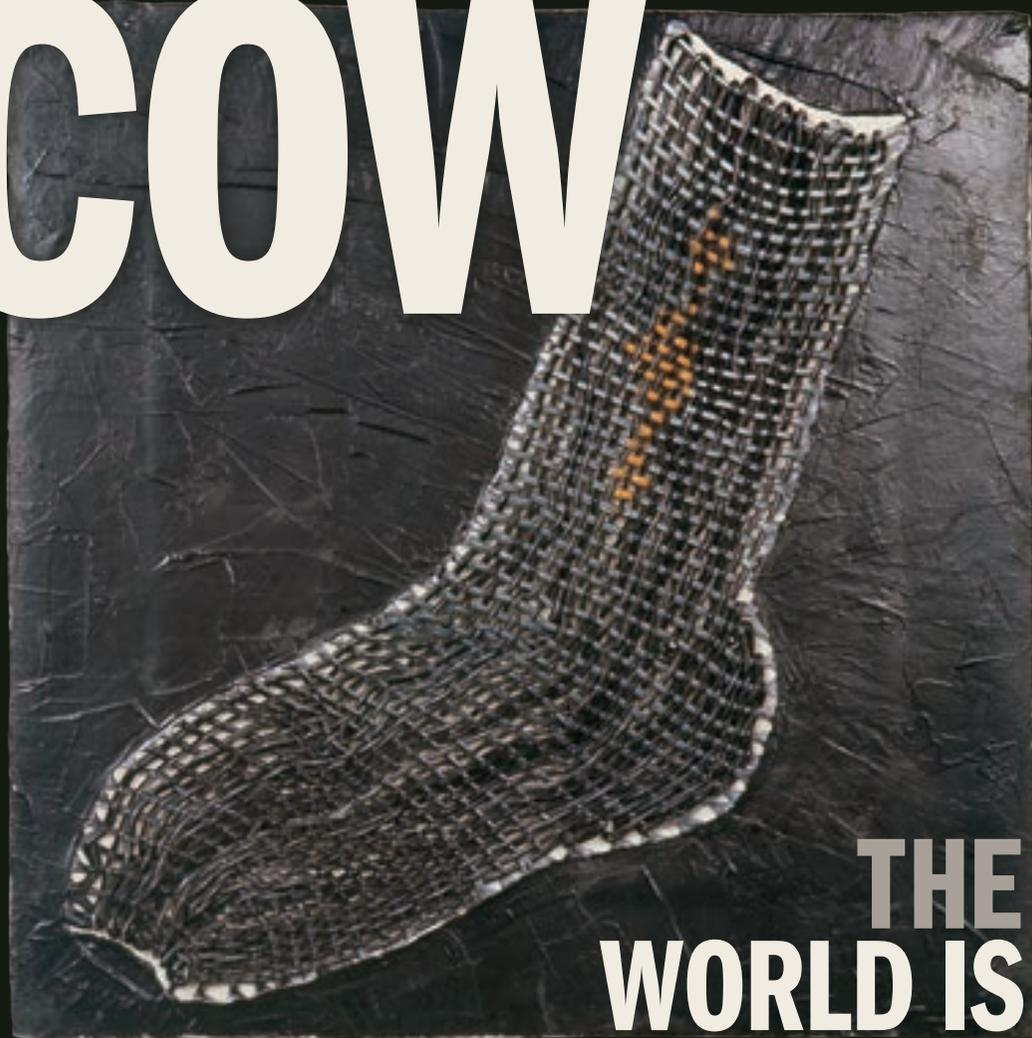


HENRY COW



THE
WORLD IS
A PROBLEM

BENJAMIN PIEKUT

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Preface

Henry Cow—it's impossible to explain. It's certainly impossible to explain without writing a fat book.

Tim Hodgkinson, 1981

I have written one of those fat books, but many things will still go unexplained. I realized that this would be the case during my research, when a member of the band remarked upon all the things that we hadn't seemed to cover in our conversations. That surprised me, because we had already recorded twenty-five hours of interviews. But I took the point: when you tell somebody else's story, you are bound to accent wrong beats and drop notes here and there. Furthermore, my relentless interrogations occasionally forced my collaborators to articulate things that may never before have been spoken, about events that took place forty or more years ago, when they were just out of university or around that age. I cannot imagine what that is like, but it must feel odd at best, vulnerable and violating at worst.

Nevertheless, these people have been gracious, generous, trusting, and kind to me. They have also been a real pain in the ass now and then, but I've learned enough from them to return that favor in kind, as I'm sure any would testify. Indeed, the substance of their example has worked its way deep into the weave of my own life; I doubt any other research project will ever have such a drastic, bracing impact on how I relate to others and to the future. It will take some time to come to terms with that, but for now, I must credit my consultants with edging me into states of uncertainty I would have found scarcely imaginable before we began.

Readers looking for smooth illustrations of parboiled theory will be disappointed by *The World Is a Problem*. I have found nothing but ambivalence, contradiction, and entanglement—the stuff that attends all practical

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critique. As a writer, that is the space into which I wish to move further, into deeper contradiction, greater ambivalence, thicker tangles. Although I aim to remain supportively skeptical of my interlocutors, as they were to each other, I will not reproduce the muted hostility that I have discovered in presenting material from this study. Academic (and some general) audiences have surprised me over the years with responses to Henry Cow's activities that often reach dismissiveness but sometimes approach contempt. After detailing the large, diverse audiences they found in Italy, I might be asked, "But were all those people *really* there to hear Henry Cow?" Or, after hearing my description of what they heard in the rock ethos, someone might object, "But they came from Cambridge!" Or, after recounting their internal debates over the possibility of joining the Communist Party of Great Britain, I might get a comment like, "How could they have taken themselves so seriously?" How contemporary observers have made it to a point where seriousness of endeavor has been rendered quixotic is a matter best left for other occasions, but it does call to mind McKenzie Wark's observation: "The authorities on this period delight in drawing attention to the follies then committed, as if their own complacency of thought was in some sense a higher achievement."¹

It has felt as though these respondents were searching for a technicality through which to toss out the whole topic. Motivating these responses to Henry Cow's endeavors would appear to be naive notions of politics, authenticity, or populism—as if a communist rock band must only come from the working classes, as if the only audience that counts would line up attentively and parse correctly their obscure lyrics, as if significance is granted only upon the disclosure of receipts documenting the sale of greater than fifty thousand units—indeed, as if real significance is measured only by an absence of contradiction. I hope that the kind of account I offer here—one that attempts to preserve "the richest intimacy with facts," as William James would say—will contribute to a more realistic picture of what things like politics, critique, experiment, and collectivism look and sound like.² While we might search for the perfect historical case of "correct" cultural politics, a torrent of more "imperfect" ventures rushes further into the past. I have attempted to arrest momentarily a small part of that torrent.

In establishing certain plot points in these stories, I have relied on interviews with my historical subjects, supplementing these accounts with textual evidence from their personal archives, published journalism, and audio evidence from the bootleg archive that circulates on the internet. I have not always singled out specific sources because there are cases (such as

the summer of 1975) where texts and memories disagree, and only by reading many of them together and against one another has it been possible to determine what actually happened with any accuracy. Recounting my steps in print would be tedious. When I haven't been able to make precise determinations, my writing reflects this ambiguity. Usually, it isn't a big deal. Some bits of information were confirmed by close reading of the personal notebooks of various band members, particularly those of Tim Hodgkinson. I could have added a reference to the page, but these sources are not available in a public archive and are unpaginated anyway, so I decided to leave it unreferenced and tell you about this decision up front.

When someone speaks in this book and that speech has no footnoted reference, then I am quoting my own interviews with that person. There are also several passages of dialogue interpolated into the prose, originating in different kinds of sources: published and unpublished interviews from the time; later archival conversations; my own double interview with Hodgkinson and Georgina Born; the band's meeting minutes, recorded in shorthand by Lindsay Cooper; and reported speech from one of my own interviews with band members and associates. Wherever possible, I have seized these opportunities to break up my own control of the text; the dialogues have also helped me with plot, characterization, and voice. Someone like Hayden White might complain that I have chosen to work in an outmoded literary style in this history, but I will consider it a distinguishing achievement if there is any style at all.

Lindsay Cooper is the only major player in these stories who couldn't speak for herself during the years of my research, so I wish to express clearly how I represent her in the pages that follow. I met her twice at her apartment in Camdentown; on the first occasion, Sally Potter introduced us. Lindsay had not been able to speak for many years, but she listened intently to me as I described the project and told her a little about myself. I have been told that, in its late stages, multiple sclerosis works its way into the brain; aural comprehension still takes place, but slowly. My experience accorded with this description: Lindsay met my gaze and listened to what I had to say, but any muted reactions might have been delayed by ten seconds or more. Nonetheless, I had the strong impression that she knew what was going on; she participated to the best of her ability during the interview that I subsequently conducted with Potter about Cooper's life and her time in Henry Cow. That evening, Sally and I spent some hours going through the large boxes of materials that Lindsay had put together before her paralysis grew incapacitating. In addition to scores and parts, they included letters

to family and friends, datebooks, press cuttings, and other ephemera. The letters and postcards, in particular, have been very important, because she didn't tend to take (or be given) a strong vocal role in band interviews at the time. On my second visit, her caregiver, Astrida Gorkusa, told me that Lindsay had been excited all day because she knew I would be returning to photograph the documents that I hadn't collected on my previous visit—so excited, in fact, that she had completely tired herself out, and wasn't in a state to receive greetings face to face.

