

INTRODUCTION TO NON-IDIOMATIC IDIOCY IN THE LIGHT OF CONTINGENCY

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an introduction to the process of music making called *non-idiom*. This process will be discussed as originally conceptualized in Bailey's work, but especially in its later fleshing out into the figures of the stranger and the idiot we find in the collective work of Brassier, Guionnet, Murayama and Mattin. Moreover, discussing the non-idiom through specific aspects of *contingency* in Hui and Meillassoux's work is suggested to be a valuable entry point for creating a set of new connections that will be a fruitful base for future collective philosophical and musicological writings. These connections include, among other things, the simultaneously written similarities between Brassier, Guionnet, Murayama and Mattin's rethinking of the non-idiom and van den Akker and Vermeulen's concept of metamodernism, as well as the suggestion that Stockhausen was a precursor of Meillassoux's ontological work on contingency.

We start with focusing our attention on Hui's description of contingency as "a strange possibility, since it is a threat to the necessity of laws".¹ The thesis will be structured in form of three commentaries on this citation, with each commentary allowing to understand the topic of each chapter. The first commentary will consider the general meaning of the passage in its kinship with the initial conceptualization of the practice of non-idiomacy, including the limits of this practice at the time. The second commentary will be devoted to the term 'strange' and how its distinction with 'idiotic' is enriching to get a better understanding of how to surpass the limits of the early generations of non-idiomatic practices. The third commentary will return to the term 'threat' and how non-idiomatic practices can be conceived as a stretching of this threat to an absolute extreme.

THE ORIGIN OF THE NON-IDIOM

ELEVATING CONTINGENCY INTO NECESSITY

Let us first clarify the idea of contingency as a possibility to be a "threat to the necessity of laws". It implies the following presuppositions: (1) there is a coherence of different possibilities under an overarching law; (2) as long as this coherence sustains, the law is considered *necessary*; (3) is considered *contingent* a possibility that is not coherent with the law, which makes the latter lose its status of necessity.

Let us go a step further, and acknowledge Hui's following claim: "the artist or philosopher is he or she who elevates contingency to the plane of necessity".² This now implies the following presuppositions: (1) contingency can be dealt with in the form of artistic or philosophical intentions; (2) when the artist or the philosopher deals with a possibility that threatens the law (contingency), it turns in into a new one (necessity). Hui uses as an example the jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt. Having his ring finger and pinky burned to the point of non-functionality, the "strange possibility" of playing guitar without using these two fingers (contingency) has indeed produced the gypsy jazz guitar style (new necessity).³

Put this way, we have a clear case of an artist who elevates a contingent situation into a new necessary result. However, what is this result? It is a subjective creation whose objective influences are clearly traceable; regardless of how improvisationally personal his style was, we could for example still hear recognizable influences of jazz and gypsy music. In other words, Reinhardt falls in the trap of

¹ Yuk Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency* (London, United Kingdom; Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd, 2019), 11.

² Ibid, 210. Considering page 208, this elevation is not restricted to the realm of art of the philosophy.

³ Ibid, 195.

representation. The question we therefore ask is whether it is possible for the artist to elevate a contingency into a necessity that escapes representation, which leads us to *non-idiomatic improvisation*.

