Music in the Abyssal Maw of Autophagia

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> *The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*
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> *Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" (1917)*

Baring the device allows the spectator to see, to hear, to sense, the work of art as a work. According to Shklovsky, this becoming-aware of the work of the work is what makes the work a work of art. This is recursive, of course, like a tautology is recursive: It is X because it does what X does. To that extent, baring the device is a form or a mode of turning back on oneself. But the two works I want to consider here, while sharing some behaviors with works that bare their own device, would seem to turn more violently back on themselves. They don't merely shine a light on their devices, or turn toward the mirror, to confront their own devices. Rather, they take the device into themselves, break it down, digest it, and discard its evacuated husk. In short, they eat the device.

Autophagia, the key term of my title, is the act of eating one's own body. The figure of the ouroboros, the serpent (or other nefarious creature) eating its own tail, is often called upon to indicate reflexivity and repetition. But the primary reason I want to conjure the horrendous image of autophagia, of eating oneself, is to confront the moment when, having choked down the better part of its better parts, the mouth reaches itself. What then? How does autophagia end? I suppose it goes without saying that I'm speaking metaphorically

here. But attempting to remain faithful to my metaphor, I want to ask: Can the mouth eat the mouth? Can a work of art swallow the apparatus that "gives it voice" and still function as a work of art?

What is in question, then, is not the noun, "the device," but the verb, "to bare." I will test this verb against two recent works: Audioguide, a seven hour performance piece by the German composer, Johannes Kreidler; and *Urban Disease*, an album-length recording by the Basque band, Billy Bao. I want to know if these works are baring the device, or subjecting the device to something more catastrophic. And I want to know what happens to the work of art when it devours its own device.

Before adding more beams and bolts to the theoretical architecture of an autophagic music, let me provide a thumbnail sketch of the two works in question. Johannes Kreidler describes *Audioguide* as a piece of music theater. It was presented in August of 2014 at the Darmstadt Summer Course.[1] Among other components, over the course of its seven hours, *Audioguide* makes use of a small ensemble of players of acoustic and electronic instruments, pre-recorded audio, live actors, one hundred violins, and nearly continuous projection of video, still images, text, and live camera feeds.

Johannes Kreidler, Audioguide, 2014. Still from YouTube video of performance at Darmstadt. (Pictured: Tammo Messow & Ensemble NeoN.)

Various themes and topics are engaged and entwined throughout the performance. These include: beauty, formalism, hypermodernism, capitalism, industrialism, globalism, markets, semiotics, porn, music, theater, music-theater, Stockhausen, 9/11, the video released on Wikileaks and known as "collateral damage," Borges, Derrida, sexuality, sexism, shitting, Hegel, MP3, the decline of the recording industry, technology, Kreidler himself, money, funding sources for *Audioguide*, Nazism, and 24 minutes-worth of names of subgenres of metal music, such as death metal, doom metal, black metal, etc.

Urban Disease is a recording: an LP, a CD, or a downloaded file, released in 2010.[2] The recording is constructed of passages of free improvisation, punk rock, strummy bedroom lo-fi, math rock and prog, each shunted against one another like logs in a

cord, forming a composition of oblique angles and disruptions. One can try to listen to *Urban Disease* as a long musique concrete composition, but then the constitutive frictions of each of these genre references, as they slash and subsume each other, are stripped of their denunciative power. For minutes at a time, we listen to a single pair of lonely hands, slowly clapping in an empty theater.

A Google search for "Billy Bao," the name of the band, yields information about a Nigerian immigrant to Bilbao; an individual, who, before starting a noise-punk band, "was a bit of a troubadour who accompanied himself on acoustic guitar and warbled wild songs of protest in his native Nigerian patois."[3] Billy discovers punk rock in Bilbao, immediately embracing it as an outlet for his personal and political frustration. He joins forces with a group of Basque musicians, forming a band that bears his name.