Even though Lindsay had been ill for many years, her death in September 2013 came as a nasty surprise. I hope it will not appear sentimental or gratuitous to state the truth as I see it at the end of my time on this project: of all my interlocutors, only Cooper has garnered universal fondness from the others. I do not mean to imply that there were no conflicts, or that she couldn't hold her own in a battle of wills. But she seems to have had the most “liberated” personality of anyone in these stories—a loyal friend, a funny writer, a committed artist, and a passionate thinker. This book is dedicated to her memory. I wish I had known her.

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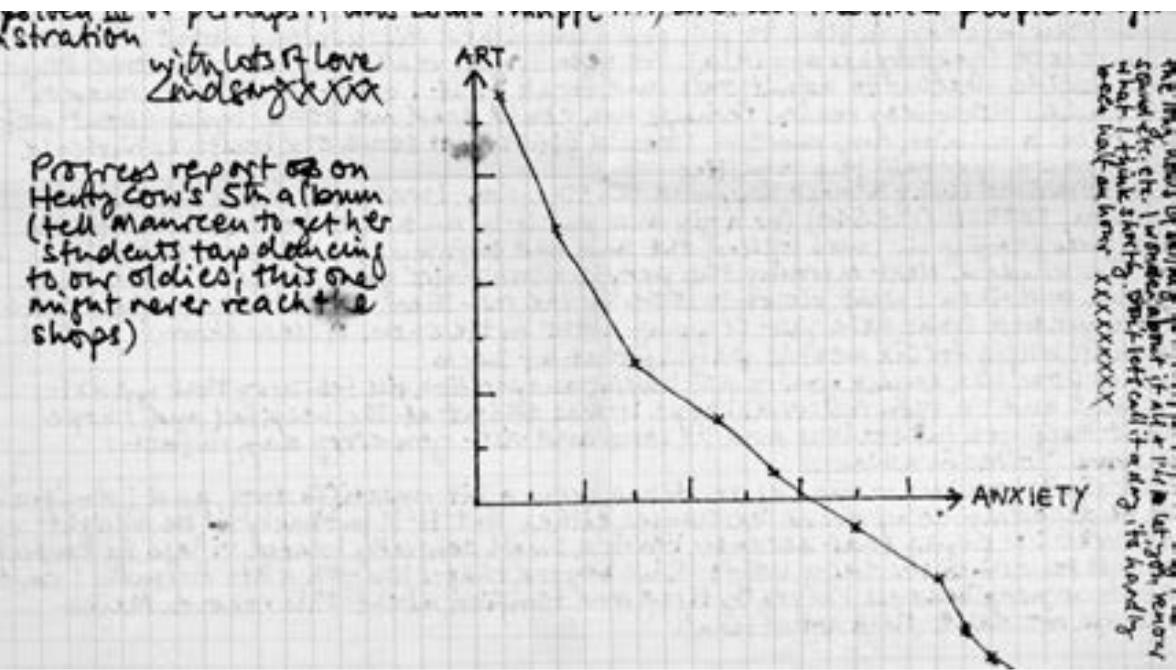
It would have taken me longer to finish this manuscript without my semester of sabbatical leave from Cornell, and I am grateful for the support of my chair, Steve Pond, and senior associate dean, Derk Pereboom. I also benefited from an Early Career Fellowship from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (United Kingdom); Mark Everist was instrumental in improving my application for it. I owe a debt of gratitude to Anne Currie and the Faculty of the Humanities at the University of Southampton for awarding me an Annual Adventures in Research grant, which jumpstarted this project at its inception. Finally, I thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for giving me a Summer Stipend in 2011; any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this book do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

A Note to the Scholarly Reader

This book takes a somewhat unusual, hybrid form combining collective biography and argument-driven cultural history. For that reason, some scholarly readers expecting the customary survey of the contemporary literature at the head of this study will feel unsatisfied. I've stuck that wedge in the afterword. I have taken some inspiration for this ordering from Bertolt Brecht, who wrote, "In the epic theatre moral arguments only took second place. Its aim was less to moralize than to observe. That is to say it observed, and then the thick end of the wedge followed: the story's moral."

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Frontispiece The relationship of art to anxiety, from a letter by Lindsay Cooper, January 1978. COURTESY OF THE LINDSAY COOPER ESTATE.

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Introduction

Feral Experimentalism

With this book, I intend to make a small contribution to a large project that would take the form of a rigorous documentation and analysis of adventurous music and sound work in the twenty-first century, and how we got here over the last seventy years. I refer to the related and frequently overlapping contemporary sonic practices of indeterminacy, improvisation, noise, live electronics and coding, field recording, sound art, installation, graphic notation, text scores, and new instruments. Curious and exploratory, this global network of artists stretches across and against the genre formations of notated composition, jazz, rock, dub, electronic music, hip-hop, noise, and folk; it also occasionally stakes positions in contemporary art, theatre, cinema, and new media. If this “foment of activity,” as David Toop would call it, wears “looser ties to the ethics, methodology and materials established for free improvisation,” it has also stretched far its fetters to the Cagean school of score-based composers in the postwar decades.¹ I sense that this contemporary, mixed formation of experimental music making began to take shape in the late 1960s; though an analysis of these many branching and bunching genealogies would exceed the capabilities of any single book, I hope that *Henry Cow* will serve as one example of how this congeries of expanded experimentalism sounded in the field of rock.

Genre will vibrate as a pronounced undertone in the story that follows. “*Henry Cow* is nothing if not a band that tries to step across the dividing lines between jazz, contemporary music, rock, and so on,” the band’s drummer Chris Cutler told me. “There was a moment in which the fringes of all of those previously highly separate discourses got close together, and, up to a point, communicated. We didn’t see much of [composer] Tim Souster, but when we played together somewhere, we got on fine. There wasn’t any kind of formal coming together, but when we played with the Art Ensemble of Chicago, they liked us, we liked them, and we got on just fine. The musical languages were compatible but not the same.” In this introduction, I will

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concern myself less with these questions of genre—fascinating though they are—than I will with documenting the historical conditions of the 1960s and 1970s that provided the backdrop for Henry Cow’s activities in the rock field.² In the afterword, I will pass through this terrain a second time, with a view to illuminating the implications of this history for the theory of the avant-garde. Throughout this book, I will use the word *avant-garde* in this sort of theoretical and conceptual register, counter to another influential approach that posits a historical, aesthetic, and social split between an “experimental” composer like John Cage and an “avant-garde” one like Pierre Boulez.³ The avant-garde, I will maintain, is irreducible to any single conjunctural milieu, as important as futurism, Dadaism, and surrealism have been in articulating its themes. By contrast, I will use *experimentalism* to refer to a historically specific network, one that does not necessarily express a radical political imagination; indeed, experimental music’s genealogical embroilment with science-and-technology discourses has often disinclined it from developing an overt political project.⁴ (In those moments when it does develop such a project, I regard it as an avant-garde, too.)

Experimentalism underwent significant expansion in the late 1960s, when composers, improvisers, and rockers came to share several aesthetic concerns—chief among them sound and spontaneity. Journalists and artists held in common the notion that these musical lineages were coming together in some broad manner, even if there persisted disagreements among them. I will occasionally refer to writers in the United States and Europe, but the British conversation about these musics will take center stage. And because popular music has garnered the smallest amount of scholarly discussion in relation to experimentalism, I will spend some extra time with rock, specifically the British reception of German rock.⁵ This music instigated a specific formation of the experimental strongly linked to rock’s technological apparatus, its loose collectivism, and its spontaneity. It efficaciously disentangled a rock-based, electrified, collective improvisation from the practice’s then-recent history in blues jams and guitar solos, an aesthetic transformation that couldn’t but draw on and solidify historical associations of avant-gardism as a white European/European American endeavor. I will conclude these introductory observations by zooming out from musical performance to consider how improvisation functioned at multiple scales in the life of Henry Cow, as a general stance or mode of relating certainty to uncertainty. Die-hard fans of the band might find the most satisfaction by jumping directly to the narrative history that begins in chapter 1.

Clive Bell, an early friend of Henry Cow in Cambridge who would develop into a gifted improviser in his own right, recalls the presentation of a new work for piano by Roger Smalley, the composer-in-residence at King's College, Cambridge, during their time there in the late 1960s. It began with the composer drawing complex mathematical diagrams on a blackboard for several minutes. "And then he went over to the piano and played this completely wild piece that might as well have been totally improvised, as far as I was concerned," Bell recalls. "I just thought it was kind of hilarious, that all these diagrams led to this flailing, Cecil Taylor freak-out." Bell's experience represents an increasingly common one for listeners of his generation, especially those rooted in the recording-intensive traditions of African American music such as jazz and rock 'n' roll. His ears moved transversally across relatively distinct historical networks by identifying shared musical properties such as intensity, gesture, and timbre, in spite of whatever formalisms might operate in the work of Smalley or Taylor. At the level of individual listening, Bell could draw musical connections that existed far more problematically in social space; the differences between a Taylor and a Smalley were forged and reforged by educational institutions, economic support networks, critical establishments, and performance contexts.

