

## Another Version of Ourselves: The Enigmas of Improvised Subjectivity

Benjamin Piekut

This short text takes up some questions having to do with acts of self-definition, collective authorship, and expression, and how they are rehearsed, examined, and denied—in short, put into motion—by means of musical performance.<sup>1</sup> To improvise is to work with known materials and techniques, moving them in the direction of uncertainty. When you improvise with others, you bring your skills and your musical personality to the encounter. You use them to participate in an exchange, and that exchange issues something new, something that could not be foreseen—and that is open improvisation, at least according to one widespread and common-sense understanding of the practice.<sup>2</sup> But I will explore another variant, one that embarks on its journey toward uncertainty by pulling apart personality and rendering it into a site of ongoing investigation. Both of these understandings of improvisation convert certainty into uncertainty, one by stretching or risking the self in a situation of surprise, and the other by disassembling or nullifying the self in order to get free of it.<sup>3</sup> I want to think about

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**Benjamin Piekut** is a historian of experimental music, jazz, and rock after 1960. His first monograph, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and its Limits*, was published in 2011 by the University of California Press. He is also the editor of *Tomorrow Is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies* (Michigan, 2014) and co-editor (with George E. Lewis) of the *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* (2 volumes, 2016). His second monograph, *The World Is a Problem: Henry Cow and the Vernacular Avant-garde*, is under contract with Duke University Press. His essay in *The Drama Review*, “Deadness,” co-authored with Jason Stanyek, received the “Outstanding Article Award” in 2011 from the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. Previously a lecturer at the University of Southampton in the UK, he is now an associate professor in the department of music at Cornell.

<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Fumi Okiji for reading this essay and offering comments that improved it.

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller consideration of improvisation and its definitions, see George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, “Introduction: On Critical Improvisation Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1–36.

<sup>3</sup> I explore a similar dynamic in greater detail (though in a different context) in *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-garde and its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 140–73.

these fascinating problems in relation to George E. Lewis's influential pair of descriptive tools, the Afrological and the Eurological. This schema of postwar spontaneity remains useful and productive, I will suggest, when it is reanimated in analytical scenarios that might disrupt the work of disentanglement that it is often called upon to perform.

My thinking on the subject of non-self-expressive improvisation has been informed substantially by research on the rock band Henry Cow, whose improvisational practice and interpretations of it will form the main contribution of this text. Although a fuller historical account of the group will have to wait for another occasion, a few basic details will help to establish a context for the discussion that follows. Founded in 1968 by two Cambridge University undergraduates, Fred Frith and Tim Hodgkinson, Henry Cow existed for a decade and included more than ten members across those years. In 1973, they signed to Virgin Records, for whom they would record three studio albums between 1973 and 1975 (and one live double-LP released through a Virgin subsidiary in the UK). They recorded their fourth studio album in 1978 and published it on their own label after they had broken up. Although they wrote and performed plenty of conventional "songs" and more substantial, notated compositions, the band explored open group improvisation from its beginnings; their stylistic references ranged from post-Impulse! energy music to static electronic textures and acoustic chamber music. Henry Cow's eclecticism owed to the varied tastes and backgrounds of its members. Frith grew up playing blues and folk music, while Hodgkinson was a fan of free jazz and the European modernist composers; drummer Chris Cutler loved pop, R&B, and psychedelic music, not to mention Sun Ra and Edgard Varèse. When reeds player Lindsay Cooper stepped in for saxophonist Geoff Leigh, the band's improvised sound tilted toward contemporary classical music, owing to her conservatory training and the timbral palette of her main instruments, bassoon and oboe. Likewise, the classically-trained cellist Georgina Born's replacement of John Greaves on bass pulled them away from his jazzier, dance-band roots and further into the aesthetic zone of western art music.

Occupying various positions on the socialist left, the members of Henry Cow tended to value group free improvisation as a kind of collective labor. It removed the pernicious division of labor between composer and performer in traditional composed music, and allowed all members to lead and be led by emerging structures in sound. They viewed improvisation in the recording studio as a natural extension of this kind of shared work. In other words, they understood magnetic tape not in terms of its dead position against a live or authentic spontaneity—that binary was not part of their discourse. Rather, the plasticity and reverbility of magnetic tape captured their interest; it provided new possibilities for collaboration, through loops, overdubbing, edits, and mixing. In this

sense, recording wasn't opposed to improvisation, but rather revealed other possibilities inherent within it.

The tension and pull between a single musician's distinctive wares and the group endeavor to which she contributed manifested strongly in the case of vocalist Dagmar Krause, who joined Henry Cow when it merged in 1975 with her Anglo-German pop trio, Slapp Happy. Although she had heard her fair share of Karlheinz Stockhausen and other European high modernists on the radio during her youth and adolescence in Hamburg, her own cultural production had been restricted to folk, blues, and pop singing. With Henry Cow, she confronted directly the more rarified world of free improvisation. "I was sort of thrown into the deep end, really," she told me. "How brave are you going to be, Dagmar? Are you going to make some sounds? I was constantly trying to see how I could fit in with what was being played."<sup>4</sup> (During her first year in Henry Cow, Krause often refrained from participating in their open improvisations, but after attending vocal workshops led by the noted improviser Maggie Nicols in the summer of 1976, she increasingly added passionate cries, yelps, and growls to their live performances.)