What is the device in works such as *Audioguide* and *Urban Disease*? It would seem prudent to address this question before we can accuse certain works of baring theirs (or worse). One can map the device to a series of nested frames containing what Kant would have called the "ergon," the work itself, the formal composition. Each subsequent nesting frame would, in effect, zoom out to encompass more parerga: that which is traditionally thought to reside outside the work proper, yet to relate to or support it. I'm convinced that the work of art is always constructed as a nexus of parergonal forces. What would constitute the "object" of study for Greenberg or Schenker is one of these forces, but only one. The work is the composite image of this object as it interacts with its conditions of production and reception. These conditions include the cultural and historical resonances, allowances, and prohibitions of a given time and place: the geists of both the zeit of production and of any given reception, or what Rancière calls the work's operative regimes. The device is not quite identical with the work. But as our conception of the work expands, so must our conception of the device. If we imagine the work as a nexus of parergonal forces, then the device would be the various inclinations and controls effected by the work that draw attention to some of these forces and interactions of forces, while camouflaging or erasing others. The device is both how the thing is put together and what emerges (or not) due to this particular putting together. Perhaps you see it coming: Baring the device is, itself, a device. If it truly bares, it must bare itself too, and then bare itself baring, ad infinitum: the serpent eating its own tail. If we take the task of baring the device seriously, we must be prepared to confront its autophagic denouement.

Shklovsky is concerned, primarily, with literature. Literature must always grapple with issues of content, of referentiality. Music, on the other hand, has largely been given a pass on such issues. Even when music is considered to be referential – whether it be program music, music about other music, or political music – the referentiality in question is usually a kind of "generally about": connotative rather than denotative. More often than not, the specific referent is provided by means other than music: program notes, title, verbal explanation, projection, etc. In his lengthy analysis of Shklovsky's ideas in *The Prison House of Language*, Frederic Jameson rightly draws our attention to the fact that Shklovsky's descriptions of defamiliarization, whether in Tolstoy or Sterne or Cervantes, are always directed at the form, at the put-togetherness of the device. It is never the content of the novel, its social-historical facticity,

that is defamiliarized. On this account, it remains possible to map musical practice to Shklovsky's ideas of defamiliarization and to leave the apparent formalism of both sides intact. Both music and Shklovskian defamiliarization operate unencumbered by the socio-historical burdens of content.

But this is not the path I will take. Instead, I want to recuperate a kind of Shklovskian materialism, while at the same time, reattaching music to its often implicit, often ignored, but always present, socio-historic facticity. I need to make a case for a revisionist view of Shklovskian defamiliarization. At the same time, I need to devise and demonstrate an alternate model of listening that situates what we might call primary musical content such as melody, harmony, and rhythm within a dispersed field that also includes secondary musical content such as quotation, genre play, and manipulation of memory and anticipation. But beyond that, this model also accounts for what is sometimes called the "extra-musical," that is: additional forces, influences, and relationships that license the motivations, structures, and meanings of the composition. These considerations extend listening into the realms of technology, law, economics, class, race, gender, and so on.

Acting on what was at first a flippant impulse, but now seems increasingly meaningful, I will call this model "shallow listening," in contradistinction to Pauline Oliveros's notion of "deep listening." Oliveros describes deep listening as an expansion of attention. But what she really means is an expansion of perceptual attention. In an interview with the website *Sound American*, Oliveros says that deep listening takes two forms, "focal" and "global" attention. Focal attention requires constant renewal, like refreshing your web browser for new content. Oliveros says this is the kind of attention required to follow speech. According to Oliveros, global attention is where the expansion of deep listening really happens, to include "everything that is around you; inside of you."[4] But crucially, global attention doesn't live up to its geopolitical billing. Oliveros's expansion goes only as far as the ear. As Oliveros describes it, when practicing this mode of deep listening, "we can expand almost infinitely to include, and this is what I call inclusive listening, everything that is possible to listen to."[5] The expansion that Oliveros has in mind moves vertically, rather than laterally. As the name, "deep listening" suggests, it goes deeper: into the ear canal, into the perception and subjectivity of the listener, into the experience of sound.

