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"Hmmronk, Skrrrrape, Schttttokke". Searching for Automatism in Music

> The mind then proves to itself, fragmentarily of course, but at least *by itself*, that «everything above is like everything below» and everything inside is like everything outside. The world thereupon seems to be like a cryptogram which remains indecipherable only so long as one is not thoroughly familiar with the gymnastics that permit one to pass at will from one piece of apparatus to another.[1]

Surrealist Manifesto(s) author and the movement's most prominent, long-standing figure-head André Breton iterated unwaveringly on the integral connection between automatism and surrealist expression. To Breton, automatism was surrealism's catalyst. The unconscious, unmediated "world below" was to be accessed and expressed outwardly through the "gymnastics" of automatic processes. Breton, who was by his own account not the most likely candidate to address the topic of surrealism and music due to his lack of understanding and sometimes blatant repulsion of the latter, nevertheless suggested at the close of the essay *Silence is Golden* that perhaps there is a «virgin soil of sound» which is somehow accessible.[2] Accepting Breton's premises that surrealism is rooted in automatism and that there may indeed be some sort of sonic expression of the surreal, we might then ask, what might the automatic processes, those employed to access the roots of a Surreal music's «virgin soil», entail? Further, what does surrealism as expressed through music sound like? By investigating a brief history of automatism, its importance in surrealist literature, the connection between surrealism and music, and potential sonic

[1] André Breton, *On Surrealism in Its Living Works (1953)*, in Id., *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Seaver - Helen R. Lane, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1969, pp. 295-304: 302-303.

[2] André Breton, *Silence is Golden*, trans. by Louise Varèse, «Modern Music», XXI, 3 (1944), pp. 150-154: 154.

articulations of automatism, this essay will address the possibility of and problems associated with automatic expression through music.

In the opening pages of the first *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924) Breton elaborates on freedom and madness, the marvellous, the relevance of dreams, Freud, poetry, and, to a lesser extent, visual art. *Soluble Fish*, an automatically composed novel, concludes the *Manifesto*. With the exception of a brief analogy, Breton's musings are bereft of musical references. Where the concept of music does manifest itself, he presents a list of specific surreal attributes of the works and lives of well-known Frenchmen (mostly writers), subsequently explicating that the reason why they are *not* Surrealists beyond the attributes of their works is because they did not wish to «serve simply to orchestrate the marvelous score. They were instruments too full of pride».[3] Beyond this analogy, which ironically portrays sur-reality as «a marvelous score» (one may rhetorically ask, is Breton actually referring to a sonic «score» at all?) while simultaneously giving musical instruments the personified potential of pride, the exclusion of the concept of a surrealist music reflects Breton's overall distaste for the art. This is evidenced not only by the dearth of its appearance to any significant extent in his early writings, but also more overtly in his 1944 essay on music *Silence d'or*, translated as indicated above to *Silence is Golden*. Also of note is the fact that the nature of Breton's disdain was voiced once again later in his brief, unpublished written piece of 1955 on the music of Erik Satie. In this short declaration, Breton delved into the possible origins of his aversion: his own experience of music was one which, as he described it, had been «scrambled by birth».[4] In this later document, Breton presents a point of view that had been seemingly altered by self-insight. The world of music was, almost too simply put, beyond his understanding. In his writing favourably about Satie (it is common knowledge that the composer was initially shunned by Breton in the 1920s Parisian surrealist heyday) we can observe Breton's changed opinion, expressed not as a call for silent contemplation, but as a guarded tolerance that may be earned through the merits of the composer's work. While therefore only the starting-point for this tripartite study of automatism, surrealism, and music, Breton's decades-long distaste for the art form needs to be acknowledged at the outset since it was, in part, responsible for the near absence of musical material from the conversation.

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[3] André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)*, in Id., *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, cit., pp 1-47: 27.

[4] André Breton, [*Texte sur Satie*], original manuscript, 1955, available online at http://www.andrebreton.fr/work/56600100505260 (accessed on May 16, 2018).

The concept of automatism was first documented in the mid-nineteenth century by the neuropsychiatrist Jules Baillarger who had «asked his patients to write down any thought that was coming to their minds».[5] Automatism was further examined by the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, and then more extensively by Pierre Janet and Frederic Myers. Early clinical documentations of expressions of automatism, even if they *were* poetic or artistic, were not considered as art, but rather as symptoms of pathology. In terms of automatism's appropriation into surrealism, the seeds of Breton's interest in neuropsychiatry were sown while he was positioned as a medical orderly in Nantes, and later deepened when he undertook studies in neuropsychiatry and began caring for shell-shocked victims at a psychiatric centre during the First World War at Saint-Dizier. According to his then-peer and the future physician and author Théodore Fraenkel, Breton was disturbed by the fact that the poetry of his psychiatric inmates was, to him, superior to his own.[6] Following the war, Breton's interest in neuropsychiatry was eclipsed by his engrossment in the writings of Sigmund Freud and his own literary ambitions. His interest in Freudian psychoanalysis, one kindled earlier while studying neuropsychiatry, surpassed his fascination with the automatism of Janet and Myers.[7]

