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Cage, Reich, and Morris:

Process and Sonic Fetishism

Fetishism is often characterised as the obscuring of the social relations immanent to the processes of production. For the fetishist, power seemingly emerges as a characteristic of an autonomous object, not the heterogeneous processes that determine the object. Seemingly at odds with the magical fetish object, much art music and sonic art since (at least) the 1960s onwards foregrounds processes over objects. Indeed, the processes of production are often explicitly traced sonically: John Cage and others prescribed processes through which performers might enliven and sonically explore a variety of objects, with indeterminate results; Robert Morris presented a wooden box for exhibition, from which emerged the recorded sound of its own construction (*Box with the Sound of its Own Making* [1961]); Steve Reich conceived of *Music as a Gradual Process* (1968), expressing an interest in a "compositional process and a sounding music that are the same thing". I use Žižek's account of fetishism to complicate commonplace assumptions about products and processes in music. Crucially, in *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek suggests that postmodernism connotes a fetishization of the ephemeral, often manifested in a staging of production. In this view, fetishism – a fetishism related to but distinct from Marx's and Freud's uses of the concept – still might function where one turns away from products produced and instead puts on show one's processes of production. This chapter thus theorises musical product, process, and fetishism in a manner taking us beyond Adorno's (1938) infamous proposal that the "counterpart to the fetishism of music is a regression of listening". It contributes to a critical theory of musical production, under which artistic production is related to broader (nonartistic) regimes of production – a connection more firmly established in studies of visual and plastic arts, but underdeveloped in philosophies of music.

Fetishism is often characterised as the obscuring of the social relations immanent to the processes of production.[1] For the fetishist, power emerges from an autonomous object, not the heterogeneous processes that determine the object. Seemingly at odds with the magical fetish object, much art music and sonic art since (at least) the 1960s onwards foreground processes over objects. Indeed, the processes of production are often explicitly traced sonically: John Cage and others prescribed processes through which performers might enliven and sonically explore a variety of objects, with indeterminate results; Steve Reich conceived of *Music as a Gradual Process* (1968), expressing an interest in a "compositional process and a sounding music that are the same thing" (Reich 2005: 305); Robert Morris presented a wooden box for exhibition, from which emerged the recorded sound of its own construction (*Box with the Sound of its Own Making* [1961]). Navigating conceptual coordinates provided by these three examples, in this chapter I use Žižek's account of fetishism to complicate commonplace assumptions about products and processes in music and sound.

There is a historical dimension to Cage, Morris, and Reich's embracing of processes. Echoing others, I suggest that the then-developing culture of an emerging late capitalism involved not

[1] I am grateful to the Conservatoire for Dance and Drama for providing funding towards a short sabbatical, for the purpose of finalising this chapter.

only specific modes of production of products, but also a certain *production of processes*; this is manifest under interrelated but nonidentical terms such as postmodernism, the service economy, and post-Fordism. In fact, Žižek himself has suggested that the postmodern often makes visible the process of production, which is very much linked with the production of the product. Even more fundamentally, he has pointed to the fetishisation of the *ephemeral* under postmodernism, where, for instance, money loses the material referent that was its coinage. I find it notable that this shift takes place alongside a widely chronicled *dematerialisation of art* (see Lippert 1997), exemplified by 1960s Conceptual Art – a move resonating with some of the musical and sonic practices discussed below.

While Conceptualism did move art practices away from the focus on the artistic product – and thus resisted reproduction of that dominant form of the twentieth century, the commodity – this same strategy arguably reproduced instead some of the *processes* that would come to later characterise an ephemeral postmodern as such. Tim Rutherford-Johnson (2017: 165–170) has shown how once-radical processes, such as musical Happenings, become later co-opted by a capitalistic system insistent on spectacle. And, as argued by Claire Bishop (2012) and Kim Grant (2017), artistic processes of working commonly – although not identically – relate in their inception to nonartistic labour practices and to priorities that are not always aesthetic in nature.[2]

Antonio Negri has provided a brief historical overview of the relationship between artistic and nonartistic modes of production, and argues that from around 1968 there emerged a new paradigm of production within both spheres. He notes an emergence of what he calls "immaterial labour". This form of labour is not immaterial in the sense of being "purely abstract" or "transcendent"; it still "makes material products, commodities and communication" (Negri 2011: 107).[3] What characterizes "immaterial labour" is instead its being socially organised through a multiplicity of intertwined networks, associations, and movements. Negri locates a paradox here: he suggests that what characterises art of this late period is that it vitally and corporeally stages "the abstraction of the social relations in which we exist" (Negri 2011: 107). In summary, echoing Negri's and others' contextualising and historicising gestures, I'd like to suggest that it is not only new product-forms that constitute postmodern art and music, but new forms of making, production, and process, entailing a dialectic of materiality and ephemerality.[4] Žižek's formulation of fetishism, products, and processes is helpful here. However, before explicating a Žižekian interpretation more fully, it worth briefly noting this concept's longer history – both within musical discourses and a broader plain of cultural production.

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[2] Bishop considers "delegated performance" practices, which 'outsource' the undertaking of artistic work by nonartists, at the direction of the artist, relating these to contemporary labour practices, managerialism, and outsourcing (see Chapter 8, *Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity* in Bishop 2012). Grant explores the role of assistants 'to the artist' (e.g. with Jeff Koons) and concludes: "The artist no longer has to make anything or have any specific skills, but as the widespread refusal to eliminate the notion of the artist as the individual "creator" of an artwork indicates, the essence of authorship remains a central art world value". (Grant 2017: 237).

[3] Elsewhere Negri refers parenthetically to "cognitive labour" (Negri 2011:115).

[4] Echoing Negri (2011: 108) one might add here that art needn't blindly reproduce dominant modes of production; it might act critically as an immanent space of contestation.