Imagine the same volume of listening attention, but instead of condensing it within a concentrated, narrow-gauge bandwidth, we allow it to pool at the surface, spreading out to encompass adjacent concerns and influences that the tunnel vision of the deep model would exclude. What I am calling "shallow listening" moves laterally and turns a deaf ear to the boundaries between perception, intellect, and interpretation. Shallow listening "hears" the sources of sounds, the reverberation of history and intention, the dissonance of power relations, the implications of sounds as they land in the ear and in the world with meaning. Works such as Kreidler's *Audioguide* and Billy Bao's *Urban Disease* necessitate shallow listening. In fact, other models of listening—whether deep or conventionally aligned with *neue musik*, in the case of *Audioguide*, or avant rock, in the case of *Urban Disease*—are doomed to mishear these works. Such mishearing is analogous to parsing a foreign language

according to the semantic grid of one's own language, like a student of mine a few years back who misheard the French "avant-garde" as the English "a font card." (I will say that, in spite of his mistake, he proceeded to write a pretty good paper on Fluxus typography.)

So let's spread out and engage in some shallow listening. In Kreidler's *Audioguide*, there are a number of moments that hew quite closely to a Shklovskian model of device baring. These moments bare devices large and small, local and global, traditional and neue. Briefly, the performance incorporates an analysis of the use of the figure of "structure" in the writings of Stockhausen and employs Feldman's 2nd string quartet as a porn film soundtrack. There is some tongue-in-cheek theorizing about music theater as a genre, and discussions of music's relation to the subconscious and to sexuality. There are also numerous instances of Kreidler folding his previous work – and reactions to his work – into the proceedings of *Audioguide*. For example, *Audioguide* includes a fairly lengthy, and somewhat facetious discussion of what is probably Kreidler's best-known work, *Fremdarbeit*, from 2009. For this work, Kreidler outsourced the compositional work of a commission to a Chinese contract composer and an Indian programmer. In a miniature episode of recursivity within the larger arcs of the seven hour experience of *Audioguide*, Kreidler flirts with one of the rumors that has been fluttering around *Fremdarbeit* since its premiere; namely that he invented the Chinese composer and the Indian programmer as a fictional frame, but in fact, composed the work himself. In *Audioguide*, he says that he recently revisited the piece to add yet another recursive layer by having the Chinese composer further copy the stylistic gestures of the 2009, "original." However – in the midst of *Audioguide* – Kreidler informs us that he was unable to track down the composer this time and, instead, decided to merely write the subsequent piece of music himself and to falsely attribute it to the Chinese composer.

At another point in *Audioguide*, the master of ceremonies, wearing a bright red shirt and a headset microphone, walks us through the budget of *Audioguide*. The MC, who is, at times, a thinly veiled stand-in for Kreidler himself, at other times an objective commentator, informs us that the piece we are now witnessing cost 100,000 Euros. He explains that the funding agencies provided 80,000 Euros and that the additional 20,000 was raised by investing the original 80,000 in a recently established mutual fund which bought over seven million Euros worth of stock in the secondary art market. By trading shares in the works of blue chip artists, Kreidler was able to raise the additional 20,000 Euros in one year.

Johannes Kreidler, Audioguide, 2014. Still from YouTube video of performance at Darmstadt. (Pictured: Tammo Messow, Tom Pilath, & Ensemble NeoN.)