NON-IDIOMATIC IMPROVISATION

In the 1970's, Bailey started writing about the *non-idiom*, which was published in 1980 in his book *Improvisation*. The concept describes what (back then, the birth of) free improvisation is striving for: "questioning the 'rules' governing musical language",⁴ as contrasted with the presupposed "vocabulary" inherent to improvisation belonging to specific *idioms*. The latter term refers to recognizable historical influences; a particular genre in which one is playing, an improvised 'trick' turned into a habit, or any other kind of identifiable trace from the past. What Bailey defines as non-idiomatic music is therefore an alternative practice that intends to get rid of representation by sheerly escaping idioms. Returning to Reinhardt, his creation of a gypsy jazz guitar style was a creation that quickly *stabilized* into an idiomatic kind of improvisation. More generally, Bailey considers 'free' or 'non-idiomatic' improvisation as opposed to any kind of improvisation at the service of an idiom (a practice that Bailey identifies in flamenco, baroque, raga...). Non-idiomatic 'music' requires to be an ongoing process of questioning idioms.⁵ In a way this makes us wonder if it is music at all, or at least what its relation to music is. Bertrand Denzler and Jean-Luc Guionnet would later describe the confrontation of "process versus aesthetic result, improvisation as a tool to make music [idiomatic] versus music as a tool to improvise [non-idiomatic]".⁶ The differences between the two kinds of improvisational inventions offers two different relations to contingency: the first kind considers a possibility of "threatening" of the necessity of an idiom as a *means* to express a new idiom as a result (from playing guitar with two fingers less to producing the gypsy jazz guitar technique) while the second considers the very process of threatening as an *end* in itself, without the need to reach an aesthetic result. The "strange possibility" that Bailey elevates to a necessity is the consistent devotion to the process itself. This means that escaping representation requires to do away with result-driven practices.

SURPASSING THE LIMITS OF THE FIRST GENERATION

By coining the term *non-idiom*, Bailey seems to have articulated a powerful way to theorize a faithfulness towards exclusively process-driven practices. The question remains if the requirement of a process-based approach is actually sufficient to escape representation. We have mentioned that, as far as Reinhardt is concerned, and more generally idiomatic improvisation, there are 'objective' influences recognizable in his own 'subjective' style. A non-idiomatic alternative would however not be interested in making visible how a new style emerged out of old ones, *instead it keeps on adjusting the very core of its improvisation so as to permanently flee prior influences*. Nevertheless, we will now understand that this does not prevent this *process of adjustments* to be objectifiable just as well.

If Bailey's *Improvisation* articulated the possibilities of the first generation, we will now begin to unravel how in their 2010 collective writing *Idioms and Idiots (I&I)*, Brassier, Guionnet, Murayama and Mattin set up the challenge for the present generation. Despite the resonance of the non-idiomatic practice, it seems that *I&I* would turn out to be the only successful attempt to thoroughly think the non-idiom further than the limited, and we are about to see, naive introduction of the concept provided by Bailey.

I&I attempts to point out (and surpass) a problem that "leftist perspectives failed to recognize",⁷ which points at the fact that the constant process of readjustment perfected by the improviser is actually very

⁴ Derek Bailey, *Improvisation* (Da Capo Press, 1993), 84.

⁵ *Ibid*, 1-28.

⁶ Bertrand Denzler and Jean-Luc Guionnet, *The Practice of Musical Improvisation* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2020), 77.

⁷ Ray Brassier, Jean-Luc Guionnet, Seijiro Muryama, and Mattin "Idioms and Idiots," 2010.

objectifiable by the new kind of societal organization that started to emerge in the same period. Indeed, what is often referred to as ‘neoliberalism’ is pushing its members to *constantly adapt to the instabilities* of a (nowadays even more dominating) market-based society. If Bailey elevates the process of adjustment into a non-idiomatic necessity, neoliberalism elevates it into a societal necessity.⁸ This point highlights that the danger of representation goes both ways. It includes objective means serving a subjective end, as we have seen in the example of Reinhardt’s idiomatic improvisation, who uses objective influences to create a new subjective style. But it also includes subjective means serving an objective end, as we have seen with the relation between the improviser and the neoliberal society, where the subjective adaptability is in line with the objective societal requirements. Just like the successful self-entrepreneur in front of competitors and clients, the skillful early free improviser *stands-out* in front of co-improvisers and audiences. This tendency towards hyper-adaptability to every new present situation is a skill that has been objectified on a societal level.

Beyond this sociological framing, this reasoning points out that the sound of the early free improviser is clearly recognizable by its excessive tendency towards *change*.⁹ Improvisation as an outstanding skill of adjustment, as a practice of exhibiting an individual virtuosity under any circumstances has therefore turned into an identifiable idiom. To reorient the path toward a non-idiomatic approach, another contingency has to be elevated to necessity. If ‘standing out’ failed to threaten the necessity of laws, Muruyama is instead suggesting to ‘dig in’,¹⁰ and in a more general way a major novelty provided by *I&I* was the “particular attentiveness to a non-linguistic aspect, in a way that differs from that of the previous generation: silence”.¹¹ However, how can one relate to silence in a non-idiomatic way? An answer *I&I* provides is through the ‘idiotic’ approach, which can be understood by contrasting it with the ‘strange’ approach.