Nevertheless, interest in the concept of automatism did spread to those in the surrealist circle beyond Breton, and prompted explorations such as *Les Champs Magnétiques*, the collaboration co-authored by Breton and Philippe Soupault. Shuttering themselves in a room for weeks to accomplish their task, Breton and Soupault created this seminal 1920 surrealist work of automatic writing. Pure psychic automatism became famously central to the definition of surrealism enshrined in Breton's first *Surrealist Manifesto*. However, unlike the medium-channelled writings popular in Parisian culture of the time, surrealist automatism steered clear of spiritualist inclinations and drew instead from Freud's work. Freud had employed "free association" writing tasks with his patients as a form of tapping into the unconscious mind, and the Surrealists drew from Freud's language and methods, adapting these their own end. This reflected their keen interest not only in the products of automatism, but also the processes of it. As art scholar Willard Bohn phrased it:

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[5] Joost Haan - Peter J. Koehler - Julien Bogousslavsky, *Neurology and Surrealism. André Breton and Joseph Babinski*, «Brain. A Journal of Neurology», CXXXV, 12 (2012), pp. 3830-3838: 3832.

[6] *Ibidem*, p. 3835.

[7] Cf. Alexandra Bacopoulos-Viau, *Automatism, Surrealism and the Making of French Psychopathology. The Case of Pierre Janet*, «History of Psychiatry», XXIII, 3 (2012), pp. 259-276.

> the primary function of Surrealism is clearly to liberate the Freudian unconscious, to tap its powerful forces via automatic writing, automatic speech, and the analysis of dreams. The superior reality (or surreality) that these forms of association embody is that of the unconscious itself, the exploration of which will expand our total consciousness.[8]

On the topic of the connection between music and surrealism, and by extension music and automatism, while the connection between surrealism and music was virtually uncharted territory during the twentieth century, surrealist sonic expression appears plausible, Breton's opinion of the art form aside, particularly if we frame it within Breton's more complete definition of surrealism. In his words surrealism is

> Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, *or in any other manner* – the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.[9]

It was in Erik Satie's 1913 collection of three piano pieces titled *Descriptions automatiques*, explored in some musical detail in Sébastien Arfouilloux's comprehensive tome on surrealism and music *Que la nuit tombe sur l'orchestre*,[10] that the first mention of automatism in relation to music was made. With miniatures titled therein *Sur une lanterne*, and *Sur un casque*, what is perhaps most automatic, even surreal, about the pieces is *not* their sonic content, even for the period (when form and tonality were developing at an accelerated rate). To provide an example, *Sur un vaisseau*, the first of the three *Descriptions*, travels, albeit ambiguously, through tonal centres grounded in conventional triadic harmonies. These are articulated through a repeated rhythm to be played by the left hand. Above these tonal shifts are the playful and less rhythmically structured whimsical gestures of the right hand. Fairly straightforward as they are, though shifting in tonality and gesture, the more likely indicators of automatism at work in the three pieces of the collection are their accompanying spurts of written non-musical text. These occur interspersed within the musical notation. Though the specific title, *Descriptions automatiques*, alludes overtly to a connection with the automatic, the pieces were preceded and followed by other works of the composer that are similarly annotated with equally as intriguing performance notes. This suggests that if Satie were motivated by the concept of automatism

[8] Willard Bohn, *From Surrealism to Surrealism. Apollinaire and Breton*, «The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism», XXXVI, 2 (1977), pp. 197-210: 205.

[9] André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)*, cit., p. 26 (emphasis added).

[10] Cf. Sébastien Arfouilloux, *Que la nuit tombe sur l'orchestre. Surréalisme et musique*, Paris, Fayard, 2009, pp. 25-27.

in *Descriptions automatiques*, and intended the written expressions to be demonstrative of the process, it was perhaps part of a wider fascination with the paradox of mixing extreme precision and irrationality.

It is worth mentioning that there is a fair amount of overlap between dadaism and surrealism. Surrealism followed on the heels of dadaism, though the Dadaists were better known for their anti-art-establishment inclinations and their ironic use of found objects, whereas interest in automatism and the unconscious dominated surrealist method and discourse. Though Satie was not specifically aligned with the Surrealists or the Dadaists, the ironic sensibility that found its way into dadaist thinking and creation similarly made its way into Satie's music. To that end, it is possible that *Descriptions automatiques* was more of an ironic nod to the emerging seeds of the not yet-burgeoning Surrealists than an actual attempt at automatic writing or composing.