According to Hodgkinson, Krause's character-based approach to singing might have made it more difficult to engage improvisationally: "Dagmar is almost like a Stanislavski-method person. [But] improvisation isn't giving you any dramatic role in particular, so you have to conceive that yourself and you have got to learn to do that."<sup>5</sup> For many singers, Hodgkinson reasons, an individual dramatic role—whether autobiographical or fictional—works to orient one's expressive choices, whereas a clarinetist or drummer might discover other freedoms through the haptic interaction with the instrument. As her time in Henry Cow wore on, however, Krause grew skeptical about the "freedom" claims of improvisation. "Maybe I was a reluctant improviser," she speculates, "because when you get to know people quite well, you know immediately . . . what sounds they're going to make. I had problems with that, you see? You'd say, 'Oh, now he's gonna do that.'"<sup>6</sup> As this comment suggests, the tension between novelty and predictability emerged as a problem for Krause. "Improvising is great, and it *is* a new language. But, you know, sometimes it felt to me like 'bish, bash, bosh.' I'm sorry, that's what it felt like to me. I couldn't hear anything new after a while, coming out of there. It was never all exactly the same, but it was predictable nevertheless."<sup>7</sup>

These observations raise interesting questions not only about open improvisation as a practice itself, but also about the different social conditions in which the practice exists. Predictability means one thing in relation to the general mu-

<sup>4</sup> Dagmar Krause, in discussion with the author, Chiltern Hills, UK, February 3, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Hodgkinson, in discussion with the author, Brixton, UK, April 3, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Krause, in discussion with the author.

<sup>7</sup> Krause, in discussion with the author.

sical practice that had arisen in the 1960s—“That saxophonist is simply regurgitating all of Coltrane’s licks; it’s so predictable.” It means something else in the context of a collective or band, where individuals build up a repertoire of sounds, sequences, and techniques in continuous, durative dialogue with their comrades. They forge these sonic relationships over the course of a single set, from night to night, on a four-week tour, over an entire season, year, or even—in the case of Hodgkinson and Frith—most of their adult musical lives. Within this frame of reference, predictability more often means something like, “Lindsay is about to do that honking thing again.”

In the jazz-affiliated British free improvisation scene, players did work in stable groupings (Joseph Holbrooke, Music Improvisation Company, Spontaneous Music Ensemble, Iskra 1903), but just as frequently they operated as free agents who met up with collaborators for a single concert or short run of dates. (AMM were an important exception to this general rule—they rarely played with others.) The members of Henry Cow, on the other hand, broke off to perform with others quite infrequently. This difference between improvisation as a kind of encounter with other individuals and improvisation as a type of ongoing, collective work was highly significant for some members of the band. For Cutler, the life of the group, exceeding its individual members, “must be held to have had an actual existence and . . . was our great strength if we had any strength. Or perhaps our strength was that we recognised it.”<sup>8</sup> Other great groups, he explained, never realized what they had—Frank Zappa dissolved the Mothers of Invention because he wrongly concluded that his singular musical ego was responsible for the band’s success, rather than its collective dynamic.

The Cows also valued the permanence of their collective because they thought it created the conditions for a thorough, empirical exploration of musical possibilities through improvisation. In particular, they thought that group stability enabled an attention toward structure that would otherwise be missing. Cutler told one journalist at the time, “As you examine the moment of playing, there’s a very high emotional content to it. . . . But nevertheless when you subsequently look at a stretch of our music you can see structure in it—because unlike a lot of the improvising musicians, we’re a *regular* group. So a vocabulary and a language builds up.”<sup>9</sup> The ceaseless nature of their collaboration meant that individuals worked on musical ideas in front of and in concert with their bandmates. Krause heard the predictability born of repetition as a kind of failure for improvisation, an indication of what that practice might represent to someone coming from the world of song. Some of her colleagues, however, might repeat old material not because they had run out of ideas, but rather because they

<sup>8</sup> Chris Cutler, unpublished interview with Nick Wilton, October 20, 1980; I am grateful to Trond Einar Garmo for sharing this transcript with me.

<sup>9</sup> John Fordham, “Not With a Mirror . . . But a Hammer,” *Time Out*, January 31, 1976, 10.

wished to return to an earlier arrangement of personalities, instruments, and sounds, in order to try out a different solution to the problem posed by that arrangement. They wanted to work with something that was half known, something at hand that could lead further afield. In 1984, when Trond Garmo noted a few correspondences in Greaves's piano playing on two different recording sessions, Hodgkinson replied, "He probably used the same harmonies for about three years. When you're improvising there's no knowing that you won't actually refer to something that perhaps you are working on at the time—some chord that is in the back of your mind. Why not? If it works—it's still spontaneous, I would say."<sup>10</sup>

Later in the conversation, Garmo asked if Henry Cow used free improvisation to find new sounds. Hodgkinson's response introduced subtle clarifications about how he understood their practice. "The purpose of improvisation is to enable you to explore different sounds. . . . I mean, I don't really like to experiment in front of [the] public. I am taking risks in front of [the] public, but I'm not experimenting, cause I want to give people something that's worth listening to when people have taken the trouble to come to a concert. I don't want them to come finding me doodling on some pieces of paper."<sup>11</sup> The composer put the pursuit of new sounds into the service of creating good musical compositions, while the threat of exploration for its own sake could emerge as easily from written composition as it might from improvisation. In Hodgkinson's free improvisation, musicians risk giving a bad performance or generating a musical structure that fails to cohere—one should distinguish this kind of "taking a chance" from other varieties of uncertainty.

