

# **Sounds Flush with the Real: Mixed Semiotic Strategies in Post-Cagean Musical Experimentalism**

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“the word ‘experimental’ is apt, providing it is understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure, but simply as of an act the outcome of which is unknown.”

—John Cage, “Experimental Music: Doctrine,” in *Silence* (1961, 13)

—quoted in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* ([1977] 1983, 371n)

When beginning to think about the relation between experimental music and the thought of Gilles Deleuze, this quotation seems to be a natural starting point. In Deleuze and Guattari’s affirmation of this phrase from John Cage they suggest a resonance between music and philosophy: in both fields the experimental approach entails a dismantling of predetermining codes and hierarchies, and with this arises the opportunity for an open-endedness that accommodates singular events and encounters. This understanding of experimentation, however, is not as transparent as it seems. In the context of the uptake and critique of Deleuzian ideas in the theorisation of music and sound, as well as recent re-evaluations of the milieu of “experimental music,” critics have argued that a range of normative demands, ideological assumptions, and metaphysical reductions undermine the purported freedoms of both Cagean and Deleuzian experimentalism.

Here I can only deal with a small aspect of the wide historical and theoretical problem this involves; but in short my aim is to begin to construct a means through which Deleuze and Guattari’s thought can be used to help us examine some strategies that composers and performers in post-Cagean musical experimentalism developed to navigate around the demands, assumptions, and reductions of Cage’s thought. With

these strategies these composers practically anticipated the more recent critical discourse on Cage. With a focus on the democratic music-making and collective listening practices of Pauline Oliveros, I will draw on Deleuze and Guattari's notions of mixed semiotics and the collective assemblage of enunciation to highlight the importance to musical experimentalism of accommodating a plurality of sign regimes and in construing subjectivity as a practical, socially-embedded production. This will provide a sketch of a means of engagement between Deleuze-Guattari and musical experimentalism that is somewhat different from some of the most prominent contemporary approaches, opening up the Cage-Deleuze notion of experimentation to practices and modes of subjectivity it has been shown to have a tendency to occlude or exclude. To begin I will outline some aspects of the ongoing critical challenge to Cagean and Deleuzian experimentalism.

### **Challenging Cagean and Deleuzian experimentalism**

The musical-philosophical experimentalism suggested in the conjunction between Cage and Deleuze-Guattari remains prominent today in what has been called "Deleuzian sound studies." Deleuze's thought has been widely presented as a means for getting around closures inherent in widespread practices of cultural theory, as when Christoph Cox speaks of his sonic materialism going "beyond representation and signification" (2011), or when Bernd Herzogenrath demands a break with the "metaphysics of being, representation, and identity" (2017, 3). The premise here is that the methods of the mainstream of cultural theory are inadequate to deal with music, sound, and noise.

From this perspective to concern ourselves with semiotics could seem outdated, and both Cox and Herzogenrath suggest that semiotics, the study of the work of signs, can depict the material reality of sound in only a secondary, representational way (Cox 2018, 15; Herzogenrath 2017, 3). Here, however, I will suggest the importance of a pluralistic sense of semiotics intrinsic to Deleuze and Guattari's thought. This will offer the beginnings of a response to the significant line of critique that has followed this engagement between Deleuze and music, stemming from Brian Kane's influential analysis of what he termed "Deleuzian sound studies": Kane's argument is that this line of research, with its focus on the nature or ontology of sound, does not go "beyond" representation and signification but rather fails to account for them, neglecting how

sound as an object of study is inextricably bound up in historical, cultural, and institutional formations (Kane 2015, 15–16).

The sound theorists Annie Goh (2017) and Marie Thompson (2017) have also made significant contributions to this line of critique, both separately taking Cox to task for failing to account for the cultural and political contingency of given epistemological situations. Their argument that Cox’s sonic materialism risks rendering invisible the racialised and gendered characteristics of our discourses on sound is directly relevant to Cagean experimentalism. Of particular focus in the critical discourse on Cage, as seen in work by George E. Lewis (1996), Lydia Goehr (2016), and Benjamin Piekut (2012), among others dating back to the 1960s, has been the pairing in Cage’s thought of a metaphysical elevation of “sound-in-itself” and a subjective reification of an idealised performer and listener, stripped of social particularity.

