

Burden Bangs Joy: The Problem of a Rock and Roll Aesthetic

Seth Kim-Cohen

Delivered as a keynote address at the Sound Art Theories Symposium at the School of the Art Institute, Chicago, November 2011.



And... A Rock and Roll Aesthetic

The first of a sequence of proposals:

A rock and roll aesthetic is an aesthetic of intensity.

It's not that an aesthetic of intensity has never been proposed before – it isn't born with rock and roll. But no other proposal has caught on: not Baudelaire nor Rimbaud, not Artaud, not Situationism, nor Viennese Actionism. Each of these episodes stands alone. One can try to connect the dots, but these episodes, if they connect at all, connect only to each other, remaining subcutaneous in the cultural body. None has infected the culture at large, creating a visible symptomology: lesions on the skin; boils, blisters, hives or pox on the surface of the to and fro of the everyday. That is, until rock and roll. Rock and roll is the first aesthetic proposition to disseminate intensity entirely in *praxis*. It has made intensity a viable category of experience in mainstream culture. And while art practice has, in isolated instances, responded to the influence of Baudelaire, Artaud, and Situationism, it wasn't

until the early 1970s that art *as a whole* had to respond to a rock and roll aesthetic of intensity.

And... Returning to a Return of the Return

In 1977 *Semiotext(e)*, published an issue double-entendrely titled “Nietzsche’s Return.” The included essays tie renewed interest in Nietzsche – especially in France – to a post-68 critique of capitalism and its institutions. Jean-François Lyotard’s contribution called “Notes on the Return and Kapital,” proposes that Nietzsche’s philosophical project suggests an alternative to capitalism’s bland, bloodless obedience. This alternative, according to Lyotard, goes by the name “intensity.”

Since we are in Chicago, it’s convenient to mention an exhibition presented here at the MCA in 2007 and 08, “Sympathy for the Devil: Art and Rock and Roll since 1967.” The exhibition catalogue includes a couple of essays that provide useful, sometimes provocative, connections. The most direct of these occurs in an essay by German critic, Diedrich Diederichsen. Diederichsen borrows Lyotard’s use of the term “intensity” to situate rock and roll and politics in the wake of punk nihilism. Diederichsen says Lyotard’s “Notes on The Return and Kapital” was both motivating and polarizing, leaving his generation of Germans to decide if intensity was always a red herring value or if it was merely misused and abandoned by the hippies. Intensity, properly experienced, produces *jouissance*: not a simple pleasure, but a joy that teeters on the precipice of dissolution. Such intensity, such joy, evades representation. Of course, this makes identifying it difficult. And this is at least one of the things I mean to suggest with my title, *Burden Bangs Joy*: the burden of theorizing, of classifying, of identifying, bangs the joy out of the object of our intentions. Representation annuls intensity.

It’s a pickle. Because, as Lyotard notes,

Representation is an intrinsic part of philosophical discourse. *The weakening of intensities*, the production of concepts and re-presenting are congruent in philosophical discourse.

(“Notes on the Return and Kapital” 44)

And it ain’t just in philosophy where we find ourselves pinched. Capital, as the most insidious and seemingly natural mode of representation, poses the greatest threat to intensity. Left to its own devices, capitalist representation subsumes its own representations, leaving even its foundational presumptions susceptible to the mechanism’s reifying impulse.

Kapital is but production as consumption, consumption as production, that is *metamorphosis* without end or purpose. Such a metamorphosis operates as a ... self-dissolution of its own institutions, constantly undone and redone. (Lyotard “Notes on the Return and Kapital” 47)

And... Unwriting Intensities / Writing Untensities

So let me come around to making my second proposal about a rock and roll aesthetic.

Rock and roll, built in the best instances of little more than intensities, is especially vulnerable to representation. (Witness cultural phenomena from Hot Topic punk stores at the mall, to “Jackass” on MTV.) In the same 1977 issue of *Semiotext(e)* in which Lyotard’s essay appears, we also find the essay “Nomad Thought” by Gilles Deleuze. According to Deleuze, Nietzsche’s radical proposal is

to use all codes, past, present and future, to introduce something which does not and will not let itself be coded. (Deleuze 13)

Deleuze cites three societal encoding instruments: “the law [by which he means sacred law], the contract [meaning the social contract] and the institution [meaning political institutions].” (13) I want to fold these three encodings into one master-encoding which I think would have to retain the name institution, because all three behave identically in relation to those beholden to them and are instituted by the same societal and psychological mechanisms. As Lyotard writes,