"When you're improvising, although you're doing your best all the time, it's not fantastic the whole time and it certainly doesn't come out like a composition although that's what we always used to aim for," Cutler explained in 1980. "We improvised, as it were, collective compositions. This is how we tried to see our improvisations and how we tried to realize them although we didn't always succeed."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Cutler, Hodgkinson, and Frith often described improvisation as a form of collective composition, a concept that served as the group's bridge between improvisation and recording. In both cases, the musicians searched for sounds and then worked on that material in the medium itself (be it the medium of magnetic tape or live performance). Moreover, their experience in the recording studio prepared them to think of improvisation as the combination and transformation of elements in a sonic texture, often conceived in layers (or even tracks). For example, in his notes for the band's quartet tour in autumn 1974, Hodgkinson referred to the sections of structured improvisation they had pre-

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<sup>10</sup> Tim Hodgkinson, unpublished interview with Trond Einar Garmo, January 16, 1984, typescript in Tim Hodgkinson personal collection.

<sup>11</sup> Hodgkinson, unpublished interview with Garmo.

<sup>12</sup> Cutler, unpublished interview with Wilton.

pared with the language of tapework: “blocks” and “fades.” The plasticity of improvised sound implied here extended to how some Cows thought of their instruments—Frith’s wrote of “expanding what a guitar can do.”<sup>13</sup> He conceived of his instrument as a physical site of exploration, indeed an almost spatial array of possibility—*choreography* comes to mind as an appropriate term. Occasionally, even the live engineer worked directly on the sound with a view to affecting the emergent composition; one technician, Neil Sandford, told me, “You could see it from up front. You could see them struggling to find the next landing point. And occasionally I’d kick it along by draining all the bass out of the sound just to make what they were doing so horrible that they had to go somewhere else.”<sup>14</sup>

One consequence of the plasticity of Henry Cow’s improvisation—or its material (and conceptual) entanglement with the instrument and the recording apparatus—was an interpretation of their work as empirical, pragmatic, unsentimental, and nonexpressive. In a 1981 letter, Frith invoked the concept of “expression” in relation to his musical practice, but attached the idea to his *instrument*, rather than to himself: “I play the guitar, + I regard everything I’ve done as part of a logical step by step extension of the guitar’s expressive possibilities, + I mean expressive in the broadest possible way. And the process continues. I’m not ‘looking’ for anything. I’m playing the guitar.”<sup>15</sup> Hodgkinson wrote at the time, “We rejected the Cagean philosophy that chance itself can give rise to music of value, & of course we also rejected any individualist or romantic idea of self-expression, or arriving at the essence of Freedom with a capital F, or any religious ideology.”<sup>16</sup> As Cutler explained to John Fordham in 1976, “[T]here’s no magical telepathy—the thing is very practical in that one is responding every second to the material situation being created by everyone else.”<sup>17</sup> They weren’t bonding directly through sound: those bonds were continually broken, strained, or revised by other players, the felicities of the instrument and audience, or the elaborative and disruptive potentials of tape. For Cutler and Hodgkinson in particular, this arrangement of forces interdicted the transparent assertion of individual identity—in the view they articulated at the time (and since), the group labored together on a collective sound instead of expressing their musical personalities in concert. In other words, they related to emerging material, not to each other.<sup>18</sup> Cutler explains, “There were certain things that certain people could be relied on to do at some point, but, in practice, I had no sense of person-

<sup>13</sup> Fred Frith, “Great Rock Solos of Our Time,” *New Musical Express*, October 12, 1974.

<sup>14</sup> Neil Sandford, in discussion with the author, Teddington, UK, April 24, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Fred Frith to Nick Wilton, January 6, 1981. I am grateful to Trond Einar Garmo for sharing a copy of this letter with me.

<sup>16</sup> Tim Hodgkinson notebook 7, 1975–76, n.p., Tim Hodgkinson personal collection.

<sup>17</sup> Fordham, “Not With a Mirror . . . But a Hammer,” 10.

