

WILD POP LORE:
MATERIAL SELF-
MYTHOLOGY
THROUGH
DISMANTLED
PERFORMANCE IN
PURSUIT OF THE
IMPOSSIBLE

Gustav Thomas

Wild Pop was initially conceived as a term that avoids using the word 'improvisation' to denote musical performance that is neither composed nor rehearsed (made up on the spot) while acknowledging the centrality of pop (a pop sensibility, pop's aesthetics) to the majority of music as it is most widely consumed. Wild Pop's primary distinction from other improvised forms is its commitment to make the final version as if a final version in the moment of its inception; to make definitive performative statements without preconception, planning or rehearsal..

conditions of the hackneyed performative surface:

Too hard the rigidity of stark borders unseen by actual eyes and thus made more visible in their hidden im/materiality. My dislodged head looms poised but put back wrong so that the senses upset and entangle so far unproductively - or is that an encumbered aural myopia? Yet the sudden detachment allows me to clearly the interfering fronds that barb flight, impeding evacuation.

The experience of music for most people is one that is defined by order and formality; a pursuit that filters out the messier, truer elements of human interaction, projecting an idealized intersubjectivity in a way that cannot fail to also project certain (generally dominant) ideological fabrications. Music as most people – including performers - know it is something that regulates and normalizes how people think of themselves, other people, and the world as a w/hole.

In an essay from 1968 Amiri Baraka coined a term which has become very important to me with regard to how I see myself as both artist and academic, and which I first encountered in an article by Nathaniel Mackey: ‘Find the self, then kill it.’ The whole passage reads like this:

The emphasis on self-expression in [Baraka’s] work is also an emphasis on self-transformation, an othering or, as [Kamau] Brathwaite has it, an X-ing of the self, the self not as noun but verb. Of the post-bop innovations of such musicians as Albert Ayler and Sun Ra, he writes: “New Black Music is this: Find the self, then kill it.”¹

Latterly, in an essay published in 2017’s *Black & Blur*, Fred Moten suggests:

The question, whose answer inhabits the not-in-between... concerns the irruptive placement... of the outside... (to what endures of the object’s disruptive anticipation of itself, to the commodity that screams its fetish character and the whole of its secret against the [deafness of the] proper).²

... find the self then kill it combined with an irruptive placement of the outside as a strategy to breach the deafness of the proper have become key imperatives for one aspect of Wild Pop in its practical application, those that deal in the unfastening of formal binds in received and imposed protocols for music's performance, driven by a desire to dismantle some of the cultural and institutional regulation of individual character that music has been b(r)ought to bear. While Moten's enigmatic juxtaposing of seemingly familiar terms and tropes can be understood to advocate the kind of dismantling of formal protocol Wild Pop advocates, Baraka's injunction remains both impenetrable and loaded.

Baraka's allusion to Albert Ayler and Sun Ra isn't casual; what distinguished them from their fellow adventurers in 1960s Jazz (extending the expressive parameters of the socio-vernacular immediacy of a Jazz revolutionized by new freedoms illuminated by Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman) was their incorporation and embrace of infectiously spontaneous accessibility. Sun Ra took the pop song and exploded it across, and beyond, wider frames in a way that made it seem inevitable and irresistible at the same while simultaneously using such irresistibility to fire a fantastical, interplanetary self-mythology; Albert Ayler injected and inflected often well-known popular tunes with the vitality of anguish and keening desperation particular to the African-Diasporic experience, before dismantling and reassembling them, such that their emotional tenor was stripped to the raw, allowing melodies often hackneyed by over-familiarity to truly sing out.

conditions for the release of militant seed:

To unfasten the chords. To burn the trains. To bomb the suburbs. To dismantle the subject. To reverse the tune into the assailant without causing actual bodily harm. [Or yes, depending on the context]. To charm fumes from steel. To sting each leg of constriction with the grooves of escape. To overcome the master, and to deadvocate the overlord.