As for Henry Cow, no amount of stylistic adventure could unseat them from their home genre formation. They may have engaged in open improvisation, but, as the critic Richard Williams noted at the time, "they only have the monopoly on it insofar as they're a rock 'n' roll band."⁶ But what drew this popular-music act together with colleagues such as Smalley, Souster, and the Art Ensemble into the space of "compatible but not the same"? Many things, but I would like to begin by taking note of the cohesion of a popular music aesthetics and intellectual vernacular, first with bebop in the early 1940s and then, more quickly, with rock in the 1960s.⁷ These discourses established new frameworks of judgment for musics entwined in the commercial marketplace, distinct from numerical popularity and long-standing taste formations perpetuated through the educational institutions of the ruling classes.

Popular music aesthetics did much more than invert or blur the line between high and low culture. Instead, it provided the grounds for a thorough fracturing of those two positions into a new, intricate system of orders and relations. In rock alone, artists could stake their status claims on the poetic and moral gravitas of folk (Bob Dylan), the virtuosity of jazz soloing (Cream), the ambitions of Western classical music (Emerson, Lake, and Palmer), the political stridency of free jazz (MC5), or the shock tactics of

the avant-garde (Velvet Underground). In other words, many different high positions opened up in the rock field within a few short years (all buttressed by the privileges of white masculinity, as the above list makes clear). The one that occupies me here nudged rock tropes toward a kind of expanded experimentalism that was gathered around spontaneity and held in common with art-music and free-jazz networks.

Divisions played out among critics, too. The first wave of highbrow commentary on bands such as the Beatles struggled to place them in relation to the legitimated, timeless works of the Western art music canon. Tony Palmer, for example, wrote, “Pop music, if it is ever to achieve any respect at all, has to be made to stand on its own feet alongside such as Schubert and Beethoven.”⁸ But even by the time Palmer published this condescending caution in 1970, younger critics were comparing new rock laterally to the work of John Cage, Cecil Taylor, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Morton Feldman. For example, Ian MacDonald’s comments about the tape experiments of one band, Faust, indicate this transverse perspective as well as a certain exasperation with the superseded judgment of the older generation of critics, such as Palmer or the *Times*’ William Mann. He wrote, “The fact that hardly anyone in the world has found a theory and an integrated role in music for electronically-produced or altered sound except this German rock group is much more of a cultural vindication for our music than William Mann’s acceptance of *Sergeant Pepper*—because here rock has outstripped mainstream music, not imitated or genuflected to it, as Tony Palmer believes it should.”⁹

These feral high musics grew wild, feeding on LP records and reproducing by the same means. Accordingly, any account of advanced music making after World War II has to leave what Richard Taruskin would call the “literate tradition.”¹⁰ In Chris Cutler’s schematic history of musical memory systems, recording passed through an initial stage of commercial exploitation by the capitalist entertainment industries before its specific aesthetic and social possibilities were explored by later artists. These musicians—a stylistically diverse wave that would stretch from the Ronettes to Merzbow, rooted in practice-based and phonographic aesthetics—would probe different qualities of working-class, immigrant, and rural musics waxed in the first decades of the century: an expressive egalitarianism, collective compositional process, and precise timbral and rhythmic variation.

With recordings, these exchanges could take place through the ear, undoing many established structures of training and accreditation. Recalling his youthful audition of records by the Shadows, Cutler points out, “Every small thing they do is a huge thing if you don’t know [music theory], so it

was exactly geared to the perceptive level of people of my age and generation, who hadn't learned music, hadn't been taught to play an instrument, who weren't musicians." Masami Akita attempted to create "Merzbow music" for the first time after having his mind blown by Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry's *Symphonie pour un homme seul* on the radio, and former underground rock musicians constitute the "the main forces" in contemporary Chinese sound art, according to sound studies scholar Jing Wang.¹¹ The examples are endless: Olivia Block, Kaffe Matthews, Otomo Yoshihide, David Grubbs, Ikue Mori, Chris Watson, Maria Chavez, Jessica Rylan, Kim Gordon, Christian Marclay, and many others came to the innovative forms of postwar experimentalism from popular musical practices thoroughly imbricated with the recorded form. In doing so, they extend the lateral and processual movements of what Georgina Born calls "the jazz assemblage,"¹² one of the many ways in which the social histories of Afro-diasporic folk and popular musics have suffused global sonic production in the postwar period. Moreover, the vinyl LP recording tends to encourage promiscuous listening practices in its standardization (for more on these practices, see the afterword), and the very abjection of popular music in its early history has also helped it to absorb materials and techniques from other traditions once alternative systems of evaluation began to emerge in the second half of the twentieth century.

The cross-fertilization of experimental musics surged in the second half of the 1960s, owing not only to the many flavors of cultural accreditation acquired by rock or the proliferation of new musics available on LP. These years also saw musicians in the post-John Cage and post-Ornette Coleman networks looking outward for kindred spirits, assimilable strategies, and unprecedented collaborations. "Any person in today's music scene knows that rock, classical, folk and jazz are all yesterday's titles," Coleman wrote in the liner notes to 1977's *Dancing in Your Head*. "I feel that the music world is getting closer to being a singular expression."¹³ Although persistent (and novel) asymmetries in prestige and resources would continue to disenable that singular expression, the late 1960s moment differed substantially from earlier ones such as Third Stream, because the latter, as George E. Lewis explains, "failed to realize or support the complexity of black musical culture's independent development of a black experimentalism that, while in dialogue with white high culture, was . . . strongly insistent upon the inclusion of the black vernacular."¹⁴ Furthermore, Lewis continues, the post-Coleman developments "challenged the centrality of pan-Europeanism" to the existing definition of experimentalism, advancing in its place a notion of experimental music that was becoming creolized. In the emergent British

arrangement that set the terms for Henry Cow's activities in the mid-1970s, jazz-affiliated experimentalism was supplemented and twisted by one associated with rock; sharing roots in black vernacular music making, both contributed to the creolization named by Lewis.

Improvised Encounters that Meet in This Moment

All of these musics wended themselves into the contact zone of spontaneity, but each took a different route.¹⁵ Cage may have disavowed improvisation well into the 1960s, but his performances with David Tudor exercised many parts of that faculty in all but name.¹⁶ Once Tudor developed into a designer of electronic systems, he served as an important bridge figure to a new generation with fewer anxieties about calling their work improvisation.¹⁷ And the generation of experimentalists who followed Coleman and John Coltrane abstracted the practice from its circumscribed function in soloing and comping into a general mode of constant interaction, combining it with new compositional techniques, experiments in form, instrumental invention, and electronic elaboration.¹⁸ Meanwhile, by 1965 the British R&B groups improvised long, noisy explorations in concert and occasionally on record. Pink Floyd, Soft Machine, and other psychedelic bands would extend these breaks into longer and longer “freak-outs,” a term originally popularized by Frank Zappa.¹⁹

If these three routes met in the contact zone of spontaneity, this convergence gave rise to some other characteristics that have endured. Their shared improvisational strategies tended to distribute authorship among all the participants in a performance—a relaxation that created more friction for the post-Cageans than it did for those emerging from jazz or rock, both of which had longer histories of shared authorship to draw on.²⁰ At the same time, paradoxically, sound grew increasingly linked to the body of its creator, who, bypassing the way station of the definitive score, would focus more directly on the empirical means of sound production and its preservation in recordings. One might formulate this change as the passage from a repertory-work model to a database model: musicians build up an ever-expanding individual database of instrumental techniques, technical setups, stylistic and aesthetic tendencies, standalone compositions, and highly personal approaches to improvisation, some or all of which might be drawn on and recombined in a given performance. Concerts are less often occasions to present experimental “works” than they are reports from an ongoing investigation.²¹

English-language music journalism—and British discourse in particular—refracted these sympathies and cross-fertilizations. One strong theme concerned performer freedom and self-expression in spontaneous musics. In the United States, Cage and his associates had been strict about limiting a performer's liberties, and Cage extended credit only to preapproved borrowers of his musical aesthetic, chief among them Tudor.²² This apprehension was never as strongly expressed in the United Kingdom. Largely through Cornelius Cardew's proselytizing and interpretation, Cagean indeterminacy there was understood to offer a kind of emancipation; it was a tool, in the words of one critic, "to overcome the tame subservience of the modern performer."²³ Such language was very common in the British discourse about this music by the late 1960s. Michael Parsons wrote that Cage, Feldman, and Christian Wolff "have given up some measure of control" in order to "preserve and extend the performer's role."²⁴ But Cardew had gone one step further, he wrote: "He regards notation more as a stimulus to the players' imagination than a blueprint for exact sounds."²⁵ These "indeterminists," according to Victor Schonfield in 1967, "want composers to stop telling performers what to do, and start forcing them to be creative."²⁶ In a striking contrast to Cage, Cardew was equally committed to the emotional dimension of this creativity. He described his little opera, *Schooltime Compositions*, as "a matrix to draw out an interpreter's feelings about certain topics or materials."²⁷ He was, in short, "committed to a music which is going wild again."²⁸

Cardew's preference for performer creativity created a specifically British elaboration of Cagean indeterminacy along the lines of improvisation. As early as 1962, Cardew wrote, "For performances of such pieces a high degree of awareness is required. . . . The ability to react spontaneously within situations that are familiar and yet always fresh in detail is a skill that has to be acquired."²⁹ Once Cardew joined the free improvisation group AMM in spring 1966, the emphasis on spontaneity became even stronger, and by the end of the decade the story was set: free improvisation was the "logical end" of indeterminate music. In a review of AMM's debut album, the *Times*' critic Stanley Sadie wrote, "Possibly the idea seems far-fetched, but it is a perfectly logical extension of the recognized and accepted processes of aleatory music."³⁰ Tim Souster, too, advanced a view of experimental music history that ended up at free improvisation. For him, Cage's use of live electronics had led to many new groups "dedicated to the exploration of new sound worlds and holding to no preconceived notions of method or form." He continued, "In America almost every university now has a free improvisation

group and in this country a growing field is led by the AMM.”³¹ For this British writer, then, Cage was a pioneer of live electronics and open exploration, not merely chance operations.