<sup>18</sup> See Gary Peters, *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), especially chapter 2.

alities when it came to improvising in Henry Cow. I thought ‘guitar’ rather than ‘Fred,’ ‘organ’ rather than ‘Tim’—if I thought at all, or distinguished one sound from another. So, I knew that there was agency behind a sound, but that agency didn’t really appear to me as agency.”<sup>19</sup>

George E. Lewis has labelled this perspective “Eurological,” wherein purveyors of musical spontaneity divorced sound from the individual identity or taste that might have produced it.<sup>20</sup> Afrological improvisation, on the other hand, holds firm the connections between personal history and musical utterance, enabling an expansion of the self through sonic communication. Provided that it remains divorced from a normative expectation, and that its positions remain historically emergent rather than ethnically essential, Lewis’s analytical distinction can help clarify the somewhat surprising particularities of Henry Cow’s practice of improvisation and the challenges it posed, for one cannot consistently classify them at either of his heuristic poles. For example, although Lewis strongly asserts the importance of history and “cultural context” in Afrological modalities (while observing that Eurological composition attempts to erase both), Cutler (and, to be sure, Hodgkinson) *never* understood Henry Cow’s practice to be separated from the historical conjuncture that produced it. They discussed these social and cultural circumstances doggedly with each other and in the press. Furthermore, despite their suspicions of the link between sound and person, the group never expressed a wish for the “pure spontaneity” (and the blank slate necessary for it) that Lewis pins to the Eurological mode. In fact, they asserted the opposite in their persistent returns to different forms of repetition and the changing same. Their formative affinities for the Afro-diasporic genres of pop, rock, and jazz endured as cycles, vamps, and loops in their composed and improvised music. As in other Afrological approaches to improvisation, these repetitive techniques provided a springboard for invention.<sup>21</sup>

In his description of the field of “improvised music” that emerges in the 1970s, Lewis emphasizes the continuing salience of the Afrological in that field’s staging of intercultural encounter. In a quietly surprising turn, however, he shifts the Afrological’s manner of operation away from the reiterative announcement of a kind of personal truth and toward a more provisional imitation of some other form of subjectivity that can only be essayed through invention—a speculation or fictionalization, one might say. This shift has scarcely attracted notice. In improvised music, Lewis writes, the expansion of the self encompasses

<sup>19</sup> Chris Cutler, in discussion with the author, Croydon, UK, May 23, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> George E. Lewis, “Improvised Music After 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” in *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble, 131–62 (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004; originally published in 1996).

<sup>21</sup> James Snead, “On Repetition in Black Culture,” *Black American Literature Forum* 15, no. 4 (Winter 1981): 146–54.

“not only the formation of individual musical personality but the harmonization of one’s musical personality with social environments, both actual and possible.”<sup>22</sup> To harmonize one’s musical personality with an environment, the author implies, is to de-form it in concert with an emerging ensemble of forces, yet unknown: “The possibility of internalizing alternative value systems is implicit from the start. The focus of musical discourse suddenly shifts from the individual, autonomous creator to the collective—the individual as part of global humanity.”<sup>23</sup> Because of the value placed on self-narration in Afrological traditions, awareness of one’s own positionality in that music leads necessarily to the realization of other positions. Although Lewis doesn’t pursue this argument, one might conclude that an improviser who has internalized “an alternative value system” engages in something other than “self-expression.” But what does the “internalization” of another value system entail? And what is the nature of this otherness? The answer, as I hope to show in the rest of this essay, has less to do with the movement from one established subjectivity or position to another, and more to do with an otherness within the self that is revealed, worked on, and transformed through improvisation.

In his own view of jazz history, Cutler makes an argument similar to that of Lewis, but he substitutes externalization for Lewis’s internalization: “Well there’s this great lie that jazz—especially jazz—is about expressing yourself as if you were such great shakes that it mattered about you expressing yourself,” the drummer remarked in a 1980 interview.

What it’s really about is working in a group and about constructing music that’s got content—that’s got something to say. You are not the content. . . . It’s really not necessary either to show that you can really play properly or that you can play faster than anybody else or that you’ve got a really weird approach to your instrument or that in some way you’re unique. You really have to get over that—I mean that leads to jazz-rock really I think and it leads to the bad side of the jazz mentality. If you go back to the older jazz and the real jazzers like the Coltrane Quartet or even Sun Ra now, nobody’s expressing themselves in those groups—everybody is serving the music in a real sense because, after all, this is where music comes from.<sup>24</sup>

These real jazz musicians, for Cutler, succeeded because they humbled themselves and served the music as an external entity, rather than expressing their individuality from the inside out. This variety of self-abnegation, rooted for Cutler in Afrological musics, also differs dramatically from the Cagean model that figures so prominently in Lewis’s analysis. Cage’s sonic quietism aimed to ready the self for whatever sounds may come, while Cutler’s jazz improviser refuses

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, “Improvised Music After 1950,” 150.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis, “Improvised Music After 1950,” 150.

<sup>24</sup> Cutler, unpublished interview with Wilton.



the self to support an emerging musical totality that exceeds the contributions of its individual musicians, and de-forms their existing formations of personality.