But the most self-reflexive, the most autophagic, moment in *Audioguide* occurs, significantly I think, at nearly the exact midway point of the seven-hour piece. In 2012, at the Donaueschingen music festival, Kreidler staged a guerilla protest of the planned merger of two German orchestras. Just before the opening concert of the festival, Kreidler raided the stage and snatched a violin and a cello from two of the seated orchestra members. He proceeded to tie the violin to the cello with the cello's strings, thereby representing the merger. He then delivered a statement of protest. Leaflets about the merger were dropped from the balcony, and Kreidler smashed the instruments, eventually falling, ass first, into the demolished shell of the cello's body, as if it were a child's kayak. Almost immediately, musicians, composers, musicologists, and critics, began to debate the merger, the protest, and Kreidler's own motives. Despite the fact that the leaflets declared that Kreidler had been commissioned to stage the protest by the *Society for New Music*, many commentators saw Kreidler's actions as blatant self-promotion.

At the three hour and forty-one minute mark of *Audioguide*, amidst the depraved-slapstick-destruction of one hundred violins, an actor emerges from the wings with a replica of the violin affixed to the cello. He holds this "Donaueschingen Cross" aloft and announces:

> I think actions like this are probably useful in inverse proportion to how much they look like self-publicity for the person carrying the action out, which in this case is quite a lot[6]

Johannes Kreidler, Audioguide, 2014. Still from YouTube video of performance at Darmstadt. (Pictured: Peer Blank, Tom Pilath, Tammo Messow & Ensemble NeoN.)

As becomes clear from the projection above the stage, this statement is lifted from a Facebook debate about Kreidler's Donaueschingen protest that took place between the 25th and 30th of October 2012. For ten minutes, actors on stage, forcibly remove this "Donaueschingen Cross" from each other's hands. And with each new possession another statement from the Facebook debate is read aloud and projected on the

screen. The authors of these statements include composers, musicologists, music critics, and Kreidler himself. They include opinions that are dismissive of Kreidler, disparaging any potential efficacy of the protest and accusing Kreidler of exploiting the merger for his own professional gain. They also include a number of people defending the protest and praising Kreidler for attempting to break down the barricades that so successfully separate the composition and performance of neue musik from anything that whiffs even remotely of realpolitik.

A lot of stuff is being bared here, including a few nerves. So, just to re-cap: within Johannes Kreidler's 2014 piece *Audioguide*, there is a nominal recreation of his 2012 protest at Donaueschingen. Actors then perform, as if it were the script of a stage play, a subsequent Facebook thread in which Kreidler's protest is debated on political, aesthetic, and careerist grounds. However, amidst the destruction of 100 violins, the "Donaueschingen Cross," the relic of the symbolic 2012 martyrdom, is spared. Over the course of ten minutes, the Cross is held continuously aloft by each actor as he makes his Facebook declarations. But never does it meet the fate of the hundred violins scattered about the stage like so many disgorged pistachio shells.

Johannes Kreidler, Audioguide, 2014. Still from YouTube video of performance at Darmstadt. (Pictured: Peer Blank, Tom Pilath, & Tammo Messow.)

There are two ways to think about baring the device. One confines Shklovsky, not just in the historical moment that has acquired the proper name of Russian Formalism – capital R, capital F – but also condemns him to the longer tradition of formalism – lower case f – the phenotypical manifestation of modernist aesthetics. The other way to think about baring the device suggests a reading of Shklovsky that, if not opposed to formalism, is at least a circumvention of its most essentializing tendencies. This reading allows that perception is not merely perception and that perception is not, contrary to Shklovsky's own claims, an aesthetic end in itself. This view, in keeping with our newly coined practice of shallow listening, would acknowledge that perception is a medium, in the etymologically-faithful sense of a middle, an in-between, something to be traversed in order to pass from one to another, or to be sutured in order to connect disparate entities. With perception thus understood,

we must now include other, extra-perceptual concerns in our expanded definition of the device. And these concerns, too, are exposed to the defamiliarizing effects of the device's baring. Frederic Jameson finds this kind of exposition, not in Shklovsky, but in Bertolt Brecht's distinct notion of estrangement, in which baring the device makes you aware "that the objects and institutions you thought to be natural were really only historical: the result of change, they themselves henceforth become in their turn changeable."[7]

