal collaborator) put it in his 2017 album, _Absent Personae_: How can we build worlds in music? Why would we emancipate ourselves by authoring more worlds when we could instead emancipate ourselves from authorship itself? Rather, Conrad let the material itself determine the outcome of its form, not as _a world_ of his making, but as _the world_ under our stewardship, evidenced through his <u>aforementioned 200-hour piano composition</u>, a "piece" of shared sonority he accessed temporarily through the world's pianos. While I won't (or can't) argue with Reza Negarestani, an intellectual powerhouse, on his own philosophical terms, I will offer examples of music that came in 2018 that altogether refute the idea of worldbuilding as it has been venerated and established by the axis above, specifically in a survey of the work of DeForrest Brown Jr. & Kepla, Klein, Voice Training (Jaclyn Miller), Stine Janvin, C. Spencer Yeh, and die Reihe — my favorite music of 2018 (aside from Charli XCX, of course).

"Opacity shields and absorbs the kind of sufficient, cogent "projections" that are required for worldbuilding and abstraction in music.""
An exhausted and defeated audio documentation against "the White's" "nominal gaze of categorization" (a kind of worldbuilding), Liverpool sound artist Kepla and DeForrest Brown Jr.'s 2018 release _The Wages Of Being Black Is Death_ , their second album for quintessential NYC label <u>PTP</u>, demonstrates "the alienation — and eventual distillation — of the Black Body as a subject and content of the social sphere." DeForrest's recent work under his Speaker Music moniker and his role as a "Rhythmanalyst" sublimates his position as a critic, curator, and composer into a force breaking open the code of rhythm — literally ripping them apart in the

Digital Audio Workstation — to find the particular desirous strands of sound he longs for, quickening their pace, slowing them into wide expanses and open grains, with any and all sonic materials caught up in its orbiting and consuming gravity.

As the originary position for this work, *Wages* proclaims itself as documentation of a world "not made for us," acknowledging a certain finitude of the conditions of Whiteness "dictating the terms and categories that describe everything in the universe except itself." Documentation implies a kind of facticity, a material of "white clarity [and] insidious neutrality" that the album detournes, records, and chronicles. Ultimately, this kind of clarity forms the conditions of worldbuilding as the cogent and sufficient succession of axioms that allow for the construction of something sufficient enough to become a world. The Whites' "icy eyes" design these worlds in neutral space, the kind of "purely acoustical world" that Negarestani described as speculated earlier by Wilfrid Sellars, as inversion of of the "transcendental idealism" Kantian philosophy — a kind of "Sophisticated Genocide," as Brown refers to it (on a track that inverts the melody of Sun Ra's "Languidity," no less). The act of worldbuilding, then, becomes a kind of stand-in for "the White's" efforts to define and ultimately coerce transparency within the opacity of blackness. On album opener "tender is the touch of white liberal complicity," Brown mutters over Kepla's ascending gauze of synthetic texture, pulsing cybernetic echoes, and dilapidated rhythm, as a simple tabla and tamborine rack keeps slow, swinging time in the tumult. Screams emerge, as Brown whispers on — as if face down in the muck — wrecked under the pressure of the artificial world, "bland and processed."

I also wrote about this kind of aversion of cogent worldmaking with regards to London-born, Nigerian-English artist Klein's 2018 EP cc, a record with a kind of cosmic pessimism-optimism that pulsates between "disney" and an "opaque bleakness." Specifically, I described the EP as "an inaccessible mystical object with googly eyes whispering 'we're doomed' between prodigious chuckles, starkly indifferent to our species-specific failures, content to 'laughing and crying' as adequate responses to this wrecked life." Similarly to *Wages*, the view that Klein's music would be an effort of "abstraction" or even the fact that it would attempt to map the limits of a given music technology (a context I positioned her work within in last year's TMT EOY essay "Traditional Music of a Wrecked Species") fails to account for the trans-ontological extendability of the opacity of blackness, one formed from the 1,000% absorptive/reflective quality of trauma as a paradoxical shade of emptiness and fullness.