Cutler continued, “If there’s any ontology it’s the ontology of a group of people—not the ontology of a single person and, in fact, precisely the way in which a group develops leads to . . . an approach to improvising which casual playing does not.”<sup>25</sup> In a permanent, ongoing group, Cutler reasoned, leadership is shared among all the members at different times, when an individual innovation passes into the “group ontology” to be taken up by others (and away from the momentary leader), only to turn around later and pull that original musician in a new direction. Born might interject a looping and diving bassline into a homeostatic texture by her colleagues, disrupting that balance in a manner that compels a response; when the response comes, in the form of syncopated chordal stabs on Hodgkinson’s organ, it might undergo further rhythmic alteration via a honking pattern in Cooper’s bassoon. The form of Born’s bassline, then, has proceeded quickly through a series of transformations and returned to her ears in a new shape. Such de/formations improvised by Henry Cow maintain the distinction between individual and group as well as the importance of a single musician’s distinctive contribution, but it can do so without recourse to the language of personal expression, authentic identity, or the truth of the self. When Cutler pulls a contact mic through a pile of chains and then routes that signal through an echo unit, the sound that results might express an agency, but it is not Cutler’s alone and its relationship to his personality is obscure at best.

Lewis critiques the Eurological dismissal of musical personality as one example of the false autonomy of post-Kantian aesthetics, quoting Rose Subotnik: “The recognition of validity in such a structure is not thought to depend on the particular identity, power, habits, or values of those who create or receive the structure in question. Rather, validity is supposed to inhere in the ability of a structure to carry out its own laws with consistency.”<sup>26</sup> Although these responses to the ideology of autonomy have carried great weight in music studies, Cutler and Hodgkinson’s scattered comments and writings on the matter of personality, identity, and self-expression illuminate another path that begins from a skepticism about identity rather than its affirmation. Like many marxist thinkers on aesthetics (most notably Theodor Adorno), they presumed that music, self, and society were inseparable—to investigate one was to investigate the others. The identities, powers, habits, and values of improvisers are never simply the inert conditions for a musical structure, but rather themselves undergo mediation through the collective and aesthetic process of creating that structure.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Cutler, unpublished interview with Wilton.

<sup>26</sup> Subotnik, quoted in Lewis, “Improvised Music After 1950,” 157.

<sup>27</sup> For more on music and social mediation in improvised contexts, see Georgina Born, “After Relational Aesthetics: Improvised Music, the Social, and (Re)Theorizing the Aes-

Consider the following exchange from a conversation among Cutler, Frith, and Hodgkinson that was recorded in 1988. On the matter of how an ongoing group arrangement transforms the subjectivities of its members, Cutler and Frith discover a certain ambivalence: each developed a new identity through his membership in Henry Cow, but one wished to escape it and one did not.

Cutler: Everybody that was in Henry Cow must have very particular memories of that experience—of being in a permanent group, living in each other’s pockets, day in and day out, year after year, and in fact all the various, peculiar permutations of the allegiances that were built up and broken. . . . This tiny little self contained world, in fact, where our internal differences and struggles seemed to be so important. . . . But that wasn’t actually quite something that one was glad to escape from. . . . Because by the time the group finished . . . , my experience . . . was very much that there was less and less of what I thought might be “me” left, and more and more of what the “I” that was the member of Henry Cow was, and needed to be, in the context of that group.

Frith: Absolutely. I had exactly the same . . . I mean, on the one hand, it was an umbrella from which one didn’t particularly want to escape, because it represented a certain weird kind of security, even in terms of having a group line. . . . It stopped me from thinking, because I became so, in a way, scared of taking part in discussions in the group that I was happier just to get the discussions over and decide what the line was, and then parrot it, because it was a way to exist. And then at the end of Henry Cow, realizing that was very shocking. I mean, for me, one of the most important reasons to stop it was because I was completely losing touch with my own thought processes, as if I was rejecting being in the group, while at the same time embracing its superficial aspect of security.<sup>28</sup>

After acknowledging the suffocations of collectivism and the pernicious distortions of personality that might result, Cutler clarified that his point was to open the question of individual identity and its many possible relations to a group identity. Frith’s memory of his Henry Cow experience, in contrast, seemed to close this question by detailing the displacement of his original identity by the logic of the group. “But the question I was really asking,” Cutler continued, “was: as a result of that, considering getting into a situation like that again—in other words, a permanent group—what kind of consciousness of the problems did you take with you? . . . What made it a thing worth doing again? And what precautions, or what lessons were learned from the old experience that you ap-

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thetic,” in *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics*, edited by Georgina Born, Eric Lewis, and Will Straw, 33–58 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> Chris Cutler, Fred Frith, and Tim Hodgkinson, unpublished conversation, 1988 (cassette in Chris Cutler personal collection).

plied in order to not have all that happen again? Or was it not a problem?" Hodgkinson replied:

The second part of those three or four questions is the easiest one, which is 'what makes it attractive to be in a permanent group?'—I mean, it seems to me absolutely clear that you get results through being in a permanent group that you can't get any other way. This is just clear. . . .

Frith: Yeah. I mean, there are things that you can do in rehearsal with a fixed number of people over a long-term period that can't be achieved any other way. . . . For me it [became] very clear [when] I was working with Massacre. . . . The biggest frustration with the group was that we could never actually work. The idea became that we would rehearse less and less and leave everything to the gig, and it became very lazy, so that what we had was only the energy of what we could put into the concert, but not the product of having worked before the concert.