What I mean by institution, here, is anything which offers itself as a stable signification (political, legal, cultural...), i.e. anything based on set intervals and conducive to representation.
(Lyotard “Notes on the Return and Kapital” 47)

Reading Deleuze and Lyotard, reading Nietzsche, I am tempted to imagine the *unstitution*, that which is *unstituted*. This is what Deleuze means when he says that Nietzsche introduces “something that isn’t encodable, the jamming of all codes.” (15) I’m tempted by the idea of the *unstitution* because it performs a microcosmic version of its intentions in its constitution. The *unstitution* is produced in the code of typing – arguably the master code of our technological time – by shifting a finger a few millimeters to the left, from the keyboard’s I to it’s U – a minor physical perturbation (to the *left*, mind you) creates a major semantic disturbance. It is not planned, not targeted, it is a typo, a mistake. If institution seeks to regularize everything, even perturbation, then *unstitution* is that which resists set intervals, the hiccup, the glitch.

Later, Deleuze says of such uncodeable phenomena, that they

must not be translated into representations or fantasies; ...they must not be sifted through codes of ... the institution; ... on the contrary they must be turned into flows which carry us always further, closer to externality, these experiences precisely constitute intensity. (18)

And... Deleuze, Guitary

The British critic, Simon Reynolds, who, incidentally, also has an essay in the “Sympathy for the Devil” catalogue, compares the structure of the music of the German band, CAN, to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the rhizome, which Reynolds says is characterized by “the conjunction ‘and ... and ... and,’” This “and... and... and...” of CAN is also exemplary of how intensity is generated. So, as a kind of performative strategy, I’m adopting this “and ... and ... and” as the structure for this talk, a sequence of bulletins on a rock and roll aesthetic.

The insistence inherent in this structure echoes what I want to propose as one of the immanent features of intensity. But let me try to be more precise. In the book *Deleuze and Music*, Jeremy Gilbert identifies “intense ‘peak’ moments which characterize most improvisatory musics.” (Gilbert, “Becoming-Music: The Rhizomatic Moment of Improvisation,” 126) I want to insist that the insistence of rock and roll intensity does not depend on peaks. What insistence depends on is just banging on: banging and banging and banging. This is why Reynolds cites CAN, impeccable bangers on. If we were focused on peaks, then the and ... and ... and wouldn’t matter, or it would have to be converted into and ... and ... AND, which would force us back into the same old patterns of development and instrumentality that Deleuze and Gilbert and Can and intensity and rock and roll, all want to avoid.

So, proposal number three: Intensity is a matter of pressure, not peaks. Insistence, persistence, and ultimately, resistance, are the qualities, the forces, that intensity brings to bear.

And... Bangs

So, what does Lester Bangs – the great rock critic, dead in 1982 at the age of 33 – say about this insistence upon which I’m insisting? Writing of Iggy Pop’s forays into long-form, insistent, self-abuse in the mid-1970s, Bangs writes: “He’s crying in every nerve to explode out of [his body] into some unimaginable freedom.” (Bangs, “Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung,” 207) This is the funhouse mirror image of what must be the best known writing of insistence in our literature, Samuel Beckett’s “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” Instead, Iggy’s insistence says: “I can’t go *beyond*, I’ll go on.” There’s a desperation in Iggy that doesn’t exist in Beckett. Beckett is resigned to futility but sees no alternative to simply playing the futility out – or is it the resignation that’s played out? Beckett’s insistence may be morose, even apocalyptically numb, but it’s not desperate in the sense of clawing at the lid of the coffin from the inside.

In a piece published in the Village Voice in 1977, Bangs identifies the source of Iggy’s psycho-somatic mania. Conveniently, the name he assigns to this pathology is the same one I’m pursuing here.

[Iggy’s] intensity comes from a murderous drivenness that has in the past made him the most dangerous performer alive: the plunges into the third row, cutting himself and rolling in broken glass onstage, getting into verbal and occasional physical brawls with his audiences. ... That there is no solution but death is why all the rest of it happens. (*Psychotic Reactions*, 205)

Iggy is not resigned to anything. He has forgotten that it’s futile. At the same time, he’s internalized that truth. It forms the material of his neurons as well as his synaptic voids, it flows in his arteries, and puddles in the cavities of his intestines. It crystalizes in the geology of his musculature. Sinew rises up against the skeleton that is its architecture, threatening to break free, either fully and finally escaping his body’s gravitational pull, or simply dropping like a soft turd on the pavement. The focus of Iggy’s amphetamine-amphibian

gaze lands on a somewhere else no one else can see. And he refuses to resign himself to the material destitution of the here and now. He thrashes against location and time, like a shark in a tight cage. He doesn't go on despite merely fearing he can't. His plight is more tragic than that. He goes on as the embodiment of his own immanence and ours.