This is outlined at length in an essay on Ulysses Jenkins and the Non-Ontology of Blackness by artist, writer, and curator Aria Dean, whose piece discusses various possibilities of a new black universalism in relation to Jenkins's video and performance work, writing extensively on the expansion of blackness that begins to repair or move beyond its originary "ontological failure." While I invite you to explore the certain complexity of these arguments, as well as Dean's source material (material that footnotes a transversal approach to Afro-pessimism and black optimism that cites Fred Moten, Frank Wilderson III, and others), therein is suggested a "prism [that] effectively positions blackness as a stance from which all else must be thought, much like François Laruelle's uchromia, wherein we might think from the point of view of Black

as what determines color in the last instance rather than what limits it." Such opacity shields and absorbs the kind of sufficient, cogent "projections" that are required for worldbuilding and abstraction in music, impossible within the disjunctive, spiraling quality of Klein's music.

The Wages of Being Black Is Death was engineered by Queens-based sound artist Jaclyn Miller, who records music under the moniker Voice Training. One of my favorite "live music" moments in 2018 was witnessing Jaclyn's presentation of the piece "Hyper-Articulate" at Brooklyn's Control Synthesizers & Electronic Devices as a part of Jack Callahan's (die Reihe) "Pennies From Heaven" electronic music series. The piece consisted of granularized voice, pre-recorded synthesis, "poorly sequenced" drum tracks, and "the present failures of queer antithesis," a kind of extended ethnography that sought to "foreground the formal elements of a panoramic culture of self-expression native to white middle class terms of queer visibility." Specifically, Miller presented decades of dissenting voices amassed into a "bright, throbbing mass," a cascade of variously pitched, overlapping, sonically enmeshed voices that were already deemed "over-articulated" by problematically essentialist conclusions made by Benjamin Munson in his research of gay male speech patterns. "Hyper-Articulation," then, became a way of sublimating the categorically essentialist worldbuilding done by this research. The performance was a psychedelic current of thousands of voices gliding over fragmented, rachitic rhythms, all shifted as two-minute tectonic rhythmic studies highlighting a new unfurled vector of multiplicitous voices.

https://youtu.be/UXhfsjELjNk
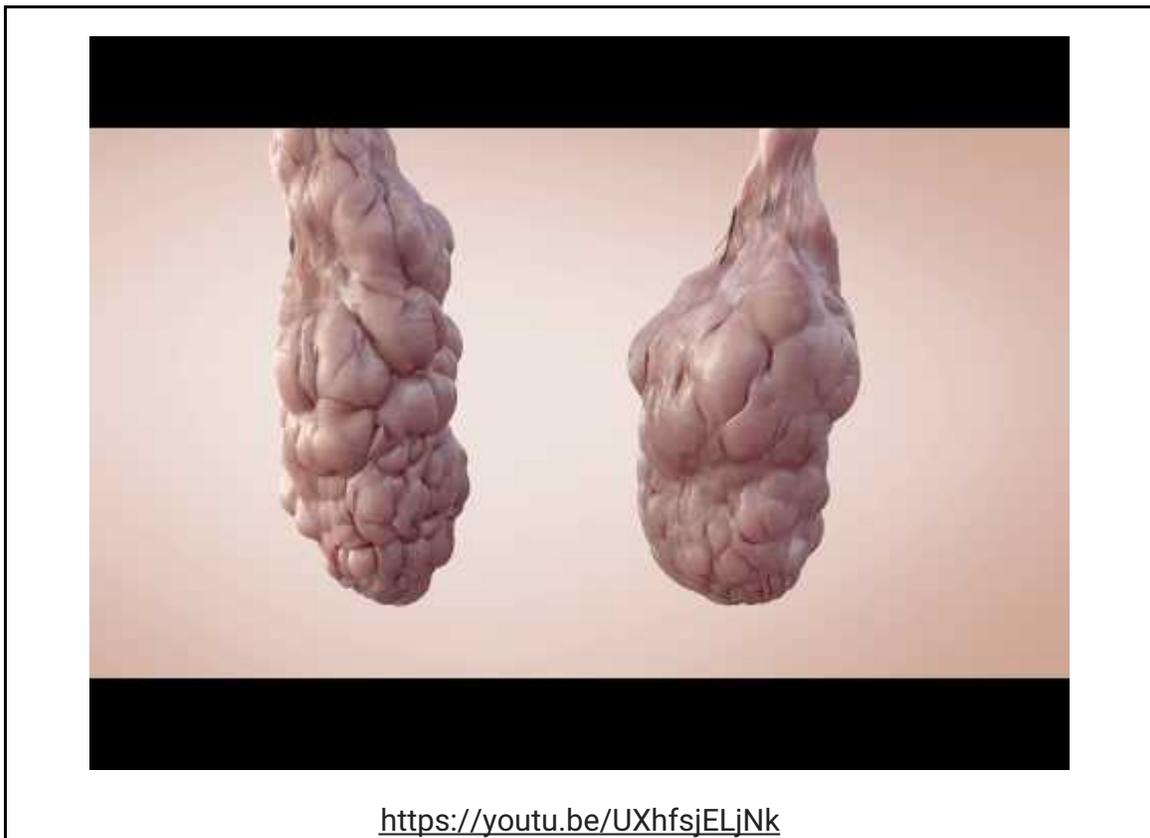
Similarly sublimating singular, paradigmatic vocality, Norwegian vocalist Stine Janvin's *Fake Synthetic Music* showcased the extensive flexibility of her voice and the ways in which it can be disconnected from its natural, human connotations. On *Fake Synthetic Music*, her first record on PAN, the artist presents "a full-body physical and ambient experience with the