Hodgkinson: Well yes—what you're presenting to people is yourself, your skills, your musical personality. And so much music is put together like that, I mean, the whole pressure is to be like that. Particularly, that's the way jazz works all the time, of course, but that penetrates rock music for economic reasons, because it's not economic to rehearse a lot; you should play a kind of music which can be thrown together quickly, and you know you're good — you know you can carry it off, you know people will like the way that you play, and that's the way it works, that's the pressure. . . . I think a group has this sort of dialectical relationship between a group and its music, that a group has to find its music, and you can't find the music unless you look for the music. Otherwise what's happening is just everybody's coming with their music.

Hodgkinson did not advance the familiar argument that improvisers only play what they know and therefore cannot create new music. Instead, he argued that social and economic conditions mitigated the radical potential of improvisation to generate new music, and, by extension, new identities. He puts forward the notion that musical individualism itself—"yourself, your skills, your musical personality"—can be the site of significant power relations. In a capitalist society entering its neoliberal stage, the ease with which a contingent group of improvisers could come together and "carry it off" communicates not simply their skill onstage, but their smooth insertion into existing socio-economic conditions, or the absence of a friction that would attend Hodgkinson's proper dialectic.

In the penetrating analysis of Henry Cow's demise that Hodgkinson wrote in 1981, he developed the same skepticism of identity; it is never a self-evident and transparent quality. "Persons have layered depths. You perceive them through time, layer after layer. For some closely guarded things you must wait

years for the rare crisis before truthful admission," he wrote.<sup>29</sup> Identity in a five-year-old group was a very different proposition from identity in a five-week-old one; improvisation could serve as one mode of relation through which to probe, over time, these "layered depths" of an individual identity.

Hodgkinson notes that the group began with white British men of a "largely intellectual middle-class background" who were in the process of being educated at Cambridge for the "professional and technical intelligentsia." For a communist intellectual committed to the radical transformation of society, the affirmation or assertion of this class identity was hardly a project to be celebrated—indeed, the telling of this "personal story" would iterate an ideological pattern of class, gender, and race domination. Instead, open improvisation presented opportunities to work on and revise a remnant identity from an unjust, dying world—"let ends begin," as Cutler wrote in the lyrics to one Henry Cow song. I take this kind of improvisational practice to be the rough correlate of disidentification. As Michel Pêcheux explains in his expansion of Louis Althusser, a subject relates to the hail of dominant or majoritarian ideology through one of three modalities.<sup>30</sup> The "good subject" answers the hail unproblematically, magically identifying with the ideological position that has been given to it. The "bad subject," on the other hand, turns against ideological evidentness and imagines itself to have escaped the snares of interpellation, even though its struggle has ultimately been determined by the lines of ideological control. Finally, the disidentifying subject uses the forms issued by ideology without identifying with them; its struggle is *inside* as well as *against*. In musical terms, I understand the good subject to be the idiomatic improviser, which "expresses itself" unproblematically in the pre-given terms of flamenco or Dixieland jazz; the bad subject pursues "non-idiomatic" improvisation, which it construes as a kind of utopian free relation of pure means. But the disidentificatory subject, in the words of José Muñoz, "tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form," which might include stylistic allusion and collision, repetition, and the employment of pre-written structures.<sup>31</sup>

As one mode of relation, improvised music-making could be a technique for attending to patterns of exchange in existing genre cultures such as rock, art music, and jazz, and renewing them through the dialectical process of developing a persistent collective art—that is, the play between de- and re-formation. And yet, Hodgkinson continues, just as individuals possess many levels of identity, they also relate to one another in many ways at once; improvised music-

<sup>29</sup> Tim Hodgkinson, draft introduction to *The Henry Cow Book*, 1981, Tim Hodgkinson personal collection.

<sup>30</sup> Michel Pêcheux, *Language, Semantics, and Ideology* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

<sup>31</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 12.

making is but one mode of relation in a concatenated ensemble that would also include collective work, language, and sex. He writes, “The way you become closer to this person itself becomes an unconscious structure. . . . [A]s we turn this way and that shifting our attention & our efforts from one thing to another those parts of ourselves left unattended continue to behave according to the pattern in which we left them.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, there exists a danger that a concentration on revolutionizing one’s practice in musical improvisation, for example, could cause one to neglect developing an alternative practice of friendship or love. The relationship of self and society might loosen in one domain while hardening in another. Krause expressed similar concerns about her marriage to bandmate Anthony Moore, telling two interviewers, “Although neither Anthony nor I wanted it, we just became victims of conditioning.”<sup>33</sup>

In Hodgkinson’s analysis, the implications of this multiplicity of social life—which surely bore the imprint of the feminism that that Caroline Ayerst brought to their marriage and Cooper brought to the band—assumed critical importance in the eventual dissolution of Henry Cow. The original Cambridge trio—Hodgkinson, Frith, Greaves—might have transformed their gender and class identities from a property for expression to a problem for investigation through musical improvisation, but those same identities endured in other aspects of their social lives. The decision to pursue artistic careers—not just in music, but *rock*—brought with it grave fear, owing in Hodgkinson’s view to the enormous pressure that their educational institutions and familial units placed upon them:

This parental and educational push towards certain social roles will be a constant pressure applied with an enormous variety of means, both subtle and crude. We begin to discover in our own lives that society has vast power and will stoop to almost anything to obtain the conformity of its members. So when the time comes to leave college we all feel guilty inside ourselves about being in a rock group instead of doing law or business.<sup>34</sup>

Compounding this class guilt, in his view, were their national and gender identities, which inhibited their patterns of emotional and verbal exchange and contributed to what we might call a hardened, confrontational contravivality. Hodgkinson writes, “[W]e have also learnt to repress emotion and to keep our distance from other people. This means we are unable to admit feelings of guilt or insecurity to one another, and so we forego the chance to share and understand them together. For these reasons our relationships begin from the start to

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<sup>32</sup> Hodgkinson, draft introduction to *The Henry Cow Book*.