As already indicated, Satie's use of absurdist, ironic interjections predates the *Descriptions automatiques*. The 1908 composition *Désespoir agréable*, for instance, overtly incorporates the performance instruction «avec une ironie contagieuse». Pieces following the *Descriptions*, including those within the *Sports et divertissements* cycle such as the *Choral inappétissant*, are also demonstrative of Satie's sense of humour. Affixed to the *Choral*, Satie's annotations include the text «rébarbatif et hargneux», translated to «crabbed and cantankerous» according to the Salabert edition. The tongue-in-cheek irony demonstrated in the laconic chorale's conclusion, punctuated not so surprisingly by the date, «15 mai 1914» also includes just below it the parenthetical «le matin à jeun». Translated to «in the morning with an empty stomach», the sentiment addresses the composer's famished state, a connection to the title, and, perhaps with a speck of humour, the very nature of a life devoted to composing music. More indicative still of Satie's humour is the cycle's preface, wherein the *Chorale* is preceded by a short description and verse. Satie writes about the *Chorale*:

> For the "dried up" and the "stultified" I have added a chorale, sober and suitable. This makes a sort of wormwood preamble, a way of starting out wholly austere and unfrivolous.
> I have put into it everything I know about boredom.
> I dedicate this chorale to those who already dislike me.
> And withdraw.[11]

[11] Erik Satie, *Intégrale des œuvres pour piano publiées aux Éditions Salabert*, Paris, Éditions Salabert, 1999, p. 223.

One problem in the search for sonic surrealism, particularly if we accept Breton's definition of surrealism as «psychic automatism in its pure state»,[12] is that composed pieces follow deeply engrained notational and structural conventions. Satie himself, who collaborated on *Parade* (1916-1917) with the avant-gardist Jean Cocteau, and with René Clair on *Entr'acte* (1924), was never a member of the Parisian surrealist group despite contributing to and frequenting their events. And while Satie cast aside specific musical conventions and punctuated his scores with what may have been deliberately arbitrarily, if not fully automatically conceived written performance instructions which have the additionally enigmatic quality that they are never to be uttered aloud, he generally employed readily interpretable, easily legible notation. This is in contrast to the works of Adolf Wölfli, whose artistic oeuvre Breton deemed to be of the three or four most important of the twentieth century.[13] Wölfli's creations, whose musical "instructions" are far more difficult than Satie's to read from a musical standpoint, usually fall more directly within the categories of *Art brut* or Outsider Art, and perhaps even within Outsider Music if we are to consider only the sonically interpretable elements of his work. Many of Wölfli's pieces of visual art employ elements of musical notation. These include time signatures, notes of varying durations, and lined staves. Staves often feature six rather than the conventional five lines, perhaps drawn from an earlier encounter of the artist to tablature. Wölfli's notation, which is at best challenging to decipher, appears to serve as much a visual or graphical purpose as it does a musical one. Idiosyncratic texts wrap themselves around the colourful, often geographic non-music-related forms, this concept comprising a significant portion of the artist's visual works.

Beyond Satie, yet still within the context of established Western art music's contributors, a number of composers' works have derived connections to surrealism through their association with its related movements, dadaism serving as the prime example. At other times, music has been employed within surrealist works in other media with its meaning, as determined by the composer's original intention, altered. George Antheil and Fernand Léger's 1924 dadaist film *Ballet mécanique* (though a failed collaboration) and, by stark stylistic contrast and less direct association, Richard Wagner's *Liebestod* – the *Tristan and Isolde* theme was employed by the surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel twice in separate soundtracks (*Un chien andalou*, 1929, and *L'âge d'or*, 1930) – are instances of musical asso-

[12] André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)*, cit., p. 26.

[13] Cf. the biography of Adolf Wölfli at http://adolfwoelfli.ch/index.php?c=e&level=2&sublevel=0 (accessed on May 16, 2018). Wölfli's musical notation was incorporated within his pieces of visual art.

