

## **Mattin: on Improvisation**

*A: artist talk and conversation with audience during workshop (April 30, 2013, Zajia, Beijing):*  
**see Chinese version**

*B: three email questions and answers (Yan Jun – Mattin; May 2013):*

### **Question:**

you mentioned that cage has failed as he put himself as a figure. could you talk more about this? as we know cage tried to remove the self from music... and how do you think that he was swallowed by the bourgeois culture after 1960s?

### **Answer:**

We can talk about the differences between Eric Satie with his *musique d'ameublement* or furniture music which he wanted to bring music to everyday life and Cage's '433" which he made music out of everyday life. While we could think that '433" Cage was putting the background (audience and room sounds) at the same level as the foreground (our notion of music) and by doing this generating a radical equalization, Cage left intact the role of the composer and of music. Therefore the role of the composer, in this case Cage, becomes the figure. Cage really does not care what relations happens in his piece. Therefore Cage is expanding the notion of what music can be but he is not putting into question the role of music in society. Satie's instead is undermining both the role of music and of the composer. Therefore his *musique d'ameublement* has stronger political connotations than Cage aesthetization of everyday sounds.

### **Question:**

in term to individualism you mentioned, do you think the popular "absolute listening" theory also leads to an individualism situation? or there is a community has been built by this collective individuals?

### **Answer:**

The problem is the phenomenological approach to sound which privileges subjective experience. Cage's appreciation of sound in themselves clearly comes out of this type of thought but it also fits into his notion anarchism which praises the individual. Because he is not interested in the relations that occurs either between sounds or people it can easily be absorbed into bourgeois appreciation of high culture. What is the problem with a phenomenological approach to sound?

That takes for its bases two very questionable notions: experience and the subjectivist privileging of the first-person perspective. It is not surprising that both concepts arise simultaneously with the development of capitalism. Today we find ourselves that there is an "experience economy", where consumers are in search of experiences that make them feel alive in whatever way. The "absolute listening" or immersion into sound fits easily into this category

because is supposed to be about the full appreciation of the moment through perception rather than proposing cognitive or conceptual challenges. Inevitably this way of dealing with sounds allows for covering up of the construction of how experiences are produced and the interests that are behind them while making the listener feel that they are free sovereign individuals. But this type of freedom is one that liberal democratic capitalism likes, a freedom of choice in the free market economy.

Of course a community can be built. The question is how durable and reliable this community can be. It seems to me than in order to build a proper community it will require to develop forms of collective rationality in order to understand how we are being instrumentalised and how this community could find its own ways to generate agency and acts of self-determination.

**Question:**

does the context of music activity important for you? do you feel difficulty once your performance been put into art context such as white box and named as performing art? or to say been put into an established culture/knowledge field?

**Answer:**

I am interested in improvisation because it tries to constantly undermine its own conventions. At the same time it is a very fragile practice takes into account all the possible specificities of where it is produced. Therefore the undermining is always temporal and it is a matter of time until they get conventions again. The problem with improvisation today is that still carries a sense of agency or freedom which under today's conditions is extremely questionable. So I am interested in a form of improvisation that instead of taking agency and freedom as its starting point, it shows our lack of freedom. I call this negative improvisation. If this negative improvisation is successful it will be able to show its own processes of recuperation, how the moment of undermining a convention becomes a convention itself. Therefore this type of improvisation will rarely produce self-congratulatory moments.