<sup>33</sup> Dagmar Krause, quoted in Irene Krust and Malcolm Heyhoe, “Talking til the Henry Cow Comes Home,” *Liquorice* 6, June 1976, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Hodgkinson, draft introduction to *The Henry Cow Book*.

grow habits of deception, and we are all afraid of one another.”<sup>35</sup> Other members of the group, most notably Krause, shared such memories of the band’s emotional landscape, and Born described it as “a kind of distributed autism—attributable to no one in particular—in which the enormous intellectual and human potential of the individuals that composed it . . . were not matched by the quality of the encompassing everyday relationships across the (impossible) totality of The Group.”<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, Hodgkinson argued, the original core trio had all turned to marriage as their student days ended, “unable to face the fact of no longer belonging to an institution, and wishing, perhaps, to compensate for the disrespectability of being rock musicians.” When two of those unions disintegrated, they were unable to give or receive support to each other, not only because of their buttoned-up class, national, and gender identities, but also because bourgeois marriage had its own conservative expectations (about privacy and property) that came into conflict with the alternative modes of relation that the band adopted once they grew more serious about their collective work. Moreover, at least one member of Henry Cow—Cooper, a lesbian and radical feminist—cared little for the social institutions that some of the men were struggling to escape. “Unlike a lot of women, I never had all this love and marriage business instilled into me, which I’m very grateful for,” she explained in an interview at the time. “[Yet] unlike a lot of other revolutionary analyses, feminist politics have got to deal with love because, I mean, the basis of women’s oppression is to do with their relationship with men, although it’s obviously economic oppression as well. It does get right to the heart of relationships between people.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, at one point later in the band’s years, Cooper would voice a concern that the band’s “means and relations of production” were increasingly reproducing those of bourgeois culture, by which she meant they were just writing music privately, then bringing it into the group and telling the others what to do.<sup>38</sup>

As middle-class English men aged, Hodgkinson averred, intimacy was understood to be a thing shared with a domestic spouse to the exclusion of all others: in his words, “You are either young enough to have close friends, or you are ‘having a relationship’ with someone.” In an environment of circumscribed intimacies, “one problem for groups, then, is that members are ‘attached’ without having a ready-made language with which to handle their attachment.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Hodgkinson, draft introduction to *The Henry Cow Book*.

<sup>36</sup> Georgina Born, liner notes to *Henry Cow Fortieth-Anniversary Box Set*, Recommended Records, 2008, 2:39 (hereafter *NCFABS*)

<sup>37</sup> Lindsay Cooper, quoted in Malcolm Heyhoe and Irena Krumb, “Talking Till the Henry Cow Comes Home,” *Liquorice*, June 1976, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Henry Cow meeting minutes, June 28, 1977, Tim Hodgkinson personal collection.

<sup>39</sup> Hodgkinson, draft introduction to *The Henry Cow Book*.

I believe Hodgkinson implicitly refers to collective, open improvisation when he writes about the apparent naturalness of the emotionally stunted conditions created by English men in a capitalist society: “Only when people attempt a different type of relationship, based on a mutual recognition of individual equality and uniqueness, does it begin to seem extraordinary.” Indeed, he even characterizes the group as a “refuge” in its early days. “In the act of playing together, particularly of performing together, we find a way of relating to each other which is warm and inclusive without demanding the truth from any of us. We differ in the degree of our individual alienation from the wider society, but, through listening to, playing, and talking about music, we find a relieving sense of community.”<sup>40</sup> In a similar vein, Cutler has written that the band’s improvisations “evolved wordlessly and without conflict—as if they belonged to another version of ourselves, more harmonious in spirit.”<sup>41</sup> Playing, then, allowed the Cows to refuse their existing identities and collaborate on something yet unknown, even as the existing and the known continued to assert itself offstage.

The problem of identities—how and when to shake free of old ones, how and where they channel interactions, how to forge new ones, collectively—thus crawled across musical and social domains. Although Hodgkinson’s analysis of this problem remained a private document, my own conversations with band and crew members suggest a widely shared agreement in general terms: the emotional landscape of day-to-day work often grew bleak indeed, but the improvised music rarely suffered, at least not until the final few months. Cooper, for example, effused about the “absolutely wonderful, all-embracing, and extraordinary” experience of touring to a journalist many years later, but also acknowledged the cost of living as though “everything must be called into question, examined, experimented with, changed.” The failures of some of those experiments (or the defeat of the experimenters) produced what Cooper called “the walking wounded. ...I would place Henry Cow squarely in that tradition.”<sup>42</sup> Cutler told the same interlocutor, “It was hard, it was Hell, but a lot of the time it was wonderful. We did things, and were satisfied with the results. The principle was that ‘an unexamined life is not worth living,’ and we were living absolutely 160 percent, and examining most things most of the time. We would go on tour with wives, partners, children. It could be totally chaotic, because the social relations were quite strange.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Hodgkinson, draft introduction to *The Henry Cow Book*.