frequency range of her voice […] inspired by past and present producers of architectural electronic music." In this way, Janvin "presents a new take on 'deconstructed rave' by exploring both sonic and optical illusions, otoacoustic emissions and minimal melodic sequences in reference to pop, techno and trance."

The kind of folded ambivalence between acoustic and electronic music asserts a "fake synthetic form" that aptly dissolves various arbitrary divisions in our instrumentalization of sound. Pieces like "GLITCH," "LIPS," or the stunning "Zen Garden" (perhaps my favorite track from 2018) formally induce a pointillistic, "synthetic" palette that has become commonly associated as "contemporary synthesizer music." Her works similarly evoke difference tones and other heterodyning effects as heard in the work of Maryanne Amacher or Alvin Lucier, and reach similarly cybernetic conclusions regarding the kinds of entanglements human beings experience with regard to our particular listening. *Fake Synthetic Music* is a reversal from synthetic music's replication of traditionally acoustic phenomenon — orchestras, rhythmic devices, strings, voices, etc. — a technological switch that helps collapse established contexts that provoke various mythologies and ways of hearing, making, and worldbuilding with technological instruments, be it with voice or synthesizer.

This was also heard in C. Spencer Yeh's _The RCA Mark II_, a stunning work that in its own way exists as a kind of "acoustic synthesizer music." The RCA Mark II synthesizer — a famed instrument built and installed in 1959 at Columbia University — was the bedrock upon which the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center was founded. The machine, "bricked" and not operational since 1997, is as TMTer Matthew Blackwell describes in his review, "$250,000; [standing at a] forbidding seven feet tall; it could take up to 12 hours to re-calibrate if a mistake were made […] The Mark II was an exclusive machine."

Brilliantly, Yeh chose to make work with the legendary synthesizer acoustically: flipping switches, rubbing surfaces, turning knobs, and plugging/unplugging cables. Using contact and room microphones, Yeh recorded these operations over the course of several sessions, and the recordings became the basis from which he composed the LP, complete with psychedelic artwork of the Mark II by Robert Beatty. This gesture was also the subject of my previous year-end essay, a basic thesis also pointed out by Blackwell: that "machines fail, and faith in technological progress — or progress via technology — is naive." As Primary Information explains it, "in listening to the record, one does not so much hear the original synthesizer, but rather an artist dismantling the historical weight of the source through a composition of its transformation from a legendary machine to a one-ton hunk of scrap metal no longer operational." This is precisely the kind of music that outstrips worldbuilding and its nefarious agendas of establishing totalizing trajectories in sound. There is a kind palindromic relationship between Stine and Yeh's music — a legendary synthesizer becoming acoustic, and the voice becoming a kind of pointillistic rave music — both railing against the mythologies that are usually constructed within pre-existing sonic contexts, relishing in a momentary subversion rather than a "progressive" realization of human creative potential.