It's surprising to consider the extent to which critical and historical writing discusses the recorded work of any improvising performer without considering its status as stand-alone commodity (vinyl albums) severed from its point of origin. And yet for the majority of people who are, or have ever been, affected by the music of artists that made a point of prioritizing improvisation, it's through listening to albums they'll have mostly experienced them. What a recording can do, with its performer absent, is establish a self-proliferating mythology around the artist, in so far as the recording becomes a reductive idealisation of expression wholly detached from its creator; while such mythologies extend and elaborate upon the being of a living artist, in the case of the deceased such self-proliferation can obviously be limitless, with the artist themselves no longer able to shape it. Of course, recordings themselves bear witness to mortality, and every recording artist must intuitively understand that their recordings are not only conceived/received as emissions of spatial absence but also a temporal one when they are no longer alive. Because recording and record production are perpetually considered as means to ends rather than ends in themselves, it's easy to overlook the implications of this.

Pop musicians have, of course, traditionally embraced and exploited recording's capacity to facilitate self-mythology but usually in order to fabricate an idealized version of an invented or dramatically enhanced personality often only tenuously based on 'who they really are.'

Few recording artist-popstars have used self-mythology as a means to unfasten representational illusion in order to undermine the kind of stereotypical imagery that popstars generally also reinforce (two favourite examples, which I write about elsewhere, are Kate Bush (on *The Dreaming*) and Nicki Minaj (on *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded*)). Such stereotypical imagery in turn can be seen to reinforce ruling ideologies that favour a perception of xenophobia, sexism, misogyny and homophobia as fundamentally ‘normal’ (as if because “that’s how everything thinks, really...” – Trump “tells it how it is” and so on). As consumers of recorded music we have tended to accept too readily that an artist’s album is somehow an honest version of the ‘truth,’ which is to say we are seduced into buying into a nexus of myths, which in turn makes us forego a realistic identification with the work’s essence, which embodies, among other things, agency – one’s own capacity to act, to agitate, to interrupt and to intervene. Thus we become accustomed to accepting utterly fantastical and mendacious constructions as ‘normal,’ furnishing an ethical space for the acceptance of atrocity.

But normal is one of the weirdest concepts. Who wants to be normal? ... and yet who doesn’t fear being deemed abnormal, subject to, as D Ferrett suggests, ‘the threat of exile from civility and of being branded with an abject “bastard” status’? Such unspoken rhetorical questions leave little room for deviation or diversion. Which is why Fred Moten’s ‘not-in-between’ is so useful; Moten’s term resonates with Ferrett’s deployment of zero as the condition for potentially an ‘irruptive placement... of the outside’:

On each breath, [zero] opens an ever-expanding black hole within itself that is the space and time of unbound desire. Cutting ties with the limelight, zero cultivates movements in the dark that cannot be mapped as ‘progress’ on a linear time line, nor approved or charted by the makers of his-stories. Zero is the beginning of a mobilization that is the dark music practice of another space and time. ⁴

Crucially Ferrett describes a ‘movement’ that explodes within, dismembering illusory artifice while ‘cutting ties with the limelight’ and mobilizing a ‘dark music practice’ within the performative frame of a pop sensibility where the personality and image of the performer is integral to how the music is projected and received (as opposed to the notion the performing musician seeks to remain invisible through “interpreting” the superior “voice” of the composer-genius). It is this not-in-between zero condition that allows a self-fictionalizing mythology to take hold. To respond to the challenge that recording sets the performer by recognizing its status as historical inscription allows you to inhabit that mechanism and take control of it in order to dissemble it – the performer being as much an integral component in the mechanism as anything else.

tangled resistance:

We were trying to defuse the libidinal gust of dissuasion that had followed us in from the pub. That’s how it looked, but we’d not been near the pub all day. And we were bent up to it. I couldn’t believe it when you jumped because the leap was utterly imperceptible - no one saw it; all they heard was the reconfiguration of a surface that until then had been masquerading as part of the institutional infrastructure: chain of command.

To enter the space of performance possessed with a zero/not-in-between condition and a conviction to yield irresistible commodity that resists mechanisms of constriction and control: to recognize both the fallacy of one’s sense-of-self and the urgency of an historical inscription (recording musical expression) that can’t afford the deferment inherent in planning and rehearsal. In order to succeed, such undertaking requires a level of commitment that will appear reckless to those unaccustomed to interrogating the context of their awareness and sense-of-self. Peter Sloterdijk talks of *Seinvergessenheit*:

As long as intelligence is sealed up in banality, people are not interested in their place, which seems given; they fix their imaginations on the ghost lights that appear to them in the form of names, identities and business. What recent philosophers have termed forgetfulness of being [Seinvergessenheit] is most evident in an obstinate willful ignorance of the mysterious place of existence. The popular plan to forget both oneself and being is realized through a deliberate nonawareness of the ontological situation. ⁵