And... Bang!

Christof Migone's *Quieting* is a sly and stealthy piece of work – its slyness and stealth contributing to or even constituting the intensity that lurks in its heart. I want to take the opportunity to engage *Quieting* and Salomé Voegelin's reading of the piece in her recent book, *Listening to Noise and Silence*. Since both Salomé and Christof are here, I thought this would be a great opportunity to cross-reference three of the presenters and the positions we occupy in the discourse on, and practice of, sound. You will hear directly from Salomé and Christof tomorrow morning. And I hope at some point this weekend they'll have a chance to respond to the following comments.

Christof Migone released *Quieting* as a CD in 2000. The disc consists of 36 tracks ranging in duration from 16 seconds to 3 minutes and twelve seconds.] 18 of the tracks contain digital silence. Of the remaining 18 tracks, most include short snippets of very quiet environmental recordings that read for all intents and purposes as quietness, if not silence. But three of the tracks include content that Migone has singled out in the CD's liner notes: Track 18 is the temporal and thematic centerpiece of *Quieting*.

Twelve seconds in a cannon is fired. It's not particularly important for the listener to know that the cannon in question is fired every day at noon in

Halifax, Nova Scotia. Track 22, four tracks after the cannon, uses audio from the video recording of Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971), although, importantly, the audio Migone uses does not include the gunshot of Burden's title.

Track 36, the final track, is silent for all but the last six seconds in which we hear a garbled voice extracted from *First Contact*, a documentary which recounts the story of armed Australians subjugating the Papua New Guineans in the 1930s.

The total duration of signifying audio on this 42-minute CD amounts to 38 seconds. Those 38 seconds all refer, in one way or another, to ballistics: a cannon and two rifles. Voegelin's attention is focused on the 33 tracks of silence and near-silence. For her, the cannon is a framing device. Voegelin writes:

The cannon brackets the silence and reveals the intention of the work: to make you listen, to quieten yourself and hear your own process and location of engagement. (88)

Voegelin never acknowledges the ballistic thread running through *Quieting*. Instead she focuses on her own sonic/somatic experience of listening:

[It] becomes material through my fleshly encounter: hooked inside my body its silence tugs on the surface of my skin to hear it as a whisper all over my body. (90)

Voegelin's experience seems to be self-generated and to exist independently of *Quieting's* content and means of presentation. At times she claims to have produced or co-produced the work, its meanings and intentions, in her act of listening:

[T]his frame is the contingent act of listening rather than a particular

instruction to hear. It happens on the composer's wish but the desire of the audience to hear fulfills it. (89)

This is a claim that runs throughout Voegelin's book: what we might call "authorship-via-listening." And I'm certainly post-Death-of-the-Author enough to be on board with a bit of listener empowerment. But I also think that listening has an obligation to work with what it's listening to and to attend to its particularities. So if we're going to listen to *Quieting*, let's listen to it.

The quiet or silent tracks *before* the cannon shot are set-ups, each track persistently pushing forward to the next. Why not one long track of silence? Because these tracks tick by with the persistence of a ticking bomb: tick-tick-tick. These tracks are the methodical set-up before the punch line. They are the ruse that allows the con. They are the complacency that precedes the moment of violation. The tracks *after* the cannon shot are the ticking emptiness of conscience in the aftermath of trauma. Both the firer and the fired-upon ask questions that cannot be answered: tick-tick-tick. These silences are the silence of history, the silence of moral certitude in which all questions and doubts and explanations dissipate into muteness. The quieting of the work's title is not a Zen quieting of the mind, but the oppressor's quieting of the oppressed. It is also the oppressed's quieting of herself in a vain effort to evade the gaze and grasp of the oppressor. The quieting of the title is the sound of the victim erasing himself in the shadow of mounting threat: tick-tick-tick.

The intensity of Migone's *Quieting* is produced by the pressurized persistence of its silences. But this pressure is motivated, *inflated*, so to speak, by the peak moment of the cannon shot. Without the cannon shot the silences do not produce intensity. But without the quiet and silent tracks, the cannon alone

would not create the intensity we've been defining here. In the two tracks that reference rifles, the shots that link them to the cannon are absent. Both offer what is apparently language, but neither is easily parsed. The tracks resist simple decoding. What we are left with is pressure, insistence, intensity.

In 2000, the same year he released *Quieting*, Migone published an essay, tellingly titled "Ricochets." He seems to be referring to the silences of *Quieting*, when he describes,

Silence without agency. Silence as the sound fear makes when at the end of the barrel, the suspension of time after the shot.