ciations with surrealism. Both pieces come by their connections with surrealism differently. The Wagner theme forms part of a sonic, visual, and narrative dreamlike juxtaposition, though the piece was (of course) not written for the purpose of belonging to a surrealist soundtrack. Antheil's composition, while breaking from historically established musical norms, embraces some of the tonal and rhythmic languages of his modern contemporaries, his piece embodying a logic that does not seem to parallel the unconscious automatism. Sometimes aspects of surrealism, though not in the automatic sense, reside in a composer's implementation of dreamlike sonic imagery. This can occur when a composer adopts a collagist approach to the treatment of seemingly distantly related sonic objects, the visual parallel of which can be found in surrealist paintings – though very often in visual surrealist works, there is an allusion to dream-inspired, and thus unconsciously accessed, imagery. Sonic explorations, such as Pierre Henry's collagist pieces *Variations pour une porte et un soupir* (1963), and the work of André Souris, incidentally a member of the Belgian surrealist group Correspondance and a Cocteau collaborator, as was Satie, are among this group. With regards to Henry's piece and Souris' work, neither appears to exude the unbridled automatism of Breton's surrealism. Though the practice was pointedly maligned in *Silence is Golden* (1944), musical links to surrealism can also come by their association through the settings of poetic texts. Francis Poulenc, for instance, composed settings of numerous texts written by several surrealist writers, among them Paul Éluard and Robert Desnos. A significant number of these works were composed following the end of the Second World War. Poulenc's 1947 fully-orchestrated operatic adaptation of Guillaume Apollinaire's[14] play *Les mamelles de Tirésias* (originally described by the poet as a «drame surréaliste») exemplifies the composer's committed interest to these texts. Though harmonically adventurous and well-crafted, Poulenc's long and short settings, like other examples that may be associated with surrealism through the adaptation of surrealist writings, do not appear to be in keeping with the concept of psychic automatism. However, the utilization of surrealist texts within Poulenc's sophisticated musical settings indicates that the composer not only held surrealism in high esteem, but perhaps also even envisioned his music as stemming from surrealist ideals and explorations.

While works created through automatic processes have been more readily documented within literature and the visual arts, the preservation of musical articulations has

[14] Apollinaire used the term «sur-réalisme» to describe *Parade*, a collaboration between Satie (music), the Dadaist Jean Cocteau (premise and plot), Pablo Picasso aided by Giacomo Balla (costume and set), and choreographed by Léonide Massine for the Ballets Russes.

been rare and inconsistent since the initial 1924 Bretonian definition, with perhaps the exception of Kurt Schwitters' 1932 recording of his composition *Ursonate* (composed between 1922 and 1932). In the recording, Schwitters performs the composition in what may very well be an automatic rendering.[15] The score for *Ursonate* indicates a series of sounds that are to be articulated by the performer. Though it is essentially a piece written without words per se – it contains only phonetic syllables with German indications of pronunciation – there are distinct rhythmic patterns to the sounds employed in the piece, and to their appearance on the score. Observers and listeners will encounter repetitions, additive compositional devices, and other highly organized structural elements. The impetus behind the piece by way of its title, although this cannot be determined with full certainly, appears to be one which strives to forge a connection with the primeval unconscious through sound. Schwitters' spontaneous-sounding performance of the piece certainly seems to draw from an unconscious *Ur*-source, particularly as there are few performance instructions. Though there are distinct patterns of sound in *Ursonate*, they are not suggestive in terms of their associated imagery (as words would be) because they essentially hold no symbolic meaning, beyond their sonic, if not raw, connection. This brings to attention to the possibility that performance itself may be the product of a sort of automatism and, by extension, surreal intention, a topic which will be addressed further with regards to the writings of John Cage. Beyond Schwitters' singular sonic piece, a number of factors contributed to the dearth of instances of sonic automatism during surrealism's prime. Not only was music disfavoured by prominent Surrealists such as Breton himself, and by extension not promoted, the absence of readily available devices able to record more than three and a half minutes of sound up until the late 1940s made the documentation of automatic music unlikely;[16] and eclipsing the by-comparison minor problem of capturing sonic expression, political tensions leading up and into the Second World War contributed to a near dissolving of surrealism altogether. Surrealism became a non-priority, and engagements with it, a potential liability. Though surrealism, as a movement, had lost traction during post-war decades, the art world's fringe interest in *Art brut*/Outsider Art revisited the concept of automatism in art. This occurred almost in tandem with European

[15] Schwitters is neither a composer nor a performer by craft. Though not associated with the Parisian Surrealists, *Ursonate* captures automatic qualities not heard in other music of the time.

[16] Recordings of Kurt Schwitters' sound poem *Ursonate* provide perhaps exception to this, though the form and text of the piece was preconceived. The delivery of pitch and rhythmic elements, as determined by various recordings of the pieces, however, predates the concept of indeterminacy as it was employed in decades following the Second World War.

and American avant-gardists' mounting interests in musical indeterminacy and other endeavours emphasizing increased freedom for performers. Following the spirit of free jazz, which had been breaking ties with jazz idioms for years, several prominent groups of non-jazz musicians, The Spontaneous Music Ensemble and the AMM, for example, dispensed with the composer altogether, performing music later falling under the umbrella moniker "free improvisation". Though free improvisation seems on the surface to have strong ties with the Bretonian ideal of automatism, differences between the latter and the often technically honed, albeit seemingly spur-of-the-moment, former cleft the two practices.