Baring the device, by this account, may start with perception (although I'm skeptical, even, of that supposition) but it certainly doesn't end there. According to Jameson, Brecht allows us to renew not just our perceptions, but the objects and institutions that condition our ways of perceiving. Once we realize that something as apparently natural as perception is, in fact, influenced and curtailed by the structures of the time and place of perceiving, then we become truly aware. We become aware of the constructed and contingent nature of ourselves, the world, and our relations with the world. Once we come to terms with this construction and contingency, we can begin to imagine the dismantling of structures, and the rebuilding of new and better versions of ourselves, the world, and our relations.

Optimistic? Perhaps. But even in the absence of overt optimism, one may decide simply to opt out of the constructions and contingencies that influence and curtail a practice; to reject the ideology that is implicit in a field as currently and, perhaps, complacently pursued. I say "simply opt out." But of course, it's far from simple. Kreidler's work draws back its own curtains to reveal its internal machinations and positions. And this, of course, is a constituent gesture in the baring of the device. But, taking up the challenge of the "far from simple," one may work to expose the interminable nesting that constitutes the device. (*Il n'y a pas de hors-dispotif.*)

Billy Bao, for example, is one project of many in the multi-faceted endeavors of Basque artist, Mattin. On *Urban Disease* from 2010, there is nothing as curtain-drawing or device-baring as in *Audioguide*. To begin to see how it undertakes its autophagic project, Urban Disease must be situated within the expanded device of Mattin's body of work, which spans other modes and media. He has released more than 70 recordings over the past 10 years. He performs frequently in ensembles, duos, and solo. Some of these are easily recognizable as musical performances, others engage performance art, lecture, performance-lecture, political intervention, conversation and/or theater. He is also a prolific writer, and is co-editor, with Anthony Iles, of the 2009 book, *Noise and Capitalism*. In addition to his artistic output, Mattin is involved with anti-capitalist and anti-nationalist activist movements.

Billy Bao, Urban Disease, LP sleeve, 2010

Urban Disease strikes me as a unique, yet exemplary, gesture in Mattin's output. This recording is wholly dependent on what I have been calling shallow listening. A deep listening of this album would be deeply unrewarding and quite possibly unpleasant. If one is unaware of the specific critical, political context of Mattin's concerns, then I don't honestly know how one could make any sense of it. This may explain why the *Guardian* called *Urban Disease* one of the 101 strangest records on Spotify. Indeed, it is easy to believe that any listener, coming across this naively – in the manner of Spotify – would be utterly confused.

"The 101 strangest records on Spotify: Billy Bao – Urban Disease," theguardian.com, June 26, 2013 (screen shot).

If you're listening to *Urban Disease* via something other than Spotify, you're likely to know that Billy Bao is generally thought of as an improvising noise band. So there are things here that wouldn't surprise you. But a long reverb decay at the end of a section of noise is an unusual move. The field recording of waves lapping the shore is more surprising still. And when the waves segue with what might be feedback or bowed cymbals, we start to lose the ability to easily deposit what we are hearing into any recognizable pigeonhole. The 38 minute and 38 second album includes silences of various lengths, totaling 6 minutes and 37 seconds, by my count. These silences, in fact, constitute the most salient theme of the recording; the work's most identifiable and identifying refrain. There are also "hits" of digital distortion that recur intermittently. A repeated excerpt of a chaotic noise improvisation with vocals frames additional passages of silence. This same excerpt repeats three times in the album's final five minutes. Each time it recurs, it is quieter than the previous iteration, as if expending itself as it proceeds; or possibly consuming itself so that its ability to speak is progressively restricted, inhibited by the intake of its own self.