Fetishism: Marx, Freud, Adorno, Žižek

According to William Pietz, the term 'fetish', along with the word 'aesthetics', "became generally accepted in European intellectual culture" in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. Interestingly, Pietz points out that, in the Enlightenment view, both concepts "marked philosophical attempts to theorize certain subjective processes and creedal effects specific to the perceiving mind's direct relation to 'sensuous materiality'" (2003: 306–307). Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud's later developments of the term shaped and inspired (related but changed) usages of the term 'fetishism' by the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists, as well as development of the concept by Slavoj Žižek.

For Marx, fetishism was endemic to the commodity-form under capitalism; the commodity, appearing in the marketplace, conceals the labour, conditions, and processes of its production. Furthermore, it dehumanises in encouraging one to see social relations (e.g. collaborative making) as abstracted economic relations (Marx s.a.: unpaginated). For Freud (1927), by contrast, fetishism emerged through an (imagined, feared) loss of something – ultimately, the phallus, at (imagined, feared) risk of castration. In this view, the subject symbolically resists castration by investing in an object substituted in place of this lack. As Žižek (2008b: 50) summarises, "in Marxism a fetish conceals the positive network of social relations, whereas in Freud a fetish conceals the lack ('castration') around which the symbolic network is articulated".

Drawing on Marx's and Freud's thinking, Adorno's comments on fetishism provide a 'classic' account of the concept within a musical setting, providing a key point of contrast with a Žižekian reading. For Adorno, the fetish object correlated with a regressive subject. In his 1938 essay, *On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening*, Adorno (1985: 286) wrote that, "The counterpart to the fetishism of music is a regression of listening". Like a child with "stubborn malice", the listener in mass culture repeatedly demands "the one dish they have once been served" (Adorno 1985: 290).

Adorno's account – focusing on mass culture, production and consumption – foregrounds Marx's notion of fetish (commodities) over Freud's (castration). But his Marxian conception harbours a psychoanalytic underbelly, owing to his use of the aesthetic concept of mimesis, which for Adorno has a defensive as well as an expressive function: paradoxically, the consumer's fetishistic identification with the product consumed is an attempt to *escape* mass culture's homogeneity. "They overcome the feeling of impotence that creeps over them in the face of monopolistic production by identifying themselves with the inescapable product" (Adorno 1985: 288). A choice is made to embrace what is avoidable. This, we note below, may relate to Žižek's thoughts on *externalisation* whereby one's 'intimate' inner life is located in an 'external' world of (fetish) objects and activity.

Common fetish objects listed by Adorno include: themes and basic musical ideas – something the listener "thinks he can put in his pocket and take home"; singing voices, musical stars, and musical works; a veneer of musical wholeness might also function fetishistically, under which "all the cogwheels mesh so perfectly that not the slightest hole

remains open for the meaning of the whole" (Adorno 1985: 277, 276, and 284).[5] In his *Philosophy of Modern Music,* Adorno (2007: 125) also cites "fetishism of the means" in musical composition – fetishisation of a technical brilliance that is expressively and aesthetically without depth – which is of interest only to "listeners who worship mere skill".

Žižek has said much too about fetishism. Holly Watkins (2012: 450) captures well the spirit of Žižek's "carnivalesque mode of argumentation" when she writes that, "like a maddened bee, Žižek buzzes back and forth over a sprawling field of cultural motifs, repeatedly dipping into the same 'flowers' from slightly different angles of incidence". Somewhere between Freud's compulsion to repeat and Hegel's dialectic of unity through variation, Žižek revisits and interpretively reworks cultural objects over and again, never seemingly satisfied with a 'final' interpretation that seizes the object as such.

Fetishism is similarly revisited and threaded through various aspects of Žižek's writing. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology,* Žižek analyses the *form* of Marx's commodity-form and the *form* of Freud's dreamwork. Marx's commodity and Freud's dream – in both, what is analysed is "*the 'secret' of the form itself*" (Žižek 2008b: 3, emphasis in the original). Žižek suggests that, for Marx, classical bourgeois political economy knows that beside the 'manifest' text of commodities is the 'latent' content of labour – but this model is insufficient in that it "cannot explain the true secret, not the secret behind the form but the secret of this form itself". He continues – "it is the same as with the dream: even after we have explained its hidden meaning, its latent thought, the dream remains an enigmatic phenomenon" (Žižek 2008b: 8). This focus on form *itself as* secret (rather than form as concealing a 'hidden secret' behind it) is core to the following discussion because, as is suggested below, some sonic practices announce their 'hidden secrets' openly, for instance, by drawing attention to how sounds are made, while the "the '*secret' of the form itself*" remains undisclosed. One should ask, then, not what is the secret *behind* the sonic fetish, but what is the *secret that is the form of sonic fetishism*?

Žižek (2008b: 9) suggests that the dialectics of the commodity-form "presents us with a pure […] version of a mechanism offering us a key to the theoretical understanding" to phenomena besides only the commodity. More broadly, this form foregrounds the (mis)perception of an autonomous entity in place of the heterogeneous processes that gave rise to that entity. In a Marxian formulation, the relation between people becomes displaced onto a relation between things. In this classic characterisation, fetishism is normally said to be a fetish of objects. For Freud, similarly, the fetish is similarly oriented around an object: it is a substitute phallus.

In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek suggests that it is not only objects that are fetishized: intersubjective relations themselves also might be. This follows Žižek's clarification and broadening of Marxian fetishism. He describes "the notion of a certain 'fetishism' which is independent of the opposition between 'people' and 'objects': it designates a state in which the effect of a 'structure', of a network, is (mis)perceived as the direct property of an

[5] Under the latter, Freud's fetish-concept arguably shows through; the object involves filling a gap, a substitute for something lacking.

individual entity" (Žižek 2008a: 127). He follows Marx in giving a pre-capitalist, pre-commodity-form example: the king in feudal society, who is misperceived as possessing inherent power, rather than a power stemming from intersubjective relations. This is a fetish of the *interpersonal*, one that contrasts with commodity fetishism, a form of *object-fetish* par excellence. Where the commodity-form arises, "what is displaced [from this previous, pre-commodity fetishism…] is *fetishism itself* – namely the previous *direct* 'fetishization' of intersubjective relations" (Žižek 2008a: 127, emphasis in the original). This is important for Žižek's argument about fetishism as it constitutes a proposal that fetishism need not necessarily be organised around an object.