(Migone, "Ricochets"
http://www.christofmigone.com/html/projects_gallery/ricochets.html)

By surrounding the cannon blast, the audible imprint of power, with more than forty minutes of "silence without agency," Migone requires the listener to contend with both conscience and consciousness, with both self and other, with the undismemberable entity that *we* and *they* form in the crucible of history. The essay reads this history as a series of before and afters of human enterprise and its calamitous endgames:

Past the vessel/shipwrecks, train/derailments, automobile/car crashes, electricity/electrocutions at the end of the corridor we find ethnography/... . Perhaps an elliptical silence is the only possible response on the other side of that slash. Perhaps silence is the ultimate catastrophe. We can't be silent anymore. 'Silence is complicity.'

(Migone, "Ricochets" [embedded quote, Kim Sawchuck])

And... With Every Bang, A Burden

Chris Burden's "White Light/White Heat" (1975) started with a request to Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York:

I requested that a large triangular platform be constructed in the southeast corner of the gallery. The platform was ten feet above the floor ... The size and height of the platform were determined by the requirement that I be able to lie flat without being visible from any point in the gallery.

After this request, the piece shuts its mouth. For 22 days, Burden lives on the platform, invisible to visitors. He does not eat, talk, or come down.

Burden is, of course, better known for more visceral violent works, like "Shoot" (1971), the piece referenced in Migone's *Quieting*, and "Transfixed" (1974), and these might seem better examples of intensity and a rock and roll aesthetic than "White Light/White Heat." Last year in *e-flux Journal*, Diedrich Diederichsen revisited Lyotard's term "intensity," describing it as "a devotion to unreserved investment into the potential of grand moments." (Diederichsen, "People of Intensity," 3) But Lyotard would reject the notion of a "grand moment," and insist that intensity occurs in the hollows of time, in moments that barely register as moments. While grand moments, like Gilbert's "peak" moments, demand reportage, intensity evades it, coming to visibility or audibility only as its pressure begins to distend the frameworks in which it occurs. Intensity is the result of pressure exerted. It needn't be loud nor frenetic nor shocking nor life-threatening. That's why I'm using words like "insistence" and "persistence" and "resistance," rather than a word like "violence." Let's call this point number 4:

Intensity is defined as a great pressure exerted against the limits of a situation or a structure.

“White Light/White Heat” creates more of this kind of intensity than Burden’s more overtly violent pieces. It’s not just that it takes its name from the great 1968 album by the Velvet Underground. It’s that Burden’s piece is about pressure, simultaneously inflating and deflating its situation. The tension created in the gallery space pushes beyond the pressure recommended by the manufacturers (i.e., the gallery, art historians, preceding artists). Eyewitnesses claim that though there was nothing to indicate that there was a human being up there on that platform, they could feel his presence. At the same time, the expectations a gallery-goer must have had for a Burden show in 1975 are totally deflated. Nothing “happens.” These differential pressures created by “White Light/White Heat” amp up its intensity. And I use the verb “amp” with some intent at a confab such as this, devoted to sound. The amplitude of a sound wave is the product of the difference between the pressure of the undisturbed air and the maximum pressure caused by the wave. Amplitude, then, is the product of differences in pressure. Metaphorically, I want to claim a similar causal relation for intensity as I’m defining it here and applying it to Burden’s “White Light/White Heat.” The difference between the pressure of the undisturbed air of the gallery and the maximum pressure caused by Burden’s invisible presence produces an intensity that connects Burden’s work back to its namesake. About which a quick word:

When the Velvet Underground recorded *White Light/White Heat*, they told producer Tom Wilson to keep the needles constantly in the red. The result is a pressure exerted on the amplifiers, the compressors, the mixing desk, but also on bodies, on ears, on our attention, on our tolerance, on the notion of song form, and an intensity – known as “saturation” – imparted to the magnetic tape. Something similar is produced by the pressure exerted by Burden’s “White Light/White Heat.” What if we also call this intensity “saturation”?

And... Tonight We're Gonna Party Like It's \$19.99

Diederichsen worries about the cooptation of Nietzschean and punk intensities. Labor, camouflaged and convinced of its uselessness-value, merely serves the end of frittering time, money, and energy. Wastefulness, perversely, becomes a Capitalist goal. His worries boil down to the concern that

intensity and experience are at stake in name only, ... the values have actually been shifted from one place to another in order not to preserve them but to betray them, to use them as pure decoration. ("People of Intensity," 5)

The betrayal here is that radical experience becomes a style and that style becomes a commodity. Rock and roll is exemplary in this regard. The burden of representation, quantification, even qualification or description, threatens to bang the intensity, the *jouissance*, out of the joyful abandon of not giving a fuck.