Mutual interests prompted Breton to join forces with the French artist and collector Jean Dubuffet and others to form *La compagnie de l'Art brut* in the late 1940s. The group's members collected and exhibited works made by untrained artists, though one main focus of was on the collection of pieces made by mental hospital inpatients.[17] Amassments of this nature were not new, nor, as was seen earlier, were they foreign to Breton. Earlier in the century, German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn had collected and published commentaries on his patients' creative works as *art* rather than as indicators of pathology. Prior to the catastrophic events of the Second World War, a number of the Parisian Surrealists had considered Prinzhorn's 1922 publication *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* (translated to *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*) «an alluring samplebook, a secret guide to the psychic elsewhere and an incitement to undertake its exploration», to borrow Roger Cardinal's words.[18] This interest in the tome persisted despite the group's unfamiliarity with the German language and the unavailability of a French translation of the text. In Germany in the late 1930s, pieces of Prinzhorn's collection appeared alongside of those of avant-gardists, including some surrealist works, and were exhibited together as "Degenerate Art" by the Nazi Party.[19] During the 1940s many of the works were destroyed, along with some of their creators, or sequestered in Nazi art collections. The "degenerate" label also extended to music and included jazz, swing, music written by Jewish composers, and that of certain individuals, among them Arnold Schoenberg and Kurt Weill.

Despite Breton and Dubuffet's mutual investments in automatic processes thought to be inherent in pieces sourcing from "madness", Breton left *La compagnie de l'Art brut*

[17] Ellen E. Adams, *After the Rain. Post-World War II Avant-Garde, 1940-1950*, Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2007, p. 277.

[18] Roger Cardinal, *Surrealism and the Paradigm of the Creative Subject*, in *Parallel Visions. Modern Artists and Outsider Art*, ed. by Maurice Tuchman - Carol S. Eliel, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 94-119: 105.

[19] Carole Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2007, p. 92.

because of philosophical differences, disenchanted at least in part by Dubuffet's existentialist leanings.[20] While Dubuffet and Breton continued to compile similar collections afterward,[21] Dubuffet extended his own creative explorations to music, affixing the label of *Musique brut* [*sic*] to some of his recorded pieces. Largely unknown in the music world, the untrained Dubuffet recorded, along with the as-it-were anti-Surrealist and CoBrA member Danish painter Asger Jorn, a number of improvisation-based pieces, some bearing rather surreal sounding titles such as *La fleur de barbe* (translated to *The Beard Flower*). According to Dubuffet, neither he nor Jorn had knowledge of *musique concrète* or other avant-garde music-related trends of the time.[22] Though the duo's initial improvisations, which they dubbed *Expériences musicales* (1961), were reportedly automatic, Dubuffet's extensive tape manipulations shaped the pieces to essentially become revisions of the initially raw recordings, rendering them processed, and therefore not automatic, although constructed by a self-described «novice».[23]

Automatism manifested in art follows a lineage that winds its way from works in the collections of Prinzhorn, to surrealist articulations of it, and into the work of those such as Dubuffet, who, like the Surrealists, maintained an interest in the art of mental hospital in- and outpatients. In the 1970s, Dubuffet's *Art brut* crossed the channel and was relabelled as Outsider Art by Roger Cardinal. Outsider Art – sometimes referred to as naïve, self-taught, or even folk art, and ranging from art made by mental hospital inpatients and outpatients, children, creators of outsider environments, "everyday geniuses" to borrow Gary Alan Fine's term, to "others" living on the margins of society or artistic practice – had no direct parallel in the music world up until recent decades. While somewhat dubious, far from academic, moulded by the publishers who desired a marketable product rather than one exploring unknowns,[24] and representative of the same sort of fascination with madness inspiring early surrealist circles, many of the artists in Irwin Chusid's *Songs in the Key of Z. The Curious Universe of Outsider Music* roughly parallel those making Outsider Art.[25] In his

[20] E. E. Adams, *After the Rain*, cit., p. 279.

[21] Katherine Conley, *Surrealism and Outsider Art. From the "Automatic Message" to André Breton's Collection*, «Yale French Studies», CIX (2006), pp. 129-143.

[22] Jean Dubuffet, *Musical Experiments* [1961], trans. by Matthew Daillie, http://www.ubu.com/sound/dubuffet.html (accessed on May 16, 2018).

[23] *Ibidem*.

[24] Cf. J. Flinn Akroyd (interviewer) - Irwin Chusid, *Psalms in the Key of Z. Irwin Chusid on Outsider Music*, «MungBeing», 2 (s. a.): *The Outsider Art and Stuckism*, p. 42, http://www.mungbeing.com/issue_2.html?page=42&full_article=yes (accessed on January 13, 2018).