<sup>41</sup> Cutler, liner notes to *HCFABS*, 1:9. One might quibble with the phrase “without conflict,” since the staging of musical conflict was something that Henry Cow excelled at, as Cutler himself writes in *HCFABS*, 1:9.

<sup>42</sup> Patrick Wright, “Resist Me. Make Me Strong,” *The Guardian Weekend*, November 11, 1995, 41.

<sup>43</sup> Wright, “Resist Me. Make Me Strong,” 41.

Hodgkinson's point, however, was that Henry Cow experimented in some domains of the creative life while remaining inattentive and nonexperimental in others. Such contradictions mark all cultural politics. For example, many readers will have already arrived at the observation that the opportunity to pull apart one's identity or to refuse some aspects of it accrues to whiteness as an aspect of privilege. Mutatis mutandis, Lewis has offered such an analysis of the downtown New York scene, where critics celebrated the stylistic mobility of white improvisers (i.e., John Zorn), while withholding similar praise for their black confreres (i.e., Anthony Braxton).<sup>44</sup> Although one would wish to account for how the diversities of class background, gender, and sexuality inflected the work of whiteness in this setting, the members of Henry Cow did enact this ambivalent politics: stretching to investigate the power that was sedimented in habit and personality, they exerted a different aspect of that same power. Beyond noting the sense of this critique, and my own agreement with it, I am unclear where else such an analysis might take us. But in his discussion of what I would label as the speculative or fictive dimension of improvised music, Lewis also suggests a different, more surprising, unsettling, and promising line of inquiry into the formation and de-formation of musical personality. Although the Afrological holds firm a connection to memory and taste in contrast to the myth of pure spontaneity, the history that is invoked is always already broken, one of "the destruction of family and lineage, the rewriting of history and memory in the image of whiteness."<sup>45</sup> One might say that the very cohesion of personal history that the Afrological wishes to express is that which has only been withheld or taken from it. The broken origin of personhood must be continually improvised anew.<sup>46</sup> This line finds additional momentum and acceleration in Fred Moten's meditations on a blackness defined not by its aspirational relationship to personhood, but rather as the anti-foundational condition of (white) personhood's existence. For Moten, normative personhood itself is a specialized form of life that one might not have a claim to or a desire for.<sup>47</sup>

What kind of methodological position could emerge from the act of stepping away from the choice to assert or to disassemble subjectivity, when subject-

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<sup>44</sup> George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); see also Tim Lawrence, "Pluralism, Minor Deviations, and Radical Change: The Challenge to Experimental Music in Downtown New York, 1971–85," in *Tomorrow Is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies*, ed. Benjamin Piekut, 63–85 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> Lewis, "Improvised Music After 1950," 149.

<sup>46</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>47</sup> Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 737–80; thanks to Marcus Boon for pointing me to this text.



tivity is understood to be something “that the black cannot have but by which the black can be had; a structural position that he or she cannot take but by which he or she can be taken”?<sup>48</sup> That path, I believe, leads to an improvisation of fictiveness and fabulation, where telling a story in sound about the truth of the self is the same as telling a lie. To improvise is to lie, or to tell the truth about a lie, or to expose the lie of the true self.<sup>49</sup> The Afrological and the Eurological are less opposed approaches to spontaneity than they are tightly braided pathways—complementary, contravivial, but still asymmetrical—around this shared truth illuminated by the ontological demands of blackness. The self that might be given away or denied through Eurological improvisation can make no rightful claim to an origin, because it is the product of a historical and ontological system that precedes and exceeds it, a system that founds white selfhood on the denial of black humanity.<sup>50</sup> By contrast, the self that is asserted in Afrological improvisation is already an unstable one bearing the contradictions of double consciousness. For white improvisers (like Henry Cow) seeking to strip away the power relationships sedimented in their identities, it would seem that the Afrological mode harbors the possibility of loosening up these reifications, while the Eurological can do little more than attempt to forget them.

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<sup>48</sup> Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness,” 749.

<sup>49</sup> See Tracy McMullen, “Subject, Object, Improv: John Cage, Pauline Oliveros, and Eastern (Western) Philosophy in Music,” *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* 6, no. 2 (2010), <http://www.criticalimprov.com/article/view/851/1918> (accessed June 29, 2017); see also Vijay Iyer, “Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation,” in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, edited by Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin, 393–403 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>50</sup> Nahum Dimitri Chandler, “Originary Displacement,” *boundary 2* 27, no. 3 (2000): 249–86. I am grateful to Fumi Okiji for directing me to this essay and for explicating its stakes in her chapter, “Double Consciousness and the Critical Potential of Black Expression,” in *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

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