Žižek pursues this thought further – and here his Lacanianism is readily evident – when he suggests that this fetish of 'direct' intersubjective relations must also be understood to be mediated by "invisible symbolic structure which regulates these relations". To forget this is to "(mis)perceive the situation as simply involving 'relations between people'", and to fall into fetishistically reifying these intersubjective relations (Žižek 2008a: 128). This is to say that there is something going on *in addition* to distinguishing fetishism that is (1) directed towards objects and (2) focused on the interpersonal: there is some symbolic framework at work which functions to enable a displacement of the relations between people (the interpersonal) onto the sphere of a relation between things (object).

With musical practices reentering this discussion, one could ask: *What is the invisible (or 'inaudible') symbolic regulation of practices which takes us beyond the performance of stable objects in music and sound art?* As Lydia Goehr (2011: 120, emphasis in the original) has summarised, in John Cage's view it seemed as if "music as a *performance* practice had given itself over to the highly controlled assembly production of *products*". One might seek to disturb the reified musical product-object by scrutinising performance practices and sensitising listeners to the results of indeterminate processes through a disciplined openness towards unpredictable sonic results. *But is this to escape fetishism as such?* Turning to new forms of (musical, artistic) production does not – necessarily – forego fetishism, especially when the symbolic structures on which production and intersubjectivity rest still persist (here, the concert-performance system, for example). I hope it is clear that my aim *is not* to label Cage or others as 'fetishists' per se, by rather to more fully theorise the mechanics of fetishism's operation, in musical processes and production *as well* as musical objects or products (such as those outlined by Adorno).

While Cage, through turning to particular processes, may have dereified the musical product, this was achieved through two dialectically related extremes: *either* 'sound itself' was heard on its own terms, and thus radically desituated in a manner that, ironically, echoed the fetish object's detaching from the conditions of its production; *or*, conversely, the sound-as-product was eschewed through entailing fascination in seeing – in being *shown* – what was behind the sound. The latter was constituted through an exploratory encounter of objects – for Cage, these have famously included radios, cacti, as well as musical instruments – in order to discern their sonic affordances through open-ended performance activities. To borrow Žižek's (2008a: 130) words, originally referring to television programmes on *"the making of..."*: here "the production process, far from being the secret locus of the prohibited, of what cannot be shown, of what is concealed by the fetish, serves as the fetish, which fascinates

with its presence". One of the things at stake in Cage's live, musical example is the 'directness' with which the performer confronts us, and the intersubjective relation between performers that constitute this directness. And here meet the two sides of the *either/or* just mentioned: even the sounds are direct, where in Cage's (2011: 84) view they do not become vehicles for meaning but are taken self-sufficiently – "sounds as sounds".

Žižek (2008a: 130, emphasis in the original) suggests that what is concealed in the fetish of production is the "social *mode* of production". Furthermore, Žižek argues that this laying bare of the production behind the fetish-object (e.g. "the making of…" programme) is a peculiarly postmodern fetishism, one that dissipates the materiality of the fetish, one directly related to the other two modes of fetishism (see Žižek 2008a: 130-131): fetishism of the interpersonal (the king and his subjects), and the object-focused (the commodity-form) – a historical observation according with the three very different late twentieth-century examples discussed below: (1.) Cagean practices of performance and listening, (2.) Steve Reich's conception of music 'as a gradual process', and (3.) Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of its Own Making*. In this view, fetishism still might function, it seems, where one turns away from products produced *and instead puts on show one's processes of production.*

1. Cage's performing and listening

Cage's openness to worldly sounds might at first sight appear to be the antithesis of fetishism: attending to listening processes dereifies the sonic product. However, this reading does not recognise a complex dialectic under which the *process by which* one regards one's object might itself become fetishised. A precedent might be cited in Adorno's influential essay. Adorno suggests this form of fetishism finds its height in the ham radio listening, which is not concerned with the object of listening, but the situation of listening. The ham radio enthusiast, Adorno (1985: 293) writes, inserts himself, "with his private equipment, into the public mechanism, without exerting even the slightest influence on it". Here Adorno associates fetishism with a pseudo-activity. Similarly, Cagean listening strategies provide a situation of listening, in which one finds joy in the withdrawal of one's own activity and the opening of one's ears to 'whatever' is there. A sonic object comes into focus through the enaction of a process of listening – although unlike the ham radio listener, Cage relies on a disciplined listening technique, rather than a technology (radio apparatus).

Žižek's concept of fetishism provides a different reading. Cagean listening – to adopt a Žižekian tone – posits sound as an other, to be enjoyed in its otherness.[6] This otherness concerns fetishism directly. For Žižek, others act *as if* they act for us. Žižek (2008b: 32–33) gives two very different examples: the Buddhist prayer wheel, which prays 'in the place' of the worshiper, and the laugh track on the TV show, an other "relieving us of our duty to laugh". While Adorno might have called this pseudo-activity, for Žižek this mode of activity – *activity undertaken through drawing on the other's action* – is in fact a constitutive feature

[6] In fact, it's worth noting that for a number of thinkers bearing the influence of Lacan, sound – especially the voice – is often associated with otherness; sound is not just an other, but an object quintessentially characterising otherness, see Bard-Schwarz 2018.