"The trouble with music is that it always has something to say, which it reinforces with the mythology that wants something important to be happening all the time. I love art, but I hate all

these poses, all this false moralizing and this fake pomp that surrounds it in general.
– Morton Feldman"

Lastly, we have Jack Callahan a.k.a. die Reihe's _Vocoder_, an album I reviewed earlier in 2018. An exercise in creating as self-contained a piece as possible, using as little material as possible, the record is an apt example of music whose material itself should determine the outcome of its form. In this case, the vocoder is the material, and the precise compositional approach is simply Callahan speaking a text through a phase vocoder created in Max/MSP (and with a Shure SM57 microphone) that is altered in different ways across seven discrete sections. Humorously, "Die Reihe" is also the title of Stockhausen's mid-century composition journal published between 1955 and 1962 devoted to contemporary music; and, although I referred to Callahan as the "turnt formalist of Ridewood, Queens," his work critiques the kind of formalism employed by Stockhausen. Rather, it possesses a distinctly American _subversion_ of formality that prioritizes the precise manipulation of the material at hand, the kind of motion that Morton Feldman advocated with regards to mid-century American painters like Philip Guston.

This tension of composing a "music-form," as Feldman called it, is distinct from the formal "total-form" sought by Stockhausen in the _Licht_ opera cycle. As Feldman says, "the trouble with music is that it always has something to say, which it reinforces with the mythology that wants something important to be happening all the time. I love art, but I hate all these poses, all this false moralizing and this fake pomp that surrounds it in general." Feldman's position against such musical grandstanding was famously present in his earlier critique of Stockhausen, but also in his tense relationship with the radical progressivity of composer Pierre Boulez, who was quoted in his letters with John Cage as boasting that "every time I compose a work I have to create a new world." This was at play with regards to how Boulez's works created a new set of rules for pitch relations that didn't rely on old rules of harmony and form; however, they also asserted an intense "continental" ideology of totalizing progress and production. As he famously stated: "acquire and destroy, acquire and destroy, then go further — that's what composers should do."
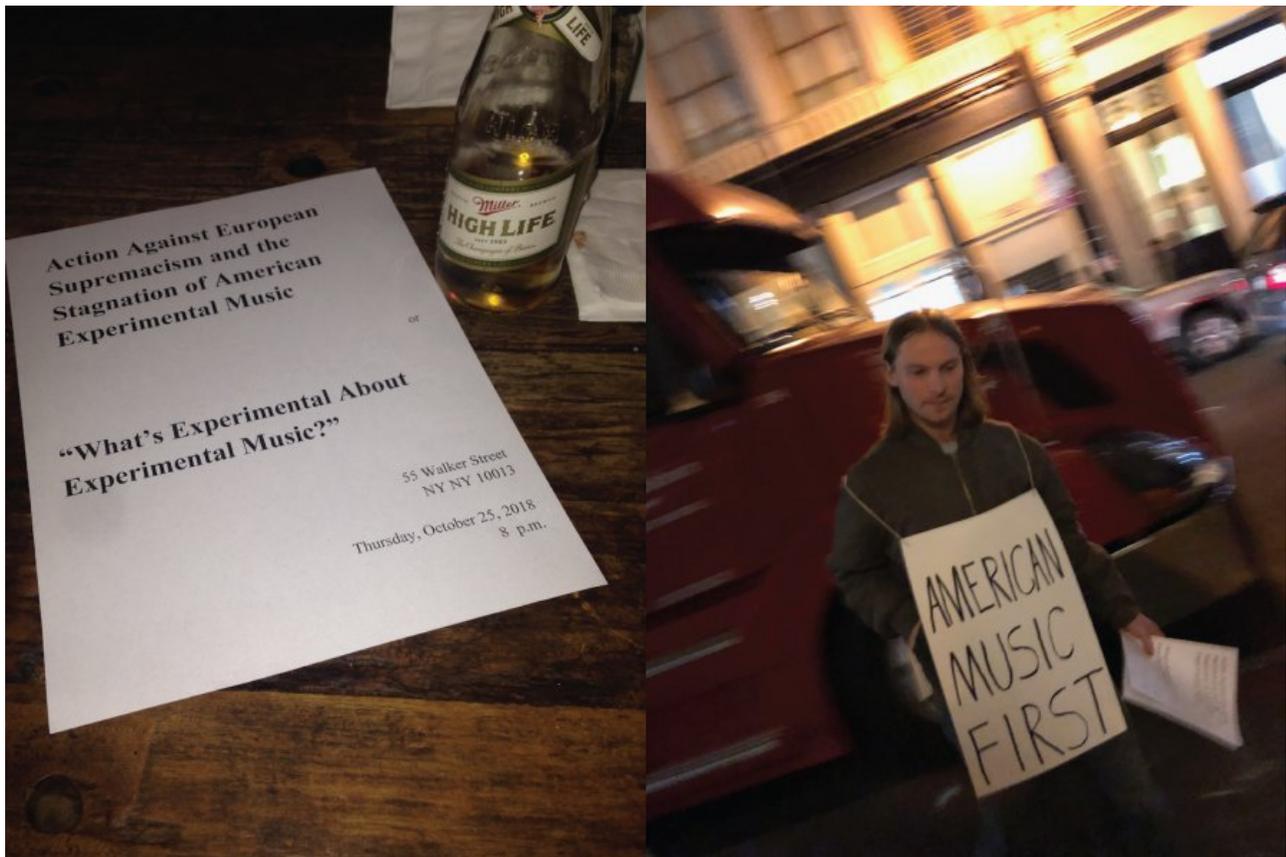
"Action Against European Supremacism and the Stagnation of American Experimental Music" / Jack Callahan (die Reihe) & Colleen O'Connor protesting an experimental music event in New York City, October, 2018.