The author of a survey of “free music” in *Time Out* favored jazz in his appraisal of contemporary improvisation, but in a measure of how jumbled up the categories had become by 1972, he also noted that “Cage is probably the greatest influence on free music.”³² For this author, the American had become the progenitor not only of Cardew’s Scratch Orchestra and AMM but also of the free improvisation of saxophonist Evan Parker, drummers John Stevens and Frank Perry, and vocalist Maggie Nicols. Given its importance in the jazz tradition, and its culmination there in the form of free jazz, it was no surprise that free music would develop among jazz players. But, the author pointed out, “straight” musicians were reaching the same conclusions: “We might as well just play, eliminating the composer,” he reasoned.

When authoring a profile of the Music Improvisation Company (MIC) in 1970, Michael Walters encountered a similar interpretation of recent music history, particularly from the electronic musician Hugh Davies, who had been an assistant to Karlheinz Stockhausen in Cologne, and who improvised on electronic instruments of his own design. “Davies detects certain differences in working with the Music Improvisation Company from improvising in a contemporary classical background, but feels that they are not great, and that the group operates ‘at a point where the two different backgrounds meet,’” Walters wrote.³³ Nonetheless, there were differences of opinion among the members of MIC: Parker and Jamie Muir (drums) still thought of what they did as part of the jazz tradition, while Derek Bailey (guitar) was adamant about the value of pursuing no tradition, no goals, and no expectations. The point is not about absolute agreement, but rather how this meeting of the worlds was posed as a shared problematic: it was now a question that needed to be addressed, though often with different responses. And the notion of convergence was not only regarded as a salutary development. The *Times*’ Miles Kington, for example, agreed that “labels are no longer of any use,” but that did not mean that he was bursting with affection for the Spontaneous Music Ensemble: “It does not matter that they no longer play jazz; what makes their music difficult to approach is that they offer the listener no alternative point of contact. What must seem wholly absorbing to them seems self-indulgent to the outsider.”³⁴

“The concept of improvisation has become highly distorted in recent years,” wrote the critic Stanley Myers in 1968. “It doesn’t mean memorising

Herr X's cadenza for a Mozart concerto. . . . Nor Herr Y permitting the performers to play the sections of Kontakt-Lens IX in any order they choose. Nor even Soul-Brother Z running through his best twenty-five choruses on the chords of 'Sweet Sue.' When Sonny Rollins was last in London, he opened his performance—there was no rehearsal—by telling the bassist to play something. Just like that. The player was in shock for a few moments, and then began what turned out to be a half-hour trio."³⁵ As this passage indicates, one of the "distortions" produced by improvisation was that formerly distinct traditions were now held in the same critical space, even if distinctions continued to be marked.

If this discourse on the protean qualities of improvisation tended to enroll mostly critics of jazz and "serious" music, other writers pulled the conversation toward an engagement with questions of high and low. As the US critic Alan Rich wrote in 1967, "For whatever reason the sociologists care to advance, there has been an interesting rapprochement taking place between the so-called popular and the so-called serious worlds, with results that are all around us."³⁶ The spur to Rich's speculation was Ornette Coleman, who had composed several chamber works in the early 1960s, likely in a bid to shed the restrictions imposed by the "jazz" label. Even with his prodigious talent for writing melodies, Coleman might not be the first name that comes to mind when one hears the word *pop*, and other writers engaged more directly with commercial popular musics in their accounts of "the gradual drawing together and overlapping of the various areas of contemporary musical activity," in the words of Russell Unwin.³⁷ Unwin noted the omnivorous appetites of new jazz and progressive rock in incorporating aspects of the other's work, as well as those of contemporary classical music. "One can't help observing how sophisticated the taste of the average rock audiences have become recently," he wrote, "and how open they are for the acceptance of new, varied ideas and fresh direction."³⁸ The audience to which he refers, presumably, would be the one that gave *Musica Elettronica Viva* the opportunity to work "as happily in pop contexts as concert-halls."³⁹ Indeed, by 1971, pop's tastes had grown elastic enough that *Melody Maker* could devote a long feature to Yoko Ono's ten-year retrospective show at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, the only such coverage of an art event I've seen in that publication.⁴⁰ In 1976, Stockhausen explained to *Melody Maker's* Steve Lake that he had chosen to release *Ceylon/Bird of Paradise* on the rock label Chrysalis because their young audience was more receptive to his "free" musics.⁴¹

In the jazz magazine *Down Beat*, Michael Zwerin considered the conundrum of Soft Machine, who were “not part of anybody’s musical establishment”: they were too rocky for jazz, not commercial enough for pop, and not legitimate enough for serious musicians. Yet, Zwerin wrote, “Soft Machine is unique and satisfying, an impressive synthesis of various elements from Karl-Heinz [*sic*] Stockhausen, John Cage, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and rock itself.”⁴² In jazz criticism of the 1960s, the serious discourse—having to do with politics, civil rights, spirituality, and so on—accrued generally to post-Coltrane free jazz. It was notable, therefore, that radical white critics such as Frank Kofsky, Ralph Gleason, and John Sinclair turned their attention to rock around 1967, praising the improvisational prowess and compositional ambitions of Frank Zappa, Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, and the MC5. Important to this story is the difference between this moment, when rock gets pulled into comparisons with its contemporaries in classical music and cutting-edge jazz, and the one just a few years prior, when, as Bernard Gendron has shown, highbrow commentators discussed the Beatles and Bob Dylan but hardly viewed them as coequal participants in the latest historical developments.⁴³ And like the politically minded French critics analyzed by Eric Drott, these Anglophone commentators understood the transformations and convergences in genre space to reflect analogous transformations in social relations; therefore, a loosening of genre restriction could index the white desire for a transcendence of racial barriers.⁴⁴

In the United Kingdom, the composer and critic Tim Souster outpaced all of his classical peers when it came to engaging with rock.⁴⁵ In 1969, he surveyed a scene that had piled up the pop DJ John Peel, Anton Webern, Roland Kirk, the Soft Machine, Luciano Berio, the Swingle Singers, and Richard Wagner, and asked, “To what extent is all this overlapping a superficial and passing mutual flirtation, and to what extent is it evidence of a profound convergence of the ‘serious’ and ‘popular’ branches of music?”⁴⁶ For Souster, the overlaps of the late 1960s differed profoundly from earlier efforts such as that “most miserable” example, Third Stream jazz. He credited “a general creative atmosphere in which numerous factors—electronics, the emphasis on performance and on sheer sound and the idea of music-making as a social activity—are common to ‘pop’ and ‘serious’ music.” With close analyses of La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Cardew, the Soft Machine, the Who, and the Velvet Underground, Souster sketched out an emergent grouping of like-minded musics. His recommendation of “some records to try out” gives a good sense of this mixed category of adventurous music:

White Light/White Heat by the Velvet Underground, *In C* by Terry Riley, *The Marble Index* by Nico, *Variations IV* by John Cage, and a six-LP Deutsche Grammophon set, “The New Music,” that featured works by Stockhausen, Earle Brown, Krzysztof Penderecki, and Henri Pousseur.