A constant refrain of Cage’s was to “let sounds be themselves” (1961, 10), an ostensibly inclusive call to allow any sound event to enter into musical contexts. Yet for Cage this call put stringent demands on the performer: to “let go of his feelings, his taste, his automatism, his sense of the universal, not attaching himself to this or to that, leaving by his performance no traces, providing by his actions no interruption to the fluency of nature” (Cage 1961, 39). The focus on sound necessitates a thoroughgoing evacuation of subjectivity, and the exclusion of any features of individual personality. Lewis (1996) has acutely highlighted how this plays out in Cage’s “indeterminacy” entailing the othering and exclusion of jazz improvisation (99–100), with jazz improvisation’s “welcoming of agency, social necessity, personality, and difference, as well as its strong relationship to popular and folk cultures” (110) seemingly disqualified by Cage.

The critical literature on Cage consistently stresses that the attempt to extract sound from the social can only obscure and reaffirm the social dynamics and power relations of musical practices. With the emancipation of sound comes a silencing of the social.<sup>1</sup> This, then, is the same shape that the critique of “Deleuzian sound studies” put forward by Kane, Goh, and Thompson takes. From a certain perspective theorists like Cox are doubtlessly right to stress that a relegation of the determining role of the human subject (2018, 4), a “desubjectivation” of sorts (40), is crucial to Deleuze’s thought, as

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<sup>1</sup> Also see here Kahn (1999, 165) and Joseph (2016, 187).

seen in the careful reflections on “subjectification” in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 127–34), and that this notion offers much to our understanding of how sound has been dealt with in contexts of musical experimentalism. What I will suggest ahead, however, is that this cannot entail a return to anything like a presubjective “sound-in-itself,” and that subjectivity must be rethought rather than refused.

While other approaches to this problem are possible, here I take the starting point of what I perceive in “Deleuzian sound studies” to be a partial adoption of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the assemblage. Deleuze and Guattari are clear that the assemblage is a tetravalent notion, with its “horizontal” axis having on one side a “content” segment named the machinic assemblage of bodies and on the other an “expression” segment named the collective assemblage of enunciation (1987, 88).<sup>2</sup> One way of posing the critique of “Deleuzian sound studies” is that it neglects the collective assemblage of enunciation in favour of the machinic assemblage of bodies, with this tending to be read as a kind of unbounded materiality. This work thus risks conflating what Guattari (1984b, 73), following the linguist Louis Hjelmslev, terms “matter” and “substance,” with matter indeed preceding the distinction between expression and content, but substance, while in touch with matter, always being semiotically formed.

Following through on some consequences of Guattari’s interest in semiotics will lead us towards being able to rethink musical experimentalism, seeking to recover a semiotic polyvocality beneath the univocal structure that could be said to characterise both language-centric approaches and certain materialist accounts of sound and the world. This will allow us to consider music from the perspective of what Deleuze and Guattari call a “mixed semiotic” (1987, 118) or “transsemiotic” (136).

### **Mixed semiotics**

From reflections beginning in the 1960s, through *Anti-Oedipus*, and ongoing throughout the 1970s, Guattari devoted much work to a retheorisation of signs. The most general issue for Guattari with regards to signs is that for him, congruent with “Deleuzian sound studies,” approaches that give primacy to signification, language, or the symbolic

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<sup>2</sup> Paulo de Assis stresses the importance of this tetravalence in a musical context (2018, 81–85).

cannot adequately account for the real workings of the world. Yet Guattari's move is to insist on a diversity of semiotic systems, suggesting that "one type of meaning is produced by the semiotics of the body, another by the semiotics of power (of which there are many), yet another by machinic semiotics" (1984d, 164).