Similar to Feldman, and in true polemical style, *Vocoder* is a non-worldbuilding piece in that it strips itself of any grandiose musical gestures, but retains a commitment to the music-form and celebration of the weightlessness of sound as-is. Still taking the project of composition seriously, his work searches for a direction that allows the composer's hand to rigorously remain "very light" and to instigate the sublimation of authorship in ways akin to Conrad or Flynt. In this way, despite employing its own kind of formalism, it retains a wholly distinct ideological backend that remains ambivalent to the tense heroics of worldbuilding. On *Vocoder*, Callahan is an instigator equally seasoned by early SoundCloud music, the DIY American noise context, and classical music, approaching sound as a set of experimental axioms, not a world to colonize. Similar to how Feldman railed against the dominant system of composing in 1950s and 60s Europe — often against Stockhausen and Boulez specifically — die Reihe protests against the verbosity of sound as it exists in sonic worldbuilding, against "overcoding" and associating sonic signals into legible, stacked forms that pull sound into attempted world-constructions — away from music itself and toward more uncertain ideological positions.

And so, in 2018, we've become world naysayers — world doomsday-ers. If 2017 was the year that broke, 2018 has stayed broken, on the floor, crashed into bits while hands were cut trying to pick up the pieces. And so we can't speak summarily, can't speak in *worlds*, but we can protest and experiment within the wreckage. Our efforts to build worlds articulate from zero

and rescind back into zero, opaque but resounding, all the while scouting a plentitude of dead worlds, into an expanse of stalwart drone. Here, all we hear is the "one of fictive music" — *entwining, set with fatal stones. Unreal…*

"To the One of Fictive Music"
by Wallace Stevens

Now, of the music summoned by the birth
That separates us from the wind and sea,
Yet leaves us in them, until earth becomes,
By being so much of the things we are,
Gross effigy and simulacrum, none
Gives motion to perfection more serene
Than yours, out of our imperfections wrought,
Most rare, or ever of more kindred air
In the laborious weaving that you wear.

For so retentive of themselves are men
That music is intensest which proclaims
The near, the clear, and vaunts the clearest bloom,
And of all the vigils musing the obscure,
That apprehends the most which sees and names,
As in your name, an image that is sure,
Among the arrant spices of the sun,
O bough and bush and scented vine, in whom
We give ourselves our likest issuance.

Yet not too like, yet not so like to be
Too near, too clear, saving a little to endow
Our feigning with the strange unlike, whence springs
The difference that heavenly pity brings.
For this, musician, in your girdle fixed
Bear other perfumes. On your pale head wear
A band entwining, set with fatal stones.
Unreal, give back to us what once you gave:
The imagination that we spurned and crave.

More about: C. Spencer Yeh, DeForrest Brown Jr., die Reihe, Grimes, Hecker, Henry Flynt, Jack Callahan, Jaclyn Miller, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Kepla, Klein, Oneohtrix Point Never, Stine Janvin, Tony Conrad, Voice Training

We celebrate the end of the year the only way we know how: through lists, essays, and mixes. Join us as we explore the music that helped define the year. More from this series

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