Diederichsen looks to the example of advertising agencies in the 1970s and 80s – proto versions of Adbusters or similar anti-capitalist meta-corporations – that endeavored to become factories of non-production, employing people to make and sell nothing, even boasting that "I myself enjoyed an opportunity to spend half a year working at [such] an agency." This is conceptual capitalism – not leisure as capital, but capital as leisure, an attempt to do to capital what it does to everything else: to appropriate it in the name of the very things whose existence it denies. Diederichsen sees such enterprise as an exercise in intensity because it disobeys capitalism's demands for instrumentality, pursuing, instead, a program of wastefulness.

Intensity and wastefulness, at least at first glance, obey extra-

economic, if not counter-economic, principles ... Wastefulness is the opposite of husbandry. Intensity enjoys potential and irresponsibility. ("People of Intensity," 4)

When its irresponsibility is seen as a critique of, and resistance to, dominant modes of experience and evaluation the wastefulness of the do-nothing corporation increases, putting pressure on situations and structures. Diederichsen is not so pie-eyed as to overlook the possibility that such exercises are often swiftly repatriated by capitalism:

[P]rinciples of intoxication and wastefulness function only when they are precisely not subject to deflective interpretation, watered down by entrepreneurs, instrumentalized, devalued: when we can believe in them without allowing ourselves to get screwed. ("People of Intensity," 6)

So the tension here is between screwing up the system and getting screwed by it. The question is whether we can reverse the flow of our title (and keep it reversed), to arrive at a fifth proposal:

Joy bangs burden; or: an aesthetics of intensity subverts the dual instrumentality of the market and the academy.

For Bangs, the Party –capital P – is another synonym for intensity and a response to Diederichsen's concerns.

I believe in the Party as an exhilarating alternative to the boredom and bitter indifference of life... The Party is one answer to how to manage leisure in a society cannibalized by it. (*Psychotic Reaction*, 75)

In the elision between the joy and the bang, between screwing up and getting screwed, something emerges. We become aware of the difference between answers and action. The Party is all action. Or maybe more accurately, the Party is action *as* answer. The party rejects telos, and with it,

instrumentality and its logic. As, Bangs puts it elsewhere:

[F]ar from being anti-intellectual, the Party is *a*-intellectual; it doesn't make any promises or ask for any field workers. As an answer to the mysteries of life, it's a Bronx cheer. (*Psychotic Reaction*, 75)

And... Joy

So, let's end where we ought always to start: with Joy. Camden Joy, too impatient to wait out the natural cycles of artistic call and journalistic response, took to the streets in the early-1990s, becoming the first, and maybe only, guerilla rock critic. A series of wheatpasted manifestoes and photocopied pamphlets assail what Joy calls "the advertocracy." Coincident with Diederichsen's championing of conceptual capitalism, Joy ends his greatest-ever pamphlet, the one entitled, "The Greatest Record Album Singer that Ever Was" by recalling a project – possibly apocryphal – from his past. He and a friend start a business, making advertisements for absurd services.

Unsurprisingly, Joy and his friend find no takers, leading Joy to pursue the activities for which he is best known. Although, truth be told, "best known" is hardly an appellation that sits well on his scrawny shoulders. Of the 100 manifestoes Joy distributed in Manhattan in the mid-1990s, only 22 survive.

One of these, handed to Christmas shoppers at Macy's, takes the form of an open letter to History (capital H), suggesting that History is too old and no longer fit for its occupation. Joy offers to take over, replacing the "weary and near-blind" History with "ruddier blood." Among Joy's litany of charges against History:

...that communism has gone down as a failure (why not also Love, old bastard? Love too hurts and disappoints why not as well murder it, foolish History? But no – arbitrarily you steal from us communism and leave us Love!)

Another manifesto, "attached with hat elastics before Gracie Mansion," reads, simply:

Joe Strummer Where Are You

A third, pasted around the World Trade Center in early October of 1995, arranges scraps of cut-and-paste text in a circle. Eight blurbs crown spokes emitting from a central hub labeled "Pleasure thyself." One epithet reads, in part:

In dimmed rooms of velvety incense dank with unfair death, devoutly call on the ones who led us here that they may yet guide us to merry freedom: Mayakefski, Duchamp (he's de champ), Oldenberg, Daniel Johnston.

Another, pleads,

Give people the goddamned chance to believe in something, anything.