[25] Irwin Chusid, *Songs in the Key of Z. The Curious Universe of Outsider Music*, Chicago, A Cappella Books, 2000.

book, Chusid avoids the term «automatic», though a number of the musicians featured seemingly employed automatic processes whether with deliberate intent or not. The recordings of Jandek,[26] Wild Man Fischer and Jack Mudurian are all demonstrative of this. Though most of the "outsiders" of Chusid's book have had their music recorded and/or marketed, music's temporality can be difficult to capture. While music, like many other art forms, relies upon media, the recording of it requires access to some form of technology that might not be readily available to those who create music automatically. To that end, it is fair to assume that field recorders are infrequently used to capture the music of "outsiders" living in mental hospitals – or should they be from an ethical standpoint if the purpose of doing so is to capture the "othered" sounds of the mentally ill for the sake of artistic (or even fetishistic) fulfilment.

Perhaps it is here that the ethical grey areas of the advocacy of an unfettered automatism reside. Are those who uphold virtues of "mad art" answerable to the moral questions that arise from perpetuating or romanticizing the myth of the "mad" artist? Are they attuned to the frequent suffering of these artists at the hands both of society and of a system that disempowers them? Breton reacted against concerns and accusations by members of the psychiatric and medical establishment about the greater societal harm of surrealism in the 1930 *Surrealist Manifesto*. The volume begins with a duplicated article authored by the French psychiatrist Paul Abély condemning the indictment of automatic acts as potentially resulting in societal harm, citing Breton's novel *Nadja* as an example of such a provocation. The subsequent report, which appeared in the oldest established psychiatric medical journal, *Annales médico-psychologiques. Journal de l'aliénation mentale et de la médecine légale des aliénés*, included an interview with Pierre Janet, along with his peer Gaëtan Gatian De Clérambault. The two not only condemned what they deemed the Surrealists' incitement of automatic acts, but also the movement in general. With an irony paralleled by Abély's description of the passing around of *Najda* from psychiatrist to psychiatrist, Breton retorted in his own response, following Abély's:

> It is also clear that Surrealism is not interested in giving very serious consideration to anything that happens outside of itself, under the guise of art, or even anti-art, of philosophy or anti-philosophy – in short, of anything not aimed at the annihilation of the being into a diamond, all blind and interior, which is no more the soul of ice than that of fire.[27]

[26] In a "written interview" (December 2011) with the author Sterling Smith, the artist responsible for Jandek, claimed that while the lyrics of his pieces were mostly pre-composed, the music was mostly improvised.

[27] André Breton, *Second Manifesto of Surrealism (1930)*, in Id., *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, cit., pp. 113-187: 124.

Several paragraphs afterward, Breton states that the simplest surreal act would be for one to enter into a crowd of people with a pistol, firing rapidly into the crowd. Contained within such sentiments, which were clearly intended to elicit reactions from the establishment, Breton points to the perhaps-absurd reaction of the medical community to his life's work, and to the removal of his writing from its context. Regarding context, the second *Manifesto* was written as political tensions that eventually erupted in the Second World War mounted. Breton's 1946 preface to the 1930 *Manifesto*, written sixteen years following the initial retort, demonstrates a near tacit lament of the fates that befell two of his peers during the period. He wrote of the then-deceased Robert Desnos, whom he had praised lavishly in the first *Manifesto*. In 1945 Desnos perished in a Czech concentration camp. Breton also wrote about the sufferings of the creator of the Theatre of Cruelty, Antonin Artaud, who had likewise suffered immeasurably from mental illness and addiction during his lifetime. While Breton's image of mass shooting is not short of shock value, it speaks – and Breton acknowledges this in the second *Manifesto* – of the darkness and vulgarity of «the life of this period».[28] While in the 1920s the Parisian surrealists drew more idealistically or playfully from the concepts of automatism and madness, by the early 1930s Breton had demonstrated a keen awareness of the potentially dark nature of humankind, and echoed years later a profound sense of loss and sorrow, from which even he was not immune.

Predating Dubuffet's experiments by several years, a number of Western art music trends that had surfaced in Europe in the 1950s shared commonalities with the automatism lauded by the Surrealists, though they were not generally affixed with the "automatic" label. So-called "Intuitive music" released performers from the restrictive confines of total or near total serialism,[29] which was the academic musical language of choice of many post-war composers. Karlheinz Stockhausen's compositions *Zeitmasse* (1956), *Klavierstück XI* (1956) and later *Es* from the larger work *Aus den sieben Tagen* (1968), and Luciano Berio's *Sequenza*s (the first of which dates from 1958) are among the earliest of these examples. Occurring prior to Stockhausen's "Intuitive music" was Morton Feldman and John Cage's concept of "Indeterminacy". In the 1958 Darmstadt new-music lecture *Indeterminacy* from

[28] *Ibidem*.