of modern subjectivity. Žižek relates this closely to what he terms "fetishistic disavowal". This, he argues, is based on an accepted but unspoken knowledge that one is undertaking a displacement. He argues that people "know very well that the commodity-money is nothing but a reified form of the appearance of social relations [… however,] the paradox is that in their social activity they act *as if* they do not know this" (Žižek 2008a: 135, emphasis in the original).[7]

This begs the question, what is the action that sound undertakes under Cagean aesthetics? One could summarise sound's being heard as (if) free, as (if) plenitudinous, as (if) open-ended. In the terms of Žižekian fetishistic disavowal: Cagean performance and listening practices undertake activity that insist on sound's freedom and autonomy – one *acts as if sound is free and autonomous* – even if one knows very well that sound is always dependant on something extraneous in terms of its production.[8] Further, in Cagean performance and listening, one hears the social – one hears traces of (social) bodies in (social) settings of performance, or opens oneself to the (socially situated) sound of traffic – all the while asserting that one's focus is on 'sound itself'; one acts as if ones does not know that sonic relations bear the mark of sociality.[9]

Indeed, the "sociality of sounds", to borrow a phrase from Douglas Kahn (1999: 162), may be actively repressed in performance situations. As Benjamin Piekut (2011: 153) has argued, Cage "generally preferred sounds that were 'natural' or articulated 'nature' as a sonic entity that could be uncovered, rather than created, by human activity. Even Cage's city sounds, such as automobile traffic, indicated rather his interest in chaotic auditory phenomenon than in human history or society". Furthermore, interpretations of Cage's work that incorporated explicitly political (and thus social) content, "were not characteristic of Cage's taste". Sounds heard under a Cagean strategy are exaggerated and reified in an existence ('*as if*') divided from their production though the assertion of their autonomy.[10]

This characteristic openendness of listening is echoed in Cagean composition and performance practices. Cage (2011: 39) famously spoke of "composition which is indeterminate with respect to its performance. That composition is necessarily experimental. An experimental action is one the outcome of which is not forseen [*sic.*]. Being unforseen, this action is not concerned with its excuse. Like the land, like the air, it needs none". Cage was suspicious of total determination in music. In his lecture on indeterminacy, Cage (characteristically suggested that the

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[7] Žižek argues that Marx's notion of reification leaves out the aspect of *doing*, pointing instead only to *knowing;* individuals, Žižek suggests, *know* that when they use money there is nothing magical about it, that money's materiality is an expression of social relations – but they act *as if this not the case*. "They are fetishists in practice, not in theory". (Žižek 2008b: 28).

[8] This could sometimes be said also of the positioning of 'sound' in Sound Studies. Steven Connor (2015) argues this discipline coalesces through a "shared fantasy of what sound is and can do" – that is, a generative theoretical and ontological investment characterises sound.

[9] On this point also see Wilson 2020.

[10] Echoing Žižek, one could say that the 'truth' of Cagean aesthetics lies precisely in its provision of a "reductionist exaggeration", a universalised claim of sounds' autonomy and freedom (see Žižek 2008a: 117–118).

> function of the conductor is that of a contractor, who, following an architect's blueprint, constructs a building [i.e. the musical work]. The function of the instrumentalists is that of workmen who simply do as they are bid. The conductor is not able to conduct from his own center but must identify himself insofar as possible with the center of the work as written. The instrumentalists are not able to perform from their several centers but are employed to identify themselves insofar as possible with the directives given by the conductor. They identify with the work itself, if at all, by one remove [i.e. the conductor]. From that point of view from which each thing and each being is seen as moving out from its own center, this situation of the subservience of several to the directives of the one who is himself controlled, not by another but by the work of another, is intolerable (Cage 2011: 37).

In the view that Cage critically summarises, the musical product determines the actions of the conductor, and the conductor determines those of the performers. Cage argues that this singular focus obscures manifold other 'centres' – those of the conductor and the numerous performers. His critique suggests a disputation of the fetish of the product and, in fact, of the fetish of the interpersonal (the conductor as a powerful 'king', to cite Marx's example analogously): to focus singularly on the product is to obscure other aesthetic – even ethical – factors that take place within its production.

But the relationship between product and production in Cagean aesthetics is rather more complex than a mere negation of fetishism. Recalling Negri, this relationship also relates to other – nonartistic – domains of production. Considering a story relayed by Cage makes this clearer. In 1973 Cage spoke of a friend, an Indian factory owner, Gautham Sarabhai, and the relationship between production and product in his textile factory:

> this textile factory in India realized the need to give up the ancient procedure of a man making a piece of cloth from beginning to end by himself. It had to adopt certain factory conventions that are or of an assembly line, really, so that one person would do something to a piece of cloth, and another person would do something else. And in the end no one [person] had produced it. It has been produced by a group that was not a group of individuals even (Cage in Kostelantez and Cage 1988: 121–122).

However, Cage noted that this new production model made the workers unhappy – and he suggests this was due to the size of the group of workers. Sarabhai, in Cage's recollection, "wanted to solve this problem of accomplishing more work […] and yet not to make his workmen miserable" (Kostelantez and Cage 1988: 122). The management remedied this situation through calling first on "Japanese specialists, who had been studying this problem of factory work", and then "someone […] from the United States", who undertook "systematic experiment" with the size of workers' teams. They concluded that too large (Cage cited the number thirteen) or too small a team (four workers) was the core issue; one needed between five and twelve workers as this enables an "esprit de corps, the spirit of the group" (Ibid.).