One shouldn't talk with one's mouth full. It is rude, of course, but also dangerous. The recursivity of the autophagic impulse conflates input and output. The competing interests of speaking mouth and eating mouth lead to confusions, congestions, aspirations, asphyxiation. Perversely, the mouth speaks its rations and eats its rationality. Starvation, diminution, expiration: what other fate is possible? The mouth must fall into itself, like a black hole swallowed by its own manic gravity. Yet, physicists

imagine that, even in the death throes of such cosmic autophagia, an infinitesimal amount of light escapes; that the black hole expectorates a final spray of energy into the cosmos, like the DNA of millennia-ago generations. In knocking away every scaffold that might ratify, codify, indemnify its meaning and its function, *Urban Disease* surrenders itself to oblivion. And yet, there it is, and we are listening.

Urban Disease consumes itself. It consumes the markers that might allow us to locate its borders, trace its compositional unfolding, or identify the traditions with which it converses. *Urban Disease* is most radically autophagic when we realize that it has eaten every possible mode of listening with which we might try to perceive it (Shklovsky's word). As a recording, it implicitly promises to function within one of the myriad channels of recording usage. In other words, when we play it, using a music player, listening with speakers or headphones, we do so within a set of conventions. We listen to it as we listen to other recordings. Yet *Urban Disease* breaks this promise, constantly denying these conventions. It subscribes to no genre. It disobeys the mandates of both high and low, it circumvents judgments of beauty or entertainment, compositional structure or emotive catharsis. Even in more instrumental terms it's hard to know how to "use" this music. It seems utterly inappropriate for commuting, doing the dishes, dinner parties, working out, or getting high.

Subjected to a shallow listening, however, we can experience *Urban Disease* as something other than or in addition to its 38 minute and 38 second duration. We can hear it, perceive it, understand it, as a plank in the platform of Billy Bao's and Mattin's extended interventionist politics of anti-capitalist listening. Rather than listening to this music as self-evident and self-contained as a composition; rather than listening to it as a response to other musical statements or to tendentious conventions; we must listen to *Urban Disease* as a component of a larger, multifarious, kind of negation-machine: the machine that is Mattin's practice. We must listen to *Urban Disease* as a dismantling of the nesting frames of the device:

> Frame: the internal coherence we expect from works of music.
> Frame: the relation of gestures within the work to a history of gestures; a history that contextualizes the semantic or syntactic meaningfulness of the work.
> Frame: the modes of listening that we have at our disposal and which we apply with discretion to different musics.
> Frame: the apparatus that delivers but at the same time licenses the material and our modes of listening to it.

Once we have come to this understanding of *Urban Disease*, it seems to me that a very sensible, possibly inevitable, response would be to never listen to it again: to feel as if one is incapable of listening to it, as if it is no longer there to be listened to, as if it has digested all that might have constituted it as listening material. But this response is haunted by a greater peril hovering just outside the outer frame of the nested device. Yet, because we have established that there is no outside the device, we would have to call this peril part of the device too. Having witnessed the autophagia of *Urban Disease*, having arrived at the conclusion that it can no longer offer itself for listening, we confront the epistemological, existential, calamity of concluding that

all of music has been swallowed up and dissolved in the digestive acids of the device itself. What this radical baring of the device bares is that it's device all the way down. Listen carefully (that is to say, shallowly): There is no such thing as music.

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1 Kreidler, Johannes. *Audioguide*, 2014. Video documentation of the entire seven-hour work is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3aFutNFiCc.
2 Billy Bao, *Urban Disease*, Audio LP, Pan Records (Pan 11), 2010.
3 http://p-a-n.org/product/billy-bao-urban-disease-pan-11/
4 "Pauline Oliveros on Deep Listening," *Sound American,* Issue 7: "The Deep Listening Issue," (unpaginated, no date). http://soundamerican.org/pauline-oliveros-on-deep-listening
5 Ibid.
6 Kreidler, Johannes. *Audioguide*, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3aFutNFiCc
7 Jameson, Frederic. *The Prison House of Language*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975, 58.