Souster’s list suggested that the convergence of various traditions might represent the beginning of a new advanced music rather than simply a telos in itself. He shared this sense of historicity with other writers, even though they didn’t necessarily agree on what the new music might sound like.⁴⁷ For example, in a 1968 dispatch on AMM, their promoter, Victor Schonfield wrote, “Perhaps a new music could result only if jazz and European music had both evolved to a point where they were committed to the same things—in which case the new language would surely exist without anyone trying to bring it about. The jazz musicians and European musicians who united as AMM evolved over two years ago to a point where they speak a common language, call it neither ‘jazz’ nor ‘European music’ but simply ‘AMM music.’”⁴⁸ In a conversation with Schonfield in the underground newspaper *International Times*, Evan Parker voiced a similar confidence that his form of open, collective improvisation could serve as the next step in modern music history: “There has to be a music that is post-Cage, and of course I’m committed to the idea that group improvisation will be that music. This involves to some extent a reappraisal of Cage’s idea that sounds are just sounds. Instead we act in a system of sound relationships which we have selected . . . for qualities which transcend the sum of the parts, the individual sound components.”⁴⁹

Indeed, as Parker told a meeting of the Society for the Promotion of New Music in 1973, his “music in the future” would be made by groups of musicians who choose to improvise with each other. “If anyone in the production of a music event is dispensable, it is the score-maker or ‘composer’ as he is often called.”⁵⁰ For the younger improvisers associated with *Musics* magazine (founded in 1975), any music of the future had to replace the subject position of the composer with something more egalitarian (a few authors in the early issues of *Musics* specifically mentioned the issue of royalties). As Branden Joseph has persuasively argued, this understanding of real-time sonic collaboration was shared by a whole generation of artists working with Cage’s reformulation of the avant-garde around practices of listening.⁵¹

From his perspective in jazz and rock, critic Richard Williams was much more interested in the convergence of those two traditions, which he considered to be “the most cataclysmic” example of musical cross-pollination.⁵² However, nothing had arisen by 1970 in fusion jazz to capture his respect,

he explained. A transfusion of other energy was needed. “From where will it come? My guess is from the experimental modern music world of composers like Terry Riley and Karlheinz Stockhausen. This might sound terribly serious and straight, but I think that the advanced compositional techniques of these two and many others will be adapted to form a new music of the Seventies and Eighties.”⁵³ He predicted that two qualities—sound and indeterminacy—would be explored thoroughly by future-oriented rock and jazz musicians. Elsewhere, Williams shared his list of “prophecies for the distant future of music”: Nico’s *Marble Index*, Riley’s *In C*, and “practically everything played by Derek Bailey.”⁵⁴

If notated, work-based composition no longer defined the leading edge of music history, as these artists and critics proposed, then the unchallenged authority of Cage and Stockhausen to pronounce judgment on jazz or rock (usually after professing ignorance of the topic) wouldn’t last.⁵⁵ In the early 1970s, various musicians and critics would turn the tables and issue their own evaluations of contemporary composition. For example, the noted jazz writer Max Harrison argued for the value of “slow yet natural growth” across the “stylistic barriers that once rigidly divided the musical terrain,” rather than “enforced confrontations” that merely combine idioms.⁵⁶ He took the composer Roger Smalley’s *Beat Music* (1971), commissioned by the BBC, to represent “the worst features” of pop and art music; the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, on the other hand, seemed to be forging a genuinely unprecedented path to the future, according to the critic. In conversation with Williams, John Cale compared the “stunning effect” that rock had had on modern classical musicians. “Those guys have got a lot to learn,” he said, “and Stockhausen’s electronic things didn’t affect rock a bit.”⁵⁷ In *Melody Maker*, Unwin wondered whether “the whole atmosphere of some [music] colleges seems to be fast becoming an anachronism,” and worried over reports that the electronic music studio at one college has been threatened with closure by the authorities, who “have reason to believe that the studio attracts undesirables having subversive political views, long hair and weird clothes.”⁵⁸

All of this talk of comminglement shadowed the shared aesthetic practices of artists working in different networks and forging new ones. It also gestured toward efforts at the material reconfiguration of presentation and distribution, as promoters such as Schonfield (Music Now) arranged concerts and tours in the United Kingdom for a heterogeneous mix of experimental and improvised music practitioners.⁵⁹ And, as we will see, small-time operators like the young Henry Cow produced their own concerts and invited collaborators across London’s mixed avant-garde to join them. The

Arts Council of Great Britain struggled to respond to the fusions I have discussed, despite the efforts of the arts administrators, grant applicants, and outside panelists to transform a state agency originally established to support notated composition and opera—slowly, imperfectly, and with great friction—into something that might recognize innovations in open improvisation and even rock.⁶⁰ New record labels (Obscure, Incus) and journals (*Microphone*, *Musics*, *Impetus*, *The Wire*, *ReR Quarterly*, *Audion*, *Rubberneck*) devoted to this emergent mixture would be established in the 1970s and 1980s.

Strange Tensions in German Rock

Yet the “interswamp” of academic and popular musics, as Robert Wyatt colorfully described it in 1975, always roiled with residual tensions—the admixture was never total, never free from historical patterns of inequality and other sorting protocols.⁶¹ And that fertile ecology was itself historical, always in motion. The period of fervent cross-pollination that began in the second half of the 1960s partially closed about ten years later for a number of reasons, a few of which I have described elsewhere.⁶² One lasting document of this period, Michael Nyman’s *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (1974), which joined Cage’s *Silence* as an essential—indeed foundational—text for students of this music, neglected to include discussion of any jazz-affiliated British improvisers, despite their prominence on the London scene; that absence was registered by the improvisers at the time and in the years since. Two years later, *Melody Maker*’s survey of avant-garde “prophets, seers, and sages” offered up the kind of salmagundi that we’ve come to expect, but likewise found no place for post-Coleman improvisers.⁶³ The article’s authors—rock critics Karl Dallas and Steve Lake—introduced traditional precursors such as Erik Satie, Charles Ives, Edgard Varèse, Pierre Schaeffer, and Arnold Schoenberg alongside newer figures such as Cage, Cardew, and György Ligeti, and such minimalists as La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass. To this list, they added the Velvet Underground, Soft Machine, Gong, Mike Oldfield, Faust, and Can, but no improvisers; the closest they came was Henry Cow, “the world’s only genuine experimental rock band,” who are offered as exemplars of not improvisation but revolutionary ideals. In a few short years, we had come a long way from that pre-Nyman assertion in *Time Out* that Cage was “the greatest influence on free music.”⁶⁴

One might interpret this reterritorialization as evidence of “the degree to which even European free jazz musicians, with few or no African Americans around, still experience the reception of their art through the modalities of race,” as Lewis has observed.⁶⁵ Like any avant-garde moment, this one repeats old patterns of race difference while creating subtly new ones, but its defining trope of convergence (and therefore, hybridity), not to mention its engagement with Afro-diasporic vernacular styles, draws a double line under color. Even if the mixing of traditions in the British context was enabled or eased by the racial homogeneity of its white participants, a progressive, liberal discourse of race subtended the optimism and daring of the earlier, late-1960s visions of convergence. For example, Schonfield would comment in 1970, “I discovered there was room for a [concert-presenting] society which would devote itself to contemporary music and which did not have an artistic colour bar.”⁶⁶ His endeavors on behalf of Sun Ra and Ornette Coleman expressed not only a devotion to their music but also a commitment to place it alongside the work of the pan-European avant-garde, “who are comparable artistically but who’ve got white skins and letters after their names.”⁶⁷

In the light of this explicit race consciousness, the omissions of Nyman, Dallas, and Lake would seem to confirm a widely held, “perhaps unconscious, formulation of the avant-garde as necessarily not black,” as Fred Moten has put it. At the same time, certainly by the 1970s, and definitely in music, it would grow increasingly difficult to deny Moten’s alternative suggestion that “the avant-garde is a black thing.”⁶⁸ So these were only partial closures, and journals like *Musics* and *Impetus* continued to feature free improvisation and jazz-affiliated innovators throughout the 1970s; *Impetus*, for example, routinely mixed in articles on Annette Peacock, Johnny Dyani, and Anthony Braxton with others on Henry Cow, Reich, Penderecki, and Klaus Schulze. Schulze In fact, the race politics of rock—those bands named in “Prophets, Seers and Sages,” or Brian Eno, who remarked (also in 1976) that he thought “the borderline between rock and experimental is a very interesting one”—were overdetermined in the 1970s: it was regarded as a white genre even as its largely white practitioners continued to draw liberally on blues tropes.⁶⁹ (This contradiction gained special momentum with punk, another self-consciously “advanced” form of rock that staked its legitimacy claim, at least partially, on a supposed transcendence of its blues roots that has proven difficult to substantiate musically, as Evan Rapport has made clear.)⁷⁰ Although Eno might have deracinated rock by grafting it to indeterminacy and ambient music, his musical activities throughout the

1970s demonstrate an ongoing engagement with Afro-diasporic tropes at the low end of the mix.

This strange tension regarding the blues influence—and the extent to which a discourse of disavowal corresponded to formations of the experimental—courses through the British reception of the new rock coming from Germany after 1970. Following that initial burst of salmagundic energy in the late 1960s, British journalists turned with great enthusiasm to krautrock, as they called it. In surveying this very specific discourse of experimentalism, I wish to show how it represented for British (and some French) critics a historically advanced form of rock that was distinct from other contemporaneous, elevated formations such as jazz rock or the more bombastic progressive bands.⁷¹ Seen by commentators as the natural successors to Wyatt-era Soft Machine, early Pink Floyd, the Velvet Underground, and Frank Zappa, the German bands helped to define a rock end of experimentalism for the 1970s along fine lines of distinction that would also apply to Henry Cow. Charles Shaar Murray's declaration about the Cow, "This is *not* the new jazz-rock," found its echo in Kenneth Ansell's distinguishing language on Tangerine Dream: "Their music is far removed from the likes of ELP's electronic histrionics, having a far greater empathy with Terry Riley's gentle format."⁷² The assiduousities of these critics and their colleagues testify not only to their discriminations of the ear but also to their desire to demarcate an enduring network of experimentalism that shared concerns across classical, jazz, and rock lineages.