There are a number of features of Cage's story that pertain to our discussion of fetishism, process, and production. Reading across industrial and artistic spheres, Cage's comment that "in the end no one [person] had produced [the cloth]" implies something about authorship in both contexts: factory production – that classic arena of Marxist fetishism – is suggestive of a certain modality of authorship, one that is laudable in pushing productive practices beyond the individual ego, but problematic in denying individuality and the happiness of the social

bonds formed between individuals. Cage asserts need for a balance between collective and individual – and in fact Cage's story follows directly a discussion about the size of musical ensembles and situations where "when a group of individuals becomes a group, they in a certain sense are no longer individuals" (Kostelantez and Cage 1998: 121).[11]

Second, Cage uses the example of industrial production to meditate on artistic production – *the very fact of the easy translatability across these domains is itself notable*. Cage seems to imply that by focusing on the number of people, and the interpersonal relations that emerge through this balancing of individuality and group, there will concretise a more gratifying (dare one say 'authentic'?) mode of production – both in factory production and artistic production.[12] One could say that Cage does question the alienation experienced by the worker when cast as an element in a Fordist mechanism – and, analogously, he does problematise the role of the musical performer as a tool within a compositional scheme dictated by the conductor (as 'contractor', 'foreman', or 'manager') and composer (cast parallel to Marx's 'king').

But, to echo Žižek: the easy translatability between factory and artistic production in Cage's narrative is also indicative of some shared dynamic, some common *invisible mediating symbolic structure* through which this equivalence is drawn. This symbolic framework underpinning the mode of production is obscured where one only speaks of interpersonal interactions as determined – for instance – by numbers of people. Such an 'equivalence' is also evident in Cage's belief that artworks could, in Branden W. Joseph's (1997: 61) words, "serve as exemplary instances of a social existence equally situated beyond the realm of legal or authoritarian limitations". A correspondence is drawn between ideal sound structure and utopian social structure, where one acts *as if* sounds are free and independent in the face of unfree and alienating modernity. This mirroring of the social in the sonic, in the Žižekian-Lacanian view, constitutes a *misrecognition*. However this is not to say this is purely illusory, for identity is located through misrecognition; Žižek (2008b: 20) writes of Lacan's *mirror stage* that "identity and alienation are thus strictly correlative". As Žižek points out, fetish and misrecognition are both based on "the property of 'being-an-equivalent'", a property of two things held in equivalence which appears to be naturalised – in this case, the relationship between artistic and nonartistic production, and resultant sounding.

2. Reich's "Music as a Gradual Process"

In Steve Reich's influential 1968 manifesto *Music as a Gradual Process* the composer outlines a music in which, as the title indicates, process is foregrounded through time: "pieces

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[11] Throughout his career Cage seemed to be navigating his question of the relation between individual and collective. In his earlier lecture on indeterminacy, Cage makes the suggestion that one physically separate players such that sounds emerge from their own separable centres. Separation also promotes "independent action" on the part of players (Cage 2011*:* 39).

[12] Within the visual arts, Kim Grant has explored how artists have become often celebrated as exemplars of more authentic modes of production – and *being*. Crucially, this 'self-realization' isn't necessarily emancipatory, and may differentially function as both conforming to and disruptive of a neoliberal selfhood (see chapter 5, "The Artist's Process as a Means of Self-Realization" in Grant 2017).

of music that are, literally, processes". These pieces "determine all the note-to-note (sound-to-sound) details and the overall form simultaneously", and as such no distinction is made between form and content (Reich 2005: 304). As Galen H. Brown summarises, process for Reich is an end in itself, rather than a hidden means for producing material that ultimately stands apart from this (Brown 2010: 181–183). Adapting Žižek's formulation of the postmodern, one could say that Reich emphases that the musical product (the sonic result) and its *'making of…'* (its process of emergence) should be identical.

Crucial to Reich's idea is the audibility of the process, that it can be heard to be happening: "I am interested in perceptible processes. I want to be able to hear the process happening throughout the sounding music" – hence the need for this to be gradual (Reich 2005: 304). Reich explicitly contrasts this perceptibility with inaudible processes that have gone into compositional making at the level of technique, such as serial methods and Cagean chance procedures. Indeed, Reich seems taken with these dual points of contrast, elsewhere (Reich quoted in Pierson 2016: 49) stating that, "Serialism and Cage gave me something to push against".

Reich expresses an interest in the *impersonal.* In language that anticipates a then-future generative and algorithmic music-making, Reich (2005: 305) suggests that in this new music "once the process is set up and loaded it runs by itself". Reich is equivocal on the roles of human and machines in this autonomous 'running'. In *Gradual Process* he wrote that whether process unfolds due to human action or to "electro-mechanical means is not finally the main issue", although this does have implications for musical expression (2005: 305); however, in 1970, a year later, he suggested that pulse-based music should follow a steady pulse that is definitively *not* produced by a "electronic sequencer or rhythmic device", which is ultimately "stiff and unmusical", because "it is actually tiny microvariations of that pulse created by human beings, playing instruments or singing, that gives life to the music" (Reich quoted in Pierson 2016: 43). Impersonal, machinic, repetitive material is here enlivened by its human execution.

Adorno and Žižek's thinking both might shed light on what is at stake with this 'impersonal' aspect. It has a precedent – if expressed in a polemical form – in Adorno's (not unproblematic) reading of Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat*, in *Philosophy of Modern Music.* For Adorno, this work turns to objective techniques and sensuous, material effects – and away from subjective expression – to such an extreme that this provides a "conspicuous moment of depersonalization". Drawing on a psychoanalytic discourse explicitly, Adorno suggests that "the alienation of music from the subject, and at the same time, its relation to physical sensations find a pathological analogy in the illusory physical sensations of those who are conscious of their own body as an alien object" (Adorno 2007: 127). There is a turn from the inner to the outer, with a subject at unbridged distance from its object (indeed one's own body similarly becomes experienced as just another worldly object). For Adorno, Stravinsky practices a musical schizophrenia.

