

Breaking Down the Fourth Wall—Again

by Andrew Cappetta

Even as Fluxus has become one of the major touchstones for art's post-disciplinary, performative, and participatory present, resulting in its institutional and art-historical legitimation in recent years (witness the recent show at the Grey Art Gallery, and strong presences at MoMA and Performa 11), its absurdist, genre-bending legacy is still very much alive in underground music venues. At the two-day Minor Musics Japan concert at ISSUE Project Room this past September, Takahiro Kawaguchi and Taku Unami (in a duo with Annette Krebs) proved that, although it is now a well-defined genre, experimental music in the Cagean vein has not become overly stylized and mannered. Ironically, it is in its theatricality (which is often aligned with stylization and mannerism) that experimental music has managed to stave off becoming a series of rote gestures.

Kawaguchi began his set by spreading a variety of objects before him on a tabletop, a common sight at most electro-acoustic improvisation (E.A.I.) performances, in which sounds are elicited from a variety of musical and non-musical objects laid out before the performer. The lights were turned down, and Kawaguchi used a small lamp to light his work space, turning the table into a small stage. He began by working with a small motor, possibly from a fan. When a small metal ball was placed on the magnetized spinning shaft, it clung to the surface, making a slight shuffling sound as it jostled around. Small pieces of theater like this, common to much E.A.I., are indebted to a host of experimental music luminaries (Keith Rowe, Lionel Marchetti and Jérôme Noetinger, Kevin Drumm), but there was something distinctly visual and, moreover, sculptural in the way that Kawaguchi worked with objects, reminiscent of the small-scale theatrical work of Stuart Sherman. Other moments in the set confirmed this attitude towards performance. At one point, Kawaguchi began to pull a seemingly endless supply of egg timers from a bag, setting them down across the table and then onto the floor into a linear formation; the repetitive setting of the timers along with their slowly accumulating clicks created a sonic presence as well as a physical one. Once the clicks of the timers subsided, Kawaguchi's performance turned dramatic, as he switched on a light and a leaf-blower: the latter filled a large plastic bag roughly the size of the performer, and the former was a small green laser that reflected off a rotating compact disc and streaked across the walls of the performance space.



Whether or not he is directly indebted to Fluxus, Kawaguchi's spectacle of small means certainly owes its existence to the movement; after all, Fluxus figurehead George Maciunas used the blanket term "theater" to describe most Fluxus productions, regardless of the medium. But while the theatrical aspect of Fluxus is alive and well in the space of musical performance, it has been decidedly removed in its historicization in the art museum. In 2009, the Museum of Modern Art acquired the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, one of the foremost collections of works, multiples, and prints related to the movement. Since that coup, the museum has placed a number of pieces from the collection on view, including three performances/performative stagings of works by Alison Knowles, Ben Vautier, and Yoko Ono. While the Knowles and Vautier pieces were performed by the artists (and in the case of Knowles, with the participation of the audience), Ono's "Voice Piece for Soprano" (1961) was presented within the gallery proper, in the museum's large atrium where viewers (and, on occasion, Ono herself) were invited to use a microphone to perform the score, which was screenprinted upon the gallery wall. The piece instructs participants to "Scream. 1. against the wind 2. against the wall 3. against the sky"; every 10 minutes or so, a

cry would shudder through the building, even penetrating distant parts of the museum.

Although it successfully captured the piece's participatory aspect, the installation on the whole missed the mark. In MoMA's re-staging, one key thing was missing, something which cannot be recreated by MoMA or any other art institution: the theatrical context of music, in which an audience is faced with the unexpected. This non-gallery context also offers a less autonomous (and less safe) space for the work, in which an audience can have almost as much agency as the performer.

The postmodern museum has become a space where anything can become sacred—from the shocking to the banal. In this context, the toughness of the original musical context, the response that something like Fluxus or Cage was first accorded, is lost. It is true that this argument can be made for any other once-avant-garde art form once it has become accepted, whether *The Rite of Spring*, "Dejeuner sur l'herbe," or "Anarchy in the UK," but the possibility for audience reaction and even antagonism still exists within the space of musical performance.