"German rock seems to these ears to be the most accomplished in Europe in the experimental area," wrote *Melody Maker's* Michael Watts in early 1972.⁷³ Indeed, critics and musicians frequently used this term, or *avant-garde*, to describe these bands.⁷⁴ Even the protestations of someone like Uwe Nettelbeck, the manager of Faust, nonetheless recirculated these terms in the popular press. "I want it to be popular music," he told an interviewer. "As far as terms are concerned I wouldn't like to have it in that bag with Stockhausen, Cage and all that, what you call experimental music. . . . Just because some things we are doing nobody else is doing, it puts us in a position to be avant-garde but that's just accidentally. I don't rate such terms very high. . . . I would rather like it to be considered as rock."⁷⁵ Regardless of Nettelbeck's comments, Faust was widely held to occupy a vanguard position, but critics identified comparable qualities in Can, Amon Düül II, Tangerine Dream, Xhol Caravan, Neu!, and Kraftwerk, among others. Their commentary animated all those themes associated with convergence I outlined earlier, namely, a transverse critical view of the contemporary

music landscape, a progressive sense of historicity, sound itself (and, specifically, electronically mediated sound), distributed authorship, and, above all, improvisation.

Farther from the Mississippi Delta than that of any new style in rock history, krautrock's point of origin elicited much discussion of roots. "They are completely different from yours," Can's Irmin Schmidt told an Anglo interviewer. "They are not the direct relationship with pop music and US blues roots. I think they're a compound of classical, folk music and the eastern influence."⁷⁶ Several journalists concurred, in spite of ample musical evidence to the contrary.⁷⁷ John Peel's comments about Neu! encapsulate this contradiction: "Their music, which, as everyone observes with an air of punditry, is not based on the Anglo-American rhythm-'n'-blues foundation, is still undoubtedly rock music."⁷⁸ Exactly. Critics seemed to want to retain the informality and populism of rock while shedding the lower associations of black R&B, especially when more elevated comparisons to "European Classical and Romantic music" were in the offing.⁷⁹ Only the astute Richard Williams called it like he heard it; reviewing Can, "the most talented and consistent experimental rock group in Europe," he noted that their rhythm section "has obviously been watching what the best avant-garde R&B musicians are currently doing."⁸⁰ (Williams's is the only reference I've ever seen to "avant-garde R&B" in the British press.)

For the most part, British observers on krautrock compared it to those other experimental artists in the post-Cage, post-Coleman, and post-VU networks. They noted that members of various northern European bands (Can, Guru Guru, Burnin' Red Ivanhoe [of Denmark]) had played previously with such jazz-associated ensembles as the Gunter Hampel Ensemble, the Manfred Schoof Quintet, the Irène Schweizer Trio, and John Tchicai's Cadentia Nova Danica.⁸¹ They compared Amon Düül II, Can, and Xhol Caravan to the "teutonic thumping" of the Velvet Underground or the extended forms of the Soft Machine.⁸² Edgar Froese was described as "a failed heavy rock guitarist who saw the light after repeated exposure to the music of Ligeti and the Pink Floyd."⁸³ The first outside reference in Williams's early profile of Roxy Music—occasionally folded into the "experimental rock" grouping—was to "the heavier German bands," and is followed thereafter by mentions of John Cage and Morton Feldman.⁸⁴ Writers also invoked Terry Riley now and then.⁸⁵

Perhaps the most common "influence" cited by musicians and journalists alike was Stockhausen.⁸⁶ Reviewers often noted that Schmidt and Holger

Czukay of Can were former students of the composer, who functioned as a benevolent, validating presence for many of the German bands. “In fact,” Barry Miles wrote in 1975, “with most German groups, the influence of Stockhausen’s Electronic Music Studio is enormous, lurking in the background in the way that Chuck Berry and Elvis do here.”⁸⁷ Interviewing members of Amon Düül II, Watts found his comparisons with Stockhausen welcomed more than those with Pink Floyd. “We’re trying to get back to the concepts of Beethoven, but on a popular level, of course,” John Weinzierl told him.⁸⁸

But not every group necessarily idolized the Cologne-based cosmic warrior; Tangerine Dream’s Chris Franke, for example, weighed in on his colleague’s work in 1975: “I have to say—electronic music before 1970 was really very primitive. There were just a few generators around and you had to do a million tape cuts to get a primitive musical result. People like Stockhausen and the French studio people did it and the music was really horrible!”⁸⁹ (He didn’t care for US electronic music, either: “It’s like a factory. You can get electronic music in pieces, buy it by the hour, by the day, but it all sounds really similar.”) Karl Dallas opined that Tangerine Dream’s use of the Mellotron made them “an uneasy hybrid between the two kinds of electronic music, the Parisian and the Kolnisch,” but took Stockhausen to task for allowing “concrete sounds to intrude into an electronic passage, as with the voice which intones ‘les jeux sont faites’ during the fourth region of his otherwise brilliant ‘Hymnen,’” because “it destroys the sublimity of what has gone below and reduces it to the banal.”⁹⁰ (He even quotes Stockhausen in *Die Reihe*.) By 1973, Can’s Schmidt lamented the emphasis that journalists had placed on Stockhausen, not because he upstaged the group, but because he had overestimated his own importance. “When one of those ‘Darmstadt heroes’ discovered some underrated composer from 50 years ago, they took it all so seriously. They thought they moved the world—but they didn’t move anything,” Schmidt told Williams.⁹¹

In addition to these judgments on other electronic music, the German musicians and their boosters cultivated a strong historical consciousness. Critics compared krautrock to other vanguard moments in rock history, like the British invasion and the US West Coast scene of 1967.⁹² To some extent, these writers were following the lead of the artists, many of whom had a strong nationalist sense of their contribution to contemporary music. “The end of the English scene is the beginning of the German,” remarked Weinzierl in 1970.⁹³ Indeed, the search for new beginnings offered one shared point of contact between the rock intelligentsia in its post-Beatles

caesura and the young Germans who continually highlighted their comparative lack of roots. Beginning from zero, German rock could overthrow “all the crusty pillars of rock and contemporary music,” according to one critic.⁹⁴ For the Rhinelandish dreamers, “starting fresh” was underscored ideologically by the rejection of what they saw as the compromised morality of the previous generation, so the frequent observations that West Germany had few recording studios, few gifted rock producers, and no real touring circuit seemed also to say something about their distance and disconnection from the Nazi past. “You see, you have a musical tradition in England as far as rock music goes,” Weinzierl explained. “But in Germany there is not one because it’s more political, and we, the young people, have finished with what our parents stood for. The pendulum . . . has now swung towards us, and we aren’t concerned with the ideas of our parents.”⁹⁵ In music, as in other arenas of public life, they were starting from zero.⁹⁶

By 1972, Anglo critics were reaching a climax in their drumbeat for German rock, and Virgin Mailorder continued to supply the goods. There seemed to be a never-ending supply. Rolf-Ulrich Kaiser, the founder of Ohr Records and a prominent spokesperson for the scene, told one journalist, “There are thousands of groups over here, of which about 150 are under contract. Two hundred records will be released this year [1972] alone,” a factoid that was picked up and retweeted (in a pre-Twitter kind of way) by the French critic Jean-Pierre Lentin in *Actuel* one month later.⁹⁷ By early 1974, Nick Kent could look back on these breathless days with a tone of scorn: “Remember back in 1972 when it was the bees knees to get rapped up in dialectics about how the krauts really knew what was going on and how all those niticlistic [*sic*] electronic landscapes they were droning their way through interminably, were nothing more or less than the music of the future?” Well, in Kent’s view, the future turned out to be boring, even if this perspective was apparently not widely shared. “Still, Virgin records has kept its Krautrock section intact in their catalogue while balding intellectuals like Ian MacDonald can be heard occasionally muttering earnestly about the undeveloped potential inherent in the contemporary German music culture.”⁹⁸

More potential inhered in Faust than any other band, if the critical consensus is to be believed. Steve Peacock averred that Faust were the first band to justify the interest in Eurorock.⁹⁹ “At present they are the most avant-garde group in Germany, if not the world,” raved Lebrun.¹⁰⁰ “Faust are already unquestionably more advanced than any of their fellow-countrymen. They’ve mastered the nuances of electro-acoustic sound and

employ this knowledge with audacity.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, critics were fascinated by krautrock’s use of electronics, synthesizers, and tape work; according to Gerald O’Connell of *Let It Rock*, the “sole common thread running through German rock” was “a fascination for pure sound and its electronic manipulation in music.”¹⁰² Tangerine Dream, Can, and Kraftwerk were all noted for their electronics, and references to mechanicity peppered journalistic accounts. Nettelbeck told one journalist, “Basically, Faust is a machine, but everybody is sitting on the machine and trying to get freedom out of it.”¹⁰³ Philippe Paringaux declared that Faust’s first album “could have been subtitled ‘An Application of Technology to Rock’n’Roll.’”¹⁰⁴ Accounts of Can often detailed their creative process, which proceeded, somewhat in the *Bitches Brew* manner, by recording hours of improvisation and then cutting together all the good parts and adding some overdubs.¹⁰⁵ Like Faust, their writing process depended on possessing their own studio and keeping the tape running.¹⁰⁶