A Žižekian reading of the impersonal renders a different conclusion. The term 'external' is useful here; a term, which Žižek uses to characterise a form of thought located outside of ("external to") the individual, and hence something associated with the Symbolic order. In

The Sublime Object of Ideology he positions one possible definition of the unconscious in these terms, as "*the form of thought whose ontological status is not that of thought*, that is to say, the form of thought external to the thought itself – in short some Other Scene external to the thought whereby the form of thought is already articulated in advance" (Žižek 2008b: 13, emphasis in the original). I'd like to pick up on Žižek's suggestion by considering musical practices as potentially manifesting forms of "thought external to thought itself".

This is a formulation particularly well suited to Reich's music. Recall Reich's thought, cited already, that "once the process is set up and loaded it runs by itself". Here the action (after the initial choice to put it in motion) is conceived of as external to the subject. Indeed, the implications of this externalisation become even more stark when one considers Žižek's suggestion that materialised externalities act for subjects, *one whose behalf the object acts.* This extends the notion of 'fetishistic disavowal' introduced above. Žižek puts this most boldly when he writes, stitching Lacan and Marx, that "*things (commodities) themselves believe in their place,* instead of the subjects […,] *things believe for them* [the subjects]" (Žižek 2008b: 31, emphasis in the original). Similarly to Žižek's already-cited example of the Buddhist prayer wheel, which prays for the worshiper, the listener's private, 'intimate', subjective experience is brought about – and consists in – a formulation enacted through external processes that seem to run 'by themselves', impersonally, in an external other.

Regarding otherness and the subject, Holly Watkins has suggested that Žižek does not take account of the private nature of desire, that the object of desire is different for different listeners (Watkins 2012: 453). This is fair criticism in one sense, in that it draws attention to diverse listener experiences that are bulldozed in some universalising psychoanalytic imaginings of 'the subject' (also see Wilson 2018). At the same time, I would gently disagree with Watkin's criticism in another respect: Žižek, I think, *does* take account of different listeners' 'private' experiences, but paradoxically by locating these in an outside that is *always already differentiated and polymorphous*, changing in light of shifting forms of social activity.[13] One could add that Žižek seems less interested in the specific content of the desired *objet a*, and more in the *formal gesture that constitutes desire*, put in motion by it. To borrow a phrase from Christopher Tarrant's Žižekian reading of sonata form, these musical forms "do not give us what we desire: they tell us how to desire" (Tarrant 2018: 96). Indeed, as Robert Fink (2005: 10) has argued, the changing form of "tonal desire in repetitive music" that one finds in Reich's (and other's) music correlated with a contemporary change in "consumer *telos*" in 1960s America. Apparently 'private' desiring is produced and enacted through external historical and social contingencies.

Reich draws attention to another aspect of an impersonal 'externality' in his text. Processes "can give one a direct contact with the impersonal and also a kind of complete control" (Reich 2005: 305). Here Reich implies that the impersonal is beyond one's own control. He continues: "By 'a kind' of complete control I mean that by running this material through this process I completely control all that results, but also that I accept all that results without changes" (Ibid.). The subject in this case has control over and sets in motion a situation under which control is then withdrawn, and which is enjoyed in its otherness. "Listening to an

[13] As Žižek (2008b: 33) puts it, 'intimate' mental states are "materialized in our effective social activity".

extremely gradual musical process opens my ears to *it*, but *it* always extends farther than I can hear, and that makes it interesting to listen to that musical process again" (Ibid., emphasis in the original). Adopting a voice that is uncannily Lacanian at this moment, Reich highlights how the illusive object ("*it*"), through our focus on it, recedes yet nevertheless draws us forward.

This resonates with what Žižek, after Lacan, might call the *objet petit a*, the object cause of desire. That is to say that Reich's processes, despite the listener's knowledge of the parameters in motion, entice listeners' fascination through eliciting something through this set of Symbolic elements at play. Reich focuses on and foregrounds the interplay of elements of musical 'language' (comprising, for instance: pitches and rhythms, harmonic distinctions and contrasts, additive and reductive actions, and so on).[14] As Reich (2005: 305) himself puts it, *"*even when all the cards are on the table and everyone hears what is gradually happening in a musical process, there are still enough mysteries to satisfy all". One, as listener, knows what the gradual process is – the process might be banal (think of Reich's wonderfully simple *Clapping Music)* – yet one is still, compellingly and joyously drawn to listen.

To put this another way: musical process in this sense calls forth the listener.[15] Indeed, this formulation, focusing on the process as *heard* (as relation between sonic object and listening subject) underlines the inherently depersonalised character of Reich's musical process. Reich has not hidden some secret expressive content *behind* the process, that ultimately comes to be revealed. Instead, the mystery that draws us in arises from known musical processes (the 'form itself'), elements of a symbolic framework put in motion. Yet, this symbolic framework is at the same time marked by a lack – suggesting a content that cannot be fully known – *within* the 'linguistic' interplay of musical elements unfolding before our ears. A dialectic opens between symbolic authority of the forms and processes utilised and the lack that emerges within them. As Martin Scherzinger (2005: 213) puts it, "the unintended moments in Reich's music are mysterious precisely because they *depend* upon the apparent audibility of the structures producing them". In contradiction with Reich's assertion that process and sounding music are the same thing, there is in fact a "*mismatch* between the motor process and sounding forms that grants the music its remarkable aesthetic power" (Ibid., emphasis in the original).

Towards the end of his manifesto Reich confirms that chasing "*it*" constitutes an interest in the impersonal: "Focusing in on the musical process makes possible that shift of attention away from *he* and *she* and *you* and *me* outward toward *it*" (Reich 2005: 306, emphasis in the original).[16] An interest in the transindividual – and in something located externally to identifiable individuals – is manifested musically through an intense focus on processes

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[14] I use the word 'language' in non-restrictive sense, following Kenneth Smith's (2011: 354) suggestion that "music is certainly linguistic according to Lacan's own formulation of language as a discontinuous system of signifiers". Watkins is correct to point out that Žižek himself is guilty of underappreciating the 'linguistic' aspects of music, and writes that his "suggestion that Romantic music bathes the listener in a stream of *jouissance* fails to recognize the presence of a syntactical order in music analogous to the symbolic order of language" (Watkins 2012: 453).