THE STRANGER AND THE IDIOT

CONTINGENCY AS STRANGENESS

In order to clarify *I&I*’s elevation of a silence-driven approach into a non-idiomatic necessity, we will first come back to the term ‘strange’. We can understand its meaning by taking a closer look at its etymology:

This is from Latin *extraneus* "foreign, external, from without" (source also of Italian *strano* "strange, foreign," Spanish *extraño*), from *extra* "outside of" (see **extra-**). / In early use also *stroung*. In Middle English "not belonging to the place where found"¹²

We extract from this etymology the following insight: something ‘strange’ has historically meant something that comes from outside and does not belong to the place where it is found. This insight simply confirms how contingency, described by Hui as a “strange possibility” can indeed be understood as a ‘threatening’ of the “necessity of laws”. We have discussed how, as long as a coherence of different possibilities is sustained by an overarching law, this later is considered *necessary*. Now we consider a ‘strange’ possibility, that is, a possibility of coming from outside the coherence of possibilities sustained by the law, but since it is found in a hitherto sustained coherence (where it does not belong) the necessity of the law is threatened. In other word, the strangeness of a possibility makes it contingent.

⁸ Ibid.,

⁹ Ibid.,

¹⁰ Metaphor that Seijiro Murayama holds on to in order to describe an silence driven practice, extracted from his workshop and private conversations.

¹¹ Brassier, Guionnet, Murayama, and Mattin “Idioms and Idiots,”

¹² “Strange | Etymology of Strange by Etymonline,” www.etymonline.com, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/strange>.

THE LIMITS OF THE STRANGER

The previous section may sound logical on a theoretical level, but our intentions concern the non-idiom, which is a practice. This leads us to the practice of the stranger. Emerging as a modern category in Georg Simmel's 1908 *Soziologie*, the stranger [*der Fremde*] is described through a metaphor of the circle as the one who fills the gap between the 'more natives' [*die Eingeborenen*] and the wanderer. While the sound wanderer enters and leaves the circle, the wandering status of the stranger, who enters and stays, vanishes, thereby destabilizing the structures within the circle.¹³

As far as the stranger is concerned, we have until now merely repeated the insight of the previous section: the possibility of the stranger, coming from outside and entering the coherence so as to threaten it, is but the personification of contingency as a strange possibility. The wanderer is a contingency coming from outside but a barely perceptible one, not present enough to be elevated to a significant necessity, therefore not even starting to challenge the structure of the circle. The stranger, however, is a present outsider. While the former quickly does away, the latter *stands-out*. However, this becomes problematic if we want to consider the characteristics of the stranger as a non-idiomatic potential. We have ended the previous chapter with the conclusion that 'standing out' is objectifiable, as this is a characteristic problem of the stranger, who is recognizable because *found* in a place where supposedly she/he/they 'do not belong'. This makes the innovating idiomatic improviser recognizable as strange (such as the 'two fingers missing' or even the 'gypsy' characteristics of Reinhardt's Jazz play), but also the first generation of free improvisation does not thoroughly succeed to escape this categorization either. Although in this latter case, the actual outside is intended to constantly adjust so as not to be pinned down, this does not prevent this very process to be visible. The intention of changing its outer influences faster than is perceptible does not prevent the improviser to stand-out as a stranger at the end of the day.