Not surprisingly, critics dwelled on the musical practices of spontaneity in krautrock. The British writers understood free-form, extended improvisation to offer a kind of escape hatch from the limited vessel of rock aesthetics, toward a more open field of progressive exploration. “There is a Berlin group, Tangerine Dream, who carry on where Pink Floyd stop, i.e. minus the tunes,” wrote a *Melody Maker* critic in 1971.¹⁰⁷ Artists like Cluster, Can, and Klaus Schulze eschewed the frameworks of blues, folk, jazz, or classical, according to another critic, in favor of simpler format, “a superstructure of open-ended improvisation.”¹⁰⁸ For example, Michael Watts described Can’s music as one “whose emphasis is strongly instrumental, but aleatory and free-form in a jazz sense.”¹⁰⁹ The more adventurous groups, such as Cluster and Tangerine Dream, occasionally made do without a tonal center or rhythmic pulse. “It’s safe to say that, within the Anglo-American sphere of influence, not even the Third-Ear Band has laid down three-quarters of an hour of music without key or regular pulse,” wrote Ian MacDonald in *NME*. “In Germany such blatantly avant-garde proceedings are taken for granted by ordinary rock audiences.”¹¹⁰

Furthermore, like the British free improvisers, many of these German artists and their English listeners prized improvisation for the potential it had to level the relations between musical collaborators by eliminating the composer figure. As Can’s Schmidt told a critic in 1972, “Now the music is improvised collectively. There’s nobody dominating, nobody writing.”¹¹¹ This utopian political model possessed an added virtue: it could signal

the remoteness of the German bands from the celebrity culture of Anglo-American pop in the economic domain. For example, Faust's plan "was to have a band which is not featuring anyone in particular but has a combined sort of sound, just like one instrument, playing in a very wide range of sounds and styles. . . . And we definitely won't have a stage act in which somebody is in the spotlight."¹¹² Such a description imbued anonymity with both aesthetic and political valences in relation to the culture industry, and led one critic to cite Germany as the only site "to have achieved any kind of rapprochement between the socialist principles of rock culture and its dependence upon a capitalist set-up which continually mocks and thwarts them."¹¹³ It achieved this state by preserving amateurism (everybody is a star), ignoring virtuosity (no guitar heroes), and eschewing recognizable songs (songwriter implies leader). "Translated, this means a lot of simultaneous jamming on one chord," he summed up.¹¹⁴

If all of these characteristics—the discursive co-location of academic and popular traditions, a sense of historicity and vanguard status, the use of electronics to work directly on sound, the virtues of anonymity—attuned German rock to the other experimental networks that were converging in the late 1960s, it was improvisation that provided the strongest connection. In a rock context in the late 1960s, that term would have referred primarily to the extended guitar solos in groups such as Jefferson Airplane, the Mothers of Invention, the Grateful Dead, and Cream. In contrast to this variant of jazz performance (demonstrating liveness, virtuosity, authenticity, self-expression, and fleet-footed formalism), krautrock built on the collective diffusion of psychedelic freak-outs to undercut assertions of individuality, and it used recording and editing to find new ways of organizing time outside of the framing structures of a song or a chord progression. Accordingly, their music had an almost spatial quality that arose in the absence of strong directionality. This quality, along with the use of electronic signal processing and a fine ear for timbre, marked out a specific trajectory through the contact zone of improvisation. Although I would not argue that Henry Cow emulated krautrock in particular (their network attachments to Faust are detailed in chapters to come), their open improvisations did trace a similar trajectory, often in combination with other routes through improvisation sampled from free jazz and indeterminacy. Yet rock was their home. "Oh come on, bass, drums, guitar, organ, riffs, solos—it's loud—we like to play loud y'know—turn 'em up to ten. Road managers. And besides we get written about in rock papers," replied one band member to the challenges of a journalist.¹¹⁵

Quests for Uncertainty

Popular music illuminated another unique facet of postwar spontaneity worth dwelling on. Rock 'n' roll, R&B, and countless other popular musics have always imbued their performances with spontaneous shouts and the like. But I wish to follow Ian MacDonald, who—twenty years after his Faust fixation of 1973—pointed to a different kind of spontaneity: “Indeed, the format of modern pop—its fast turnover, high wastage-rate, and close link with fads and styles—is intrinsically instantaneous.”¹¹⁶ In his writing on the Beatles, MacDonald offered a nuanced understanding of momentariness, of the band’s “casually voracious ‘nowness.’”¹¹⁷ He detects this sensibility in Lennon’s refusal to learn how to play an instrument “properly” (so that he could move “straight to expressing himself”), or McCartney’s displeasure when his demands for new studio innovations were delayed by the practicalities of rejiggering the necessary equipment. “Waiting killed the spontaneity they so prized, taking them back into the patient, postponed, *slow* world of their parents.”¹¹⁸ Outside of musical settings, the band’s freshness owed to the lack of calculation they brought to their press appearances, even if this directness produced some of their worst foibles (Lennon on Jesus, McCartney on LSD). MacDonald writes, “The Beatles *felt* their way through life, acting or expressing first, thinking, if at all, later.”¹¹⁹

By surrounding themselves with the ephemera of the daily press—magazines, newspapers, tabloids, TV and radio broadcasts in the background—the Beatles forced action from their environment. They chased a response, not thought. “Apart from the fact that it amused them to live like this—relishing the coincidences and clashes of high and low style that it entailed—they valued simultaneity for its random cross-references which suggested ideas that might otherwise not have occurred to them.”¹²⁰ The Beatles did not simply integrate the now into their music but instead used it to find unanticipated possibilities and avenues toward the future; “now” was a site for unexpected encounter, a launching pad, a melting iceberg, a broken bridge to somewhere else, hopefully somewhere better.

MacDonald portrays this instant as the point at which one meets uncertainty—one *divines* uncertainty, one *fosters* uncertainty, one *values* and *investigates* it. One rushes into the future by means of it. The goal of this quest is never chaos itself but rather the oscillation between states of uncertainty and certainty, the conversion of *chronos* into *kairos*, or the expansion of the gap between a cause and its consequence. Nothing describes Henry Cow’s arts of music and living better than this quest for uncertainty.

What's next? That was the question. As Peter Blegvad, a short-term member of Henry Cow we will meet in the pages to come, wrote in his notebook at the time, "In action you escape [the] limiting sense of limitations."¹²¹ A committed 'pataphysician, Blegvad prized the science of the singular, the exceptional, the particular rather than that of the general.¹²² Likewise, his bandmates persistently endorsed the role of practice, risk, and experiment in the development of theory and the continuous determination of limits. Their intelligence manifested as thinking in and through action, in this moment and in this spot.

According to Andrew Pickering, this kind of intelligence can be readily found in the history of British cybernetics, which was above all concerned with how the brain exists as an active, performative entity, rather than a calculating, "thinking" one. Or, it is actually more complicated than that; for Pickering, the cyberneticians were interested in thinking *as action*. He quotes some jottings of the important brain scientist Ross Ashby, who pursued the idea of adaptability across several fields:

[When] one is uncomfortable [there] is nothing other than to get restless. (3) Do not suffer in silence: start knocking the env[ironmen]t about, & watch what happens to the discomfort. (4) This is nothing other than 'experimenting': *forcing* the environment to reveal itself. (5) Only by starting a war can one force the revelation of which are friends & which are foes. (6) Such a machine does *not* solve its problems by thinking, just the opposite: it solves them by forcing action. . . . So, in war, does one patrol to force the enemy to reveal himself and his characteristics.¹²³

Adaptation, the bringing into alignment of the interior state of the mind with the exterior state of the environment, is one way for thinking about improvisation.¹²⁴ As Ashby makes clear in this excerpt from his personal journal, it is a strategy to create disequilibrium in a system so that one might learn something new about the environment, and then turn that new piece of information into a tool for creating a new state of equilibrium. And in this experiment, the outcome is unknown, because any exceedingly complex system—the brain, the weather, a rock band—seems to enact an emergent kind of ontology, one that comes into being with unforeseeable causes and untraceable effects.¹²⁵

Especially during their early years, Henry Cow knocked its environment about to see what would happen. I am thinking, for example, about the Cabaret Voltaire (1972) and Explorer's Club (1973) concert series, two theaters of experimental collaboration. In the case of the latter, they made con-

tact with musicians in the free improvisation scene because they thought they had something to say in that world, but the only way to discover what it actually was was to force that environment to reveal itself. A group of skilled improvisers builds up trust in its ability to handle whatever is revealed—not just handle but enjoy, improve, prolong, or delight in the threshold instant between states of stability and instability. Not blind chance, but good fortune. Likewise, Henry Cow’s reinvention of their setlist on a nightly basis surfaced a commitment to disturb any equilibrium they may have achieved in favor of these threshold moments; the disruption not only made things fresh but also allowed them to think with their ears, lungs, hands, and feet. Keeping certain important elements of a performance underspecified—how to get from “Ottawa Song” to “Ruins,” or how to begin the concert at all—provided a highly charged theater for observing and encouraging new musical formations that could not have been predicted. The improviser creates these kinds of situations so that she forces action before thought, or action *as* thought.