[15] Watkins has discussed, in a Žižekian guise, how we might "conceptualise ourselves as music's Other" – hence that it calls on *us.* See Watkin 2012: 458.

unfolding through the symbolic framework explored. Reich said elsewhere that, "a performance is for us a situation where all the musicians, including myself, attempt to set aside our individual thoughts and feelings of the moment, and try to focus our minds and bodies clearly on the realization of one continuous musical process" (Reich quoted in Scherzinger 2005: 221). Note the difference from Cage's comments on performance: while Cage looked beyond the ego, he looked to the multiple centres *of the performers,* rather than resigning this to an impersonal Symbolic. Through Reich's turn towards impersonal process, this Symbolic retains us through underscoring that, paradoxically, it is not total. Our consciousness of the process reveals both the process and the incapacity of the Symbolic to encompass this process totally. As Julia Kristeva put it, writing of objects of desire and knowledge, "the system Freud calls perception-knowledge […] is always already marked by a lack: for it shelters within its very being the nonsignifiable, the nonsymbolized" (Kristeva 1982: 81). In Reich's music, this fascinating, unsymbolized excess comes to the fore in musical processes, paradoxically, through our investment in this symbolic field.

3. Morris's Box with the Sound of its Own Making

The artist Robert Morris influentially explored the dialectics of product and process in various works and writings. As Kim Grant (2017: 193) points out, the artist went on to "articulate the concerns of process art and to attempt to theorize their significance in a series of articles published in *Artforum* between 1968 and 1970". *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* (1961) pre-emptively materialises some of these dialectics of product and process. At its most literal, *Box* consists of a 9¾ inch wooden cube, accompanied by playback of a three-and-a-half hour recording of the box being made.

Morris's exploration of process can be placed in two contexts: firstly, that of broader set of contemporaneous arts practices and, secondly, that of this own artistic trajectory. Of the former, one could note that Morris tended to foreground the materiality of processes (something evidenced in *Box*), as part of a wider trend of artists "engaged with examining the physicality of making and the material properties of their media" (Grant 2017: 193). Furthermore, one might consider Morris's contact with the process-based practices of others, such as that of John Cage.[17] Indeed, the Morris-Cage connection has been chronicled by Branden W. Joseph, who has shown how Morris drew on some Cagean procedures (for example, using chance in the 1960s) while, later, criticising Cage, on the basis that he utilized abstract (i.e. distinctly 'non-material') processes in relation to his artistic material. In an essay from 1970 Morris wrote that "kind of duality at work here [in Cagean practice] in splitting off the structural organization from the physically perceived still has strains of European Idealism about it" (Morris quoted in Joseph 2007: 68).[18]

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[16] This fascination with the object, this turn from the individual ego, is a shared by Cage, although actualised differently.

[17] Bryan-Wilson (2003: 113) writes that, "when Morris first showed it to composer John Cage, Cage obligingly listened to the three-and-a-half-hour tape from beginning to end". Also see Joseph 1997.

Regarding the second context, Morris's own artistic development, the artist has spoken of how the treatment of process and product in *Box* enabled him to foreground and address a conflict inherent in his earlier work – of painting – in which process (the temporal act of the painting) and product (the final painting itself, situated spatially) relate to one another but are divided.[19] *Box* raised this oppositionality, making it both visible and audible. Indeed, sound is instrumental in achieving this:

> with certain objects that I could split it [temporal process and spatialised product] apart even further. And that was more acceptable to me. Like the box with the sound. On the one hand you do have the process and it's time, literally time it's a sound. And on the other hand you have the object which is spatial. So that was a way of dealing with the two things by separating them (Morris in Cummings and Morris 1968).

As Morris states also, "this completely split the process and the object. And yet put them both back together again. So in some way I think this was a work that allowed me then to go ahead. I mean really resolved that conflict that had occurred in painting" (Morris in Cummings and Morris 1968). This dual splitting and staged interreliance between process and product has been interpreted in terms of an expressed difference with the commodity-form that so dominated 1960s America. Julia Bryan-Wilson (2003: 113) suggests that "Morris tried to build an object that would retain and inscribe his efforts; unlike a commodity fetish, the sculpture does not wide out or abstract away the labor power that made it [….] Indeed, by creating a piece that is inseparable from the chronicle of its production, Morris disputes the capitalist drive to force the separation between a thing and its maker".

I agree. However, this isn't the end of the story of the work's relation to fetishism. First, a work such as *Box* foregrounds an interplay between presence and absence. As Brandon LaBelle (2006: 83) puts it, this work "is really two boxes: the one presented in front of me as a finished and stable material fabrication, and the other as the continual replaying of its building, as recording buried inside the other". We have the box of the production process and the box as the product. As such, this stages "a conversation between immediacy, as presence, and reproduction, as mediation" (LaBelle 2006: 81). I want to add that presence and absence is also suggestive of questions of plenitude and lack that speak to the psychoanalytical conceptions of fetishism, in addition to that of the commodity fetish noted by Bryan-Wilson. One might begin by noting that the work's sonic staging of the scene of its own production promises etiological proximity on the part of the viewer-listener while, at the same time, underscoring their historical and experiential distance from this generative activity – that which made this reflection possible.

Secondly, one should note that the very possibility of staging this dereification of the product through presenting a trace of now-absent production *relies* on other forms of absence.

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[18] See Joseph 2007: 62 regarding indeterminacy. As Joseph points out, despite Morris's criticism, Cage himself attempted to bridge the gap between process and product in works like *0'00"*, whose premiere performance, the self-referential act of an amplified writing-out of the work's score, constituted a visible and audible "fusing [of] the compositional process with its result" (2007: 69).