THE STRANGER AND THE IDIOT

A century after the *Soziologie*, Brassier, Guionnet, Murayama and Mattin provide in *Idioms and Idiots* the following description:

If we define background noise as everything in sound that is unrecognizable and/or undefined as a form, and/or uninteresting (for the listener): and if we define rumour as noise composed of signs (forms and/or informations and/or influences): than the stranger is one for whom the border between rumour and background noise is 'different' [*ailleurs*], while the idiot is the one for whom the border doesn't exist.¹⁴

Applied to Simmel's geometry, the *idiot* plays the role of destabilizing the circle, but without being relatable to a *strange* origin somewhere 'out there'. The idiot is some kind of a generator of uncanniness, an unfamiliarity that fails to be identified as not belonging to the familiar circle. We find etymological roots of the idiot in the late latin use of the term *idiota*, meaning "uneducated or ignorant person". Going deeper into the Greek *idiotes*, we find a kinship between this ignorant position and the "'private person" (as opposed to one taking part in public affairs)", someone being one's very own idiom [*idios*]¹⁵ (we will return to this non-idiomatic idiom in the next section).

¹³ Georg Simmel, *Soziologie: Untersuchungen Über Die Formen Der Vergesellschaftung* (Duncker & Humblot: Berlin, 2013), 529.

¹⁴ Brassier, Guionnet, Murayama, and Mattin "Idioms and Idiots,".

¹⁵ "Idiot | Etymology of Idiot by Etymonline," *Wwww.etymonline.com*, accessed July 8, 2024, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/idiot>.

Returning more specifically to the *I&I* passage, let us clarify the following definitions. As that which is “composed of signs”, a *rumor* can be defined as a constellation of things that are identifiable, that makes sense (a recognizable “form”, a graspable “information”, a tracable “influence”) while *background noise* does lie *outside* our attention (just as the “uninteresting” is ignored, what is “unrecognizable” and “undefined” cannot be signs).

Therefore, we have, on the one hand, the shape of the circle being distorted and recomposed according to a *stranger* way of listening. The circle separating inside and outside, foreground and background, music and everyday noise, communication and collateral sound, is drawn elsewhere (*ailleurs*). A *different idiom* has entered, that is to say, a different language, a different coherence of meaning, grounded in different historical influences. ‘This’ is now drawing our attention, ‘this’ is now making sense, while ‘that’ not anymore.

On the other hand, the *idiotic listening* also distorts the circle, but fails the transition to the state of distinguishable recomposition. No new circles have been redrawn, as sounds are in *and* out; this being something which, in the meanwhile, has turned so banal that all *idiomatic* toolkits, that is, all languages, all references to make sense of a distinction between the rumors and background noise have evaporated.

Unlike the stranger, who’s standing out is objectifiable, *I&I* presents a non-idiomatic potential in the figure of the idiot. This approach, if practicable beyond the limits of the first generation of free improvisers, can lead us to silence driven strategies. Unlike with the non-idiom, *I&I* does not refer to precursors of such strategies. In the west, silence is often attributed to the practices introduced by Beckett and Cage. To be more precise, what these two persons are actually working with is the very impossibility of silence: Beckett deals with the narrative that keeps on going,¹⁶ while Cage plays with the sounds that keep on coming.¹⁷ In extracting precursing non-idiomatic ideas from both figure (and especially their limits) we will have a better understanding of what the author of *I&I* are striving to surpass.

BECKETT

Beckett’s 1961 theater play *Happy Days*, will hereby serve as our first case study. Our interest can be extracted from the following passage:

Well anyway — this man Shower — or Cooker — no matter — and the woman — hand in hand — in the other hands bags — kind of big brown grips — standing there gaping at me — and at last this man Shower — or Cooker — ends in er anyway — stake my life on that — What’s she doing? He says — What’s the idea? he says — stuck up to her diddies in the bleeding ground — coarse fellow — What does it mean? He says - What’s it meant to mean? — and so on — lot more stuff like that — usual drive!¹⁸

“Shower, or Cooker, no matter”, someone who’s name is on the same level as an everyday occupation, is here asking his wife, the protagonist of the play, not merely “what she is doing”, but “what’s it meant to mean”. Asking about the “meaning of the meaning” goes further than a question as part of the play, it is a question about the playing itself. Moreover, this ‘meta-question’ is immediately blurred with the incessant humming of habitual everyday life (“and so on — lot more stuff like that — usual drive!”). Beckett’s equalization of the ‘meant to mean’ meta-questioning of the theatrical situation itself with the lower layer of idiomatic theater playing is thematically speaking what the idiot is all about, that is, what *I&I* refers to as escaping the idiom from “the most immanent point of view possible” by “re-injecting” the higher level

¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, *L’innommable* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1953), 42.