[29] Matthew Swanson, *Imaging Music. Abstract Expressionism and Free Improvisation*, «Leonardo Music Journal», XI (2001): *Not Necessarily "English Music". Britain's Second Golden Age*, pp. 29-34; Anne LeBaron, *Reflections of Surrealism in Postmodern Musics*, in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, ed. by Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner, New York – London, Routledge, 2002 (Studies in Contemporary Music and Culture, 4), pp. 27-73: 36.

the series *Composition and Process*, Cage – incidentally one of the only composers labelled as a Surrealist by Breton[30] – notes some of the differences between the elements of chance and indeterminacy as employed by composers and performers respectively. Particularly intriguing is Cage's description of the indeterminate qualities shaped by the performer, rather than the "composer". Cage uses Bach's *The Art of the Fugue*, depicting the performer as a "colorist" who works within the given parameters of pitch, counterpoint, and rhythm, to illustrate the idea. Sections of Cage's lecture resemble Breton's metaphor of the "cryptogram" and Cage and Breton both point to parallel interests in dreams as potential creative wellsprings. In this extract from the lecture, Cage refers quite directly to "automatic writing":

> He [the performer] may perform his function of colorist in a way which is not consciously organized (and therefore not subject to analysis) – either arbitrarily, feeling his way, following the dictates of his ego; or more or less unknowingly, by going inwards with reference to the structure of his mind to a point in dreams, following, as in automatic writing, the dictates of his subconscious mind [...].[31]

While American Indeterminists and European Intuitionists left certain compositional and performative elements to chance, parameters used were still directed by the composer. Though in line with abstract expressionist trends[32] and postmodern[33] system-rupturing tendencies, neither Stockhausen's intuitive music nor Cage's indeterminacy are automatic in the Bretonian sense. Nor were they entirely freeing for performers. As Cage did in his lecture, so did his contemporary Morton Feldman, acknowledging the flaw of Indeterminacy: that it still placed limits on the performer and that compositional choices made were rooted in composer directives.[34]

A segment of the closing sentiments of Derek Bailey's chapter on free improvisation reads: «One of the basic characteristics of [the performer's] improvising, detectable in everything he plays, will be how he harnesses the instrumental impulse. Or how he reacts against it».[35] Bailey's monograph *Improvisation* explores the practice of improvisation in

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[30] Cf. the catalogue of the *Exposition internationale du Surréalisme* (Galerie Maeght, July 1947). Its "fiches intérieures" are available online at http://www.andrebreton.fr/work/56600100506400 (accessed on May 16, 2018).

[31] John Cage, *Silence*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2013, p. 35.

[32] M. Swanson, *Imaging Music*, cit., p. 9.

[33] Anne LeBaron, *Reflections of Surrealism in Postmodern Musics*, cit.

[34] Benjamin Piekut, *Indeterminacy, Free Improvisation, and the Mixed Avant-Garde. Experimental Music in London, 1965-1975*, «Journal of the American Musicological Society», LXVII, 3 (2014), pp. 769-793: 773.

[35] Derek Bailey, *Improvisation. Its Nature and Practice in Music*, Boston, Da Capo Press, 1993, p. 97.

global contexts, in differing time periods, and, for a portion of the book, as it occurs in "free improvisation" settings. Free improvisation can be described as music free from idiom, drawing from individualism, collectivism, and experimentalism, often yielding sonic novelty. The portrait which Bailey paints, largely compiled through his interviews with collaborators, depicts free improvisation as an act of musical problem-solving, operating within the context of certain musical milieus that are supported by listeners, performers, and the community. It is widely accepted that the origins of free improvisation stem from the free jazz of musicians such as Ornette Coleman, Eric Dolphy, and others, and that the continued interest in dispensing with the composer and rigid musical structures was subsequently pursued by American and European avant-gardists and other experimenters such as Bailey himself.

Composer and improviser Anne LeBaron's chapter *Reflections of Surrealism in Postmodern Music* in the book *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought* suggests that the elements of collage and automatism found in postmodern musics are the most direct twenty first century articulations of surrealism, with free improvisation, or as she describes it «non-idiomatic improvisation»,[36] being the most representative of the automatic lineage. Echoing the idealism of Bailey in a rather Bretonian fashion, while instead challenging music's literary and visual art's automatic counterparts, LeBaron extends the definition of free improvisation as a

> non-idiomatic improvisation embodying a unity of mind and action [where] musical concept and performance take place simultaneously. In accessing the unconscious by the most direct and immediate means, non-idiomatic musical improvisation might elicit even speedier transfer from the unconscious into sensory product (sound, in this case) than either visual or literary automatism.[37]

While LeBaron's definition sounds tenable, the conflict between her description of non-idiomatic improvisation as the unconscious mind transmitted outwardly through music and what actually occurs in improvisational settings reveals the distance between idealistic theory and practice. Performers' desires for novelty, displays of technical mastery, the exchange of musical tropes in sonic conversations, and the engaging in collectivism through seemingly spur-of-the-moment collaboration are some of the disruptive forces wedged between free improvisation and automatism. This is not to say that these are

[36] A. LeBaron, *Reflections of Surrealism in Postmodern Musics*, cit., p. 37.