[19] In his writings in the late 60s and early 70s, Morris suggested another way forward *within* painting, as exemplified in the work of Jackson Pollock, who made integral "the relationship between physical process and visible product" (Joseph 2007: 68). Also see Grant (2017: 193) regarding Morris's influential 1968 essay, "Anti-Form".

Material aspects necessarily remain out of view for Morris's staging to be possible. On this point, LaBelle (2006: 83) adds that, in addition to the first two boxes of *Box* (first, the sonic trace of production and, second, the physical product), there is crucially a third box that "remains out of frame, and out of the remaining documentation, […] the tape machine, which in 1961 was exceptionally too large to fit into the other box, the one enclosed on itself".[20] *This reproductive technology* – this "all too real hardware of sound reproduction" (Ibid.) – *is obscured as a condition of marking the other 'productive processes', those constituted by the artist's labour.*

One could, in light of this, suggest that analogously Morris's presentation of production as a site of fetishized fascination conceals the 'social *mode* of production' that makes possible the presentation itself and the holding of viewer-listeners' interest. As noted already, for Žižek the fetish of production and consequent concealing of this modality is a defining quality of postmodernism. What's more, the staging of production relies on a mode of 'curatorial production' – that is, on the assumed, somewhat naturalised, though clearly social, role of the gallery as an institution productive of certain kinds of aesthetic experience and critical activity. Even the title – that situates it within artistic and curatorial discourse – is, in a sense, part of the artistic material, rather than only ancillary. As Peter Osborne points out, works like *Box* as "objects depend upon their titles to establish relations to the acts of their production within the frozen objecthood of their results. […] Unlike the studied anonymity of so much abstract painting and sculpture – with their strings of 'untitled' and numbered works – here, titles are very much part of the works, and in a this sense not really (merely) 'titles' at all" (Osborne 2002: 22–23). Indeed, examining the 'social *mode* of production' helps further develop the questions raised above about presence, absence, and materiality. While the *artist's* labour is marked in *Box*, other past processes of production remain necessarily concealed – those which made possible the gallery space and the material with which the artist works *in the first place.* One might cite Marx's notion of "dead labour", which here would refer to all the previous activity which went into making the tools with which Morris worked, the creation of the planks that formed *Box*, transformed from felled trees, themselves maintained in a landscape shaped by generations of pastoral and forestry activity….

"[W]hich is the 'real' box?", asks LaBelle (2006: 84), its "physical, wooden dimensions here before me, or its sounds, which emanate from within, as an index of its past?'' This is a productive question that the viewer-listener may ask, although one which cannot find closure – *yet one is still compelled to ask it*. In hearing the sound of *Box* the 'realness' of the box as object is somehow undercut. This seems to point to an excess that is sought to be understood, one that is not 'contained' by the box-product itself. And, in noting this, one notes also that 'realness' becomes an always receding object of desire. Indeed, more fundamentally, this search for the immediacy of 'realness' echoes the Lacanian functioning of desire as such. The Real – a register of immediacy, trauma, and excess – arises only as surplus, and it is this "surplus of the Real over every symbolization that functions as the object-cause of desire" (Žižek 2008b: xxv). Furthermore, in the particular context of *Box*, it is important to note that it is *sound* that functions as an ephemeral presence of the past, absent act of production; as

[20] The tape machine was "either presented hidden within a pedestal or behind a wall" (LaBelle 2006: 83).

noted above, sound, for Lacanians, is suggestive of the *objet a* – it is thus positioned well to entice us into fascination with its apparent excess with regard to a constraining Symbolic. Indeed, one might suggest that this excess fascinates also in the act of interpretation – as being enacted in this essay and in you the reader – in a manner that further complicates the product/production distinction: yes, *Box* is in a sense a 'product that marks process'. But to state emphatically that this is what it is, what it ultimately means, it also to miss something crucial. This is to forget a future open to potentially new interpretations, given an ambiguity reliant, paradoxically, on its marking of past processes. The 'product' begets productive potentialities – drawing forward through backward reference. The product is, in this sense, interpretatively productive. This modality of interpretation – which takes the product as itself productive – is comparable to Žižek's reading of the dreamwork in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*: it is not that the dream has a hidden content that, once uncovered, shuts down interpretation, rather it is the kernel of unreadability in the form of the dream ('the secret of the form itself') that continues to fascinate and offer productive possibilities; "if we seek the 'secret of the dream' in the latent content hidden by the manifest text, we are doomed to disappointment" (Žižek 2008b: 5).

Imaginary, Symbolic, Real

A Žižekian reading of fetishism enables us to better comprehend product and process in and after musical postmodernity. One could consider – without overstating – how Cage, Reich, and Morris's processes emphasise different aspects of aesthetic experience and, in Lacanian terms, a foregrounding of different registers, of Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, even if all three are always in motion.

Cagean practice turns performers and listeners to diverse others, be these human (other performers) or nonhuman (sound, objects). In an Imaginary play between wholeness and separation, one is encouraged to perceive one's (unintended) sounds, with these becoming objects of perception situated within a broader sonic environment. The ego is dissolved through immersion into the otherness of a world and 'esprit de corps' beyond the self; at the same time, one becomes distinctly aware of oneself and one's body in their sounding. Reich, by contrast, embraces impersonal processes, with his music playing out evolving relations between elements of musical language – a Symbolic framework of interrelated parts – that fascinate the listener for the very reason that the terms of this framework do not fully capture the result's expressive possibilities. The process always suggests an excess beyond the process. And, echoing Lacan's Real, Morris uses sound in *Box* as an index of the now-lost scene of the object's making. Sound here acts presently as an ephemeral marker of the distinct physicality of past action. Paradoxically, what draws the listener-viewer to encounter the object also marks something lost, thus holding them at a distance. They are drawn forward through a marked absence.

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