This kind of creativity was best expressed on stage in the course of an open improvisation. It is a commonplace in conversations about improvisation to remark on how the performers attune themselves to the acoustic profile of the space that holds them. All musicians, if they are any good, adapt their playing to the immediate environment. It is implied, though, that improvisers do this particularly well, but what does this mean in practice? I think the improvising rock band provides a good field for investigating this question, because the small exchanges between musician and environment are amplified, literally. One could say that when Henry Cow improvised acoustically, what we hear is the sonic evidence of an encounter between two exceedingly complex systems: a rock band and the world around them. By “exceedingly complex,” I refer to cybernetician Stafford Beer’s term for a system whose inner dynamics are unpredictable and generative; an exceedingly complex system organizes itself in ways that are beyond our powers of total comprehension, but we can still interact with it. And it’s not only unpredictable but also creative: new things happen.

Calibrating the encounter between a rock band and the world is the PA system that sits between them, and that is why the role of sound engineer was so important to the collective and why disagreements about live sound carried such weight. The subtleties of this job create an inscrutable balancing act in performance. Certain frequencies in a given space will become nodes for screeching feedback, but some of these frequencies (different in every hall) will also be essential to the tone quality of, say, Dagmar Krause’s

voice. Bringing down the level of the voice to prevent feedback, however, now means that the guitar and drums are too loud, so the engineer must attenuate those instruments in the mains. But, this adjustment brings about another consequence: the guitar is now too loud on stage—without the extra oomph in the loudspeakers, Krause is having a hard time hearing herself with Frith's guitar amplifier blaring behind her. In some photos from 1977, Krause holds and sings into two microphones at once—this strange setup may have been an improvised solution to a similar kind of problem.

These interconnected actions and responses are the visual and audible evidence of a constantly fluctuating exchange of effects across different human and technological participants. That's life. The improviser, I would think, distinguishes herself with a heightened awareness of these exchanges and a motivation to highlight, counter, or prolong some of them to hear where they might lead. A certain action risks intended and unintended consequences, and then one responds to this new arrangement of sound in an open-ended negotiation. Engineer Neil Sandford, for example, recalls that Cutler would circle one drumstick high above his head whenever he sensed that the amplification was becoming dangerously unstable and liable to feed back. If everything was going according to plan, Sandford would notice this signal and drop the main level (or perhaps just the troublemakers that had been identified earlier in the soundcheck). If he didn't notice it, or even if he did, but his response came a bit too late, then the musicians would have to make their own adjustments, which involves a bit of improvisation even if they're playing a thoroughly composed piece.

The improvisational sensibility marked more than Henry Cow's live performances—they also approached the studio scenario as another local problem to be solved creatively. What could they do here, in this situation and with these resources, that they couldn't do elsewhere? Particularly in the case of their first album, recorded when the band was still green, such an approach to on-the-spot creativity took courage. And although the recording process for their follow-up, *Unrest*, at least partially owed to the lack of time they had to write new material, it was also a measure of confidence in their ability to enter a new environment, knock it about, and reveal possibilities for elaboration.

A related point that I want to make concerns the isomorphism of this improvisational logic—the same kind of process gets reproduced at different scalar levels of organization. When John Greaves lightly drops a billiard ball from his left hand onto the strings of his bass near its pickups, he does

so without full knowledge of how the resulting sound will play out, but his foot is poised on a volume pedal and his right hand grips the tone knob to modulate the sonic response when it comes. Likewise, when Greaves and his bass participate in a group improvisation with the rest of Henry Cow, they sound out their collaborators and explore the possibilities in what comes back. Henry Cow, in turn, improvises with an ear for how their sounds sit acoustically in the room and how their amplifiers and loudspeakers are affecting what they do—they interact with both of these exceedingly complex systems, but they do so from a position of unknowability: feedback, audibility onstage, crowd noise, and the adjustments of their sound engineer can be predicted only within certain limits during the course of the performance.

But the gig itself—let’s say it was in Genoa—came about through the same type of process. While the band is parked in Rome for a few weeks in 1975, Lindsay Cooper might be out in a cafe when a friend introduces her to an organizer for Partito Radicale, who are putting on a festival in Piacenza in four days. The pay isn’t great, but there is the possibility of a few more gigs in the days after, and they need to be in Verona later in the week, so at least it would be on the way. She brings this news back to the band, who each sound out their own contacts in the city to determine whether this is a good idea. They decide to take the opportunity, but they don’t really know what awaits them, what time they’ll play, or who is actually paying them. Uncertainty is a persistent quality of the band’s affairs, but they balance it with their own abilities to adapt to whatever situation will present itself.

I sense this improvisational attitude at key moments of Henry Cow’s history. The 1974 merger with Slapp Happy, for example, was not a likely course of events, but Krause’s description of the ill-fated project—“not undoable, . . . a tryout”—indicates how willing the musicians were to experiment. Several such moments in the band’s career should be interpreted in these improvisational terms: Henry Cow embraced opportunities to disturb equilibrium so that they could find new states of temporary stability that could not have been predicted in advance. In each of these specific situations—a musician and his instrument, a musician and other musicians, a band and their sound system, an organization and its planning—we see the same kind of improvisational approach. We can even find this approach at the institutional level with Virgin Records, at least until their housecleaning in 1976: what more was Simon Draper’s decision to “suspend disbelief” in signing Henry Cow than a commitment to explore an unknown future, to find and foster emerging orders that exceed the ones in view? Indeed, the

tensions and similarities between the operative modes of capitalist enterprises and the radical collectives intending to escape them assert themselves at key moments in this story.¹²⁶

This is a book about open improvisation, but enthusiasts of that style might not entirely recognize or endorse the way that I am approaching it. (I will use the term *open improvisation* to refer to the musical practice of improvisation without a plan or necessary telos. I want to find a path out of the aporias of “freedom” and “structure” that shadow so many conversations about *free improvisation*. For the most part, I’ll use this latter term as a narrower genre marker referring to John Stevens, Derek Bailey, and their European confreres.) In this study, I am highlighting an orientation toward the world that could be described as improvisational; this orientation is not only one about saxophonists, guitarists, and percussionists creating spur-of-the-moment musical works. It is also about seeking out surprising encounters, or beginning from a state of unknowability, or looking out at the world and seeing an array of possible human and nonhuman collaborators. Open improvisation, as I trace it through the worlds of Henry Cow, appears as a kind of concerted movement toward a future that remains underspecified, and thus uncertain.

The political valences of this quest for uncertainty were clear enough: for Henry Cow, the world was a problem, not a given.¹²⁷ No matter how perdurable a set of musical, technical, economic, historical, or social arrangements might have appeared, band members habituated themselves to the task of tumbling such certainties into uncertainty—imperfectly but relentlessly. If those habits exacted a toll, the bill for a certain ugliness, it was taken from the collective as a whole. Indeed, perhaps the most pronounced problem that they investigated was collectivism itself, and how one might practice it. That experiment, we will see, proceeded through many trials in the areas of authorship, decision making, labor, language, gender, and commerce. Reopened and rendered as a problem, rock collectivism yielded new possibilities for the distribution of creative labor, not only in open improvisational contexts but also in the composition of notated music and the collaborative authorship made possible by the recording apparatus.

“The most useful description of the inner life of a group,” wrote Tim Hodgkinson soon after the dissolution of his own, “is orientated towards showing that its music is every bit a product of work—with all the implied complications of working intensely over a period of time with the same people—and not a product of some mystery or sentiment. . . . On the other hand, a description limited to the work-process itself would leave out the

fact that being & working in a group with other people is an art in itself.”¹²⁸ Pragmatic and unsentimental, the Marxists in Henry Cow concentrated their powers of analysis on artistic labor to a far greater extent than they did on the arts of living. However, their rock collectivism performed a living inversion of its laboring quests for uncertainty in the trials of the road: collective decision making, autonomous organization, and the cruel co-habitations of touring. Accordingly, I have included in these pages some discussion of those travails, occasionally to the chagrin but always with the permission and cooperation of my interlocutors.

When I began this project, I assumed that “private” or “personal” matters would impinge on my narrative of the band’s public actions; initially informed by my reading in actor-network theory but generically true of all proper research, this position declines to designate distinct scenarios of analysis in advance, allowing surprising and heterogeneous ecologies to emerge in their specificity—less “liminal” than “not what I expected.” That is how one approaches the granularity of living: a rock band hosts as many affective exchanges as it does musical ones; occasionally, they coincide. Now, however, I understand that any endeavor pressing on the line between art and life risks its own dissolution in the negligence of either side of its dialectic. Therefore, as Hodgkinson surmised over thirty years ago, any critical description of an avant-garde “limited to the work-process itself” might succeed only by half measures. I will leave it to the reader to judge the success of the current study, but I would submit that, whatever its problems, half measures is not one of them.

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