[37] *Ibidem*.

unworthy goals, but to strive towards them counters the notion of a pure psychic automatism.

Complicating the relationship between free improvisation and automatism further are the limitations placed on free expression within performance contexts. For example, in addition to highlighting the period between 1965 and 1975 before, during, and following the creation of the Music Now series organized by Victor Schonfield, Benjamin Piekut, in his 2014 article *Indeterminacy, Free Improvisation and the Mixed Avant-Garde* questions the validity of distinctions put into place between the labelling of African American's "free" music as "free improvisation", and that of the more frequently academically-recognized (Caucasian) Indeterminists. In the article, Piekut describes Schonfield's difficulties working within the racially restrictive barriers set, in part, by the Musicians Union in London as he attempted to book Ornette Coleman for a performance at the beginning of the period examined in the article. After taking a two-year performance hiatus because of the disrespectful environments of jazz clubs at the time,[38] Coleman jumped at the opportunity to perform in London. However, he was by necessity billed as a "concert artist" rather than as a jazz musician in order to bypass restrictions placed on "jazz artists" by the Musicians Union,[39] and it was necessary for the programme to include pre-composed pieces. Despite the fact that the concert ultimately took place – though Coleman was placed on the Union's "unfair" list afterward – it is difficult to reconcile how musicians in such institutionally racialized environments could have been "truly free." The way that the mind expresses itself outwardly through sound, and the degree to which improvised performances may be automatic or not-automatic, is at least in part determined by the political underpinnings resonant at the time of performance. That said, we might also consider that perhaps intuitive sonic reactions to political environments make their way automatically into performances.

In a transcription of a discussion between the improvisers Susan Fitzpatrick and Marie Thompson, Fitzpatrick reflects:

> I discovered in my experiences onstage, the freedom or license to do/say or play absolutely anything that enters the mind is not guaranteed by any means; rather, the performance space becomes an area of still more nuanced sets of expectations, emanating from histories from which improvising in this milieu emerges, also more directly from other players and the audience.[40]

[38] B. Piekut, *Indeterminacy, Free Improvisation, and the Mixed Avant-Garde*, cit., p. 777.

[39] *Ibidem*.

In their discussion, Fitzpatrick and Thompson address the "safe" space concept. Safe spaces in performance contexts enable artists and audience members to engage in art-making in such a manner that neither the audience nor the performers feel marginalized, granting license to those involved to perform so long as it is done "safely". This invites the question of whether or not is it possible to be safe and automatic simultaneously if safe spaces squeeze out unsafe modes of practice. Considering the need for freedom and safety, and the politicization of spaces and in turn those using them, we cannot help but be left with the age-old, (nearly) tired question of whether *free* improvisation is really just that. Certainly, Breton's early Period of Sleeps experiments were neither safe nor sustainable, particularly so when, in accessing the unconscious mind, Desnos found himself charging at fellow poet Paul Éluard with a knife, abruptly putting an end to Breton's surrealist and automatic Period of Sleeps experiments.[41]

If free improvisation operates within prescriptive sonic and social codes and practices, Indeterminate music relies upon a more or less fleshed-out series of directives, and self-taught projects of those such as Dubuffet's are manipulated after the fact to serve a particular aesthetic end, where does that leave musical surrealism, particularly if we equate it with psychic automatism? Is Cage's Bach interpreter or the Satian *gymnopédiste* as automatic as the spontaneous outsider? Is free and spontaneous expression, where the unconscious mind presents itself outwardly as if through a cryptogram, not in itself a reaction to the culturally informed cerebral milieu that it reflects? If this is the case, should culturally mediated expression not be considered automatic? Perhaps the solution lies in either redefining musical surrealism altogether or at least separating it from the concept of a pure psychic automatism. To do so, though, we risk removing the movement from its historical anchors.

[40] Susan Fitzpatrick - Marie Thompson, *Making Space. An Exchange About Women and the Performance of Free Noise*, «Women & Performance. A Journal of Feminist Theory», XXV, 2 (2015), pp. 237-248: 238.

[41] R. Cardinal, *Surrealism and the Paradigm of the Creative Subject*, cit., p. 97.