Guattari's semiotic formulations vary throughout the 1970s, with him making diverse distinctions between different kinds of semiotic systems, but he consistently stresses that these systems cannot be easily distinguished, and that "one is always dealing with an interweaving of several such systems, with a mixture of semiotics" (1984d, 166). This informs the intricate relation between signifying and asignifying semiotics he produces in the 1976 presentation "Meaning and Power" (*ibid.*, 170–72). This co-implication of semiotic systems brings Guattari to resist any quick distinction between a repressive signifying semiotics and a liberatory asignifying semiotics, and so while Christoph Cox, for example, celebrates the "powerful, asignifying materiality" (2018, 14) of the sonic, the complications that Guattari introduces incline me to be more hesitant.

Guattari certainly wants to think beyond signifying semiotics, but his route is through, and not against, semiotics. We see this in his adoption of Hjelmslev's distinction between expression and content, a distinction that Guattari directly sees as a means to produce "a direct conjunction between sign machines and real machines" (1984c, 91), that is, between signs and their material conditions: to make "signs work flush with the real" (*ibid.*, 88, translation modified). In this light there is a crucial distinction to make. Guattari notes that "one must be careful not to confuse natural encodings with semiotic encodings" (1984d, 166), and Deleuze and Guattari later stress that "significance and interpretation are so thick-skinned, they form such a sticky mixture with subjectification, that it is easy to believe that you are outside them when you are in fact still secreting them" (1987, 138), and it is crucial for Guattari's thinking of semiotics that asignifying semiotics are "post-signifying semiotics" (1984b, 75).

In materialist and realist theories following Deleuze and Guattari, the presignifying regime, what Guattari had earlier spoken of in terms of the symbolic or iconic, has often taken precedence. Deleuze and Guattari describe this regime as "foster[ing] a pluralism or polyvocality of forms of expression that prevents any power takeover by the signifier and preserves expressive forms particular to content; thus

forms of corporeality, gesturality, rhythm, dance, and rite coexist heterogeneously with the vocal form” (1987, 117). The appeal to theorists of the arts here is clear. Yet the study of semiotics and of regimes of signs would be for nothing if it were simply a matter of returning to this realm. As Guattari had argued, asignifying semiotics cannot involve a reversion into a prelinguistic state. Asignifying semiotics, for Guattari, “does not therefore mean a return to the myth of a ‘natural’ semiotic. On the contrary, it means getting beyond semiotics centring upon human beings and moving irreversibly towards semiotics involving technological and theoretical systems that are ever more differentiated, more artificial, and further from primitive values” (Guattari 1984c, 98). On this account, asignifying semiotics cannot constitute a simple immersion into the flows that underlie, or precede, signification, but must be a critical and constructive procedure, one that aims to conceive of semiotics without either relying on signification or putting faith in a presignifying natural order. From this perspective Guattari can say that while we “make our interpretations with words,” we “do our experimenting with signs, machinic functions, and engagements of things and people” (1984c, 87). By affirming that “semiotic fluxes are just as real as the material ones, and in a sense the material fluxes are just as semiotic as the semiotic machines” (96), Guattari strives to develop an account of semiotics in which there is, in the end, no easy distinction between “nature” and signs, between “natural” fluxes and “artificial” machines (99).

### **Pauline Oliveros’s pluralistic sonosphere**

With this brief sketch of some aspects of Guattari’s engagement with semiotics, I intend nothing more than to stress that for Guattari, and for Deleuze and Guattari, it is crucial to recognise and work with the “multiplicity of . . . ‘sign behaviours’” (Grossberg and Behrenshausen 2016, 1006). If musical experimentalism is conceived through the nature of sound, a “sound-in-itself” that is said to characterise Cage’s work, the risk arises of this appearing as a strange mirror of signifying semiotics, a semiotics of content alone, or bodies alone, that cannot countenance any autonomy of the realm of expression. But this is far from the final word on musical experimentalism. In contrast to Cox’s (2018, 93) reading of Cage, where he argues that Cage’s music is “always about the sonic real, sonic materiality itself,” post-Cagean experimentalism has, as Jennie Gottschalk’s (2016) survey has shown, a vastly plural nature, concerning itself not only with sound

but with bodies, sites, texts, subjectivities, histories, and far more besides. Here I will close by taking the example of the work of Pauline Oliveros.