So the self that must be found is the forgotten one: its 'killing' facilitates a fictionalizing of one's existence through the self-mythology of recording and creates the context for the material manifestation of the imagined and the fantastical, as-if-for-real, because ultimately the commodity makes it real. Sloterdijk talks of 'people' and 'they', their 'obstinacy' and 'willful ignorance', as if he can speak from a context that isn't inextricably connected to all of the infinitely interwoven mechanisms that precipitate the conditions for the scenario he describes. There's no "natural" reason why the reportorial vocabulary of mass consumption should be de facto banal... besides, consumerist culture very often isn't banal.

The pared down topology (what it boils down to) is this: there always has to be something arresting about any commodity that grabs an individual's attention and coerces them into parting with their waged gains; how that is achieved is, more frequently than not, through an alchemy of illusions, obfuscations and deceptions which by extension accumulatively engender just such a Seinvergessenheit. In the case of music, however (and here we're mostly talking pop, in the broadest sense, i.e. anything "commercial", including "underground" "alternatives") an element of perceived spontaneity is crucial in creating an impression of the moment of hearing-listening's capture as indispensable and irresistible.

Recording without preparing content or substance, entering the performative space as zero, as not-in-between, means that the historical inscription committed and carried out can only be literally spontaneous. To then seize the opportunity to use performance itself as the vehicle for self-mythology provides the space for some kind of terrible apocalypse: self-sacrifice as spiritual release. And of course it's impossible to really pull off; which in turn provides the best reason to pursue it.

irresistible exile:

It can only be an exercise in dismantlement from the moment of departure up to the point of origin. Rihanna just left the building and we all ran after her with the ribbons of our tape cassettes glistening the breeze as every local and migrating bird took off to bend the mercurial melisma of our flight.

Gustav Thomas is one of many identities assumed by the person whose administrative-civilian name is William Edmondes, a private individual who lectures in music at Newcastle University. As a performing and recording artist he works in a number of collaborative contexts as well as solo under the name Gwilly Edmondez; current projects include Fast Loser (with Laura 'Late-Girl' Garcia & Tobias Illingworth), KleeveX (with Faye MacCalman), Impossibility Knox (with Odie Ji Ghast) , Leap Wars (with Dallas Boner) and the electronic noise-pop duo YEAH YOU (with Elvin Brandhi).

Gustav grew up in Bridgend, South Wales, in a socio-economic environment whose atmosphere of subtly anarcho-cynical disaffection and detachment from mainstream British life was essential to his accidental discovery of totally improvised rock at the age of 13, recording some 90 albums with his band Radioactive Sparrow between 1980 and 2003. Initially studying art at Howard Gardens, Cardiff, Gustav/Gwilly went on to study music and composition formally at Cardiff University (with Anthony Powers), Kings, London (with Robert Keeley) and York (with Bill Brooks), joining the faculty at Newcastle in 2004. At Newcastle Will has taught non-notated and recorded composition, free music, and historical options in Hip Hop, post-WW2 Jazz and hardcore popular subcultures. In 2011 he founded Felt Beak, a loose affiliation of Newcastle-based improvisors and noise musicians posting free album downloads to a tumblr account alongside the Felt Beak vimeo. An associate of The Old Police House, Gateshead, since 2017, Gwilly has also performed and/or recorded with (among many others) Michael Fischer, Pat Thomas, Valerie Pearson, Rhodri Davies, People Like Us (Vicki Bennett), Lauren Kinsella, Marie Thompson, THF Drenching, Hugh Metcalfe, James Joys and Caroline Pugh. Recent releases are available through Slip Imprint, Opal Tapes, Alter and Chocolate Monk (among others).

Links:

<https://gwillyedmondez.bandcamp.com>

<https://vimeo.com/feltbeak>

<https://vimeo.com/yeahyou>

<http://felt-beak.tumblr.com/>

Notes:

1) Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (Cambridge University Press; 1993) p. 275

2) Fred Moten, *Black & Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017) pp. 2-3

3)

D Ferrett, Bridget Hayden & Gustav Thomas, 'weaving intuitive illegitimate improvisation', *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* Vol. 14, No. 1 (2018) p. 90

4) *ibid.* p. 91

5) Peter Sloterdijk - *Spheres. Volume 1: Bubbles. Microspherology* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011) p. 27