A number of experimental musicians in recent years have been trying to uncover these codes of live musical performance, emphasizing the performative aspect of live music over sound itself. In his duo with Annette Krebs at Minor Musics Japan, Taku Unami broke the performer/audience barrier with subtle humor. While Krebs worked furiously between her laptop and guitar, weaving together snippets of dialogue, static, and guitar notes, Unami took to constructing instruments from cardboard boxes, brooms, and string. He then enlisted audience members to perform with these mock instruments while he sat amongst the crowd, playing the role of an audience member, even making a comment about the performance from his seat. A simple gimmick, Unami's role-reversal spoke deeply of the expectations thrust onto both the performer and the audience.



In a recent performance, Sergei Tcherepnin also made these normally masked codes visible. As part of the exhibition *A Form Is Simply Something Which...* at Murray Guy Gallery, Tcherepnin presented "Giving Rein," an 18-channel piece in which the artist used transducers, placing them on a variety of surfaces including pieces of cardboard and sheet metal, transforming these objects into speakers. The speakers emitted short electronic phrases and pulses and, in many ways, the sound was not important; rather, it was used to condition the audience to a particular mode of reception. The audience gathered in one of the gallery's two spaces. The room was filled with a variety of materials standing up and strewn across the floor. Speaker wires connected to transducers also littered the space, sometimes placed behind objects or even hung from ceiling fixtures and pipes. In a seemingly random manner, different musical motifs began playing from select transducers; Tcherepnin would then set each of them onto one of the materials, creating a surface onto which the



sound could project. Sometimes he manipulated the material in a sculptural manner, transforming the sound. Given the lack of organization of the space, he would at times have to go searching for the sound, digging through leaves of cardboard, or reaching up to the ceiling to grab the speaker. Given the small space, his performance at times required the assistance of the audience, who held cables or held up pieces of material. Although not directly participatory, "Giving Rein" highlighted the typical conditions of performance and how, in this instance, the audience has to break out of their expected roles in order for the performer to complete the piece.

Whereas Unami and Tcherepnin playfully highlight the unspoken codes of musical performance, resulting in works of ambiguous politics, Basque musician Mattin takes a directly critical stance in his pieces. In the past few years, he has developed a distinctive practice that some have likened to institutional critique—a branch of conceptual art that creates situations in which the infrastructure of art institutions is made visible. At a gallery performance in November, Mattin began by standing silently before the audience until the crowd quieted down, realizing that a performer was on "stage." He held this silence to a point of discomfort. Then after 10 minutes (which felt like 30), he calmly posed the question, "Do you think things are going to change if you stand still like this?" While speaking, Mattin clenched his fists, heightening the intimidating nature of his demand. The silence remained, only punctuated by occasional statements, such as "You seem like a negative version of the people's mic."

The performance was held only one week after Zuccotti Park had been cleared out. The day before the performance, Mattin had visited the park and participated in a meeting featuring the well-known tool of the people's mic, in which the audience takes an active role by amplifying the voice of whoever is speaking. In addition, in any meeting related to Occupy Wall Street that uses a horizontal structure, any one participant can speak and be amplified; anyone can lead the group. In a performance space, things are far different, with the audience rendered inactive. But at Mattin's gallery show, at the point of what seemed like unbearable tension, everything began to unravel. Audience members felt provoked and began to take control. One spat beer onto the audience and fell to the floor in dramatic protest. Some stood beside or in front of Mattin, taking on the role of performer too. Others bombarded him with questions, while some began to take control of aspects of the performance; one audience member began to turn lights on and off, while another began to set a time for the completion of the piece. Agonizing, antagonizing, yes, but Mattin's incredibly theatrical gesture boldly reveals the mechanism of the performance space and makes the audience aware of the preconditioned role it unconsciously adopts: The performer is in control, a fascist, and the audience is his or her passive flock that both holds the performer in high regard and has a host of expectations for the performer that go unvoiced. Mattin afforded us, the audience, the opportunity to stage an insurrection, but we had to find it in ourselves to do so.

In many ways, Unami's, Tcherepnin's, and Mattin's performances are resisting the polite, accepting attitude most experimental music audiences adopt, an attitude that has crept into the space of music from the space of the museum. Part of the unique experience of live music is the active role that an audience can take; consider the frenetic activity at a punk show, or even the far less physical (but no less powerful) booing of a performance. This level of activity is still possible. This particular relationship between audience and performer is not a relic of the past but rather, as witnessed by the examples I've presented, part of the nature of musical performance. This highly charged environment of musical performance, in which performer and audience are on a slightly more level ground, is missing not only in Fluxus recreations at museums, but even in avant-garde music venues. In order for experimentation in music to continue to flourish, the audience must relinquish their position as passive listeners/viewers and revive their role as active participants.

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