Oliveros is known for many things—for her role in the foundation of the San Francisco Tape Music Center and the early tape and synthesiser music she produced in this context, for her development of collective practices of listening and sounding through her sonic meditations and deep listening (Oliveros 2005), and for her theorisation, drawing from a syncretic spirituality, of music as a holistic practice that puts listeners and performers in touch with the diverse energies of the world around us. In this theorisation she puts forward a notion that seems to correspond to “sound-in-itself,” that of the “sonosphere,” naming sound in its primordial materiality, “beginning at the core of the earth and radiating in ever increasing fractal connections, vibrating sonically through and encircling the earth” (Oliveros 2011, 163). With this comes an approach to improvisation that at first glance seems akin to the depersonalisation that Cage demanded of his own indeterminate performances, with improvisation involving a “tuning” to the sonosphere.

Yet in Oliveros’s work such a notion of the sonosphere is always coupled with the cultivation of subjective and intersubjective practices of listening and sounding. As Martha Mockus (2008) compellingly argues, there is a specificity of collective lesbian sociality in Oliveros’s work. For Mockus, Oliveros’s work stands as a “musical enactment of mid- and late-century lesbian subjectivity, critique, and transformation” (ibid., 2). Her sonic meditations and her practice of deep listening are founded on an inclusive process of community building, recognising and challenging the structures of listening and sounding imposed by Western art music. Her aim is to constitute listening and sounding anew, produced, as Julia Steinmetz has argued, not through individual reflection but rather an intersubjective, collective, circulation of sounding and listening (2019, 125–26).<sup>3</sup>

Rather than taking aim at the sonosphere or sound-in-itself alone, what we see in this image of Oliveros is a composer navigating between what Guattari (2000) would later call the “three ecologies” of nature, society, and subjectivity. Oliveros pluralises the ways we understand sound—it becomes entangled in a mixed semiotic, at once and irreducibly natural, social, and subjective in character. The concern is not only with

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<sup>3</sup> See also Rycenga (1994).

sonic bodies but with a revision of our collective modes of expression. When the musicologist Kerry O'Brien (2016) remarked in her obituary for Oliveros that in the sonic meditations "experiments were not conducted on the music; the music was an experiment on the self," she recalls Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 134) speaking of a work with signs, a diagrammatic work with signs, that would constitute an "experimentation in life . . . an emission of particles-signs." By enacting a "transsemiotic" (ibid., 136) of creative translations in which signs pass between regimes, from the natural world into culture and society, Oliveros enacts a challenge to the standards of Western art music and its constitutive subjectivities, not to erase these but to renew the problem of musical and social subjectivity. In Guattari's words, the promise is that "collective assemblages of enunciation emerge which will abolish the individuated modes of subjectification and beginning from which the previous micropolitical relations will be recoded and redefined" (2011, 177).

George E. Lewis captures this image of experimentalism in his recent revisiting of the themes of indeterminacy and improvisation. For Lewis (2018) we can understand that "the experience of listening is an improvisative act, engaged in by everyone, that amounts to an expression of agency, judgment, and choice, conducted in a condition of indeterminacy." For Lewis, as for Oliveros, it is not a case of evacuating subjectivity, but of recognising its conditions and capacities in collective contexts not determined by any single given semiotic. As Guattari could already put it in 1973, albeit before the concept of assemblage had been fully thematised, "a collective assemblage of enunciation is . . . in a position to deprive the spoken word of its function as imaginary support to the cosmos. It replaces it with a collective voice that combines machinic elements of all kinds—human, semiotic, technological, scientific, etc." (1984b, 76, translation modified).<sup>4</sup> This "etc." could be elaborated on endlessly, and the effort towards this elaboration is one of the great continuing values of musical experimentalism.

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce Quaglia (2010, 248) puts this in touching terms in his reading of the work of Luciano Berio, where he writes that the desiring machine of the composer produces "a collective enunciation that is a polyphony of subjectivities—subjectivities of the virtual that can wash away the regimes of the past and the present in a violent forgetting. Thus, while music cannot stop or start the wars or feed the hungry, it can create the virtual subjectivity of the yet to come, to condition the willing listener and so create the opening for a revolution yet to come."



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