¹⁷ John Cage, *Silence : Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Hanover, New Hampshire Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 8.

¹⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 42-43.

of self-reflectivity about what is going on within the lower one, the ‘going on’ itself.¹⁹ This specific passage from the Happy Days play provides us with an idea of Beckett’s capacity to represent contingent possibilities (questioning theatrical ‘laws’) as something that in theory is not clearly separable from other, ‘banal’, or ‘coherent’ possibilities. In other words, we now have a clear image of how an idiotic (and therefore non-idiomatic) escape from the distinction between going outside and staying inside could in theory look like.

This is however as far as we go with Beckett. Guionnet allows us to think of non-idiomatic compositions (but we could as well refer to theater plays) as *science fictions* instead of *utopias*. While the latter approach is considering the score (or script) as an ideal of which the performance is but a potentially imperfect if not impossible *reproduction*, the former takes every possible outcome of the performance *as it is*.²⁰ This distinction reveals that the two figures lie at both extremes of the silence spectrum, considering the contrast between Samuel ringing the bell when his own theatrical setups are not reproduced as ought to, and the cheerful tone through which Cage emphasizes the irreproducibility of every performance.²¹ In that sense, Beckett remained a traditional playwright, which limits the devotedness of his attempt to deal with the impossibility of silence, as this latter merely remained a vague idea, a representation, safely staged beforehand. Beckett is a stranger, who may have offered an image of idiocy, but only as a *result* of a preparation made *outside* the performance. Since Beckett is a utopic playwright, we will now turn to Cage, who may be a science fiction composer, but we still have to find out if he is an idiot. In order to get there, let us first go deeper into the distinction between the stranger and idiot provided by I&I:

‘Super-stranger’ = ‘solar stranger’ in the sense that this stranger casts light upon idioms (sun).

‘Super-idiot’ = ‘nyctalopic idiot’ (one who sees in the dark), in the sense that this idiot has his/her very own idiom, and can speak in a non-speaking environment (s/he creates light for her own sake in total obscurity): s/he speaks with a non-linguistic instrument.²²

What does the prefix “super” add to the stranger and the idiot? In principle it changes nothing, *I&I* merely intends to make explicit that when humans are playing within idioms, self-consciousness is inevitably involved in the process. This passage is therefore describing two ways of dealing with this human condition. The self-reflectivity of the (super-)stranger is located in an *outside position* so as to “cast light upon idioms” (comparable with the sun that is “cast[ing] light upon” planets). In other words, by being located ‘elsewhere’, the stranger reflects, makes visible the idioms that influences the play. The (super-)idiot is dealing with self-reflectivity in a different way. Instead of functioning as a clarification, it is simply “re-injected” in the middle of the play. In other words, the idiom of the idiot (its “speaking”) does its own thing without relating to the others idioms, there is no *process of adjustment* (instead it “speaks in a non-speaking environment”). This is because the act of relating requires self-consciousness to be located ‘above’ idioms so as to see them clearly and make the connection with one’s own idiom, but the idiot is “[some]one who

¹⁹ Brassier, Guionnet, Murayama, and Mattin “Idioms and Idiots,”.

²⁰ Jean-Luc Guionnet, “Pour Une Musique sans Excuse,” *Circuit* 30, no. 2 (August 19, 2020): 63–67, doi: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071121ar>, 67.

²¹ Kate Wyver, “Not Waiting for Godot: New Show Tackles Beckett’s Ban on Women,” *The Guardian*, October 18, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/oct/18/not-waiting-for-godot-new-show-tackles-becketts-ban-on-women>. and Cage, *Silence*, 9.

²² Brassier, Guionnet, Murayama, and Mattin “Idioms and Idiots,”. In “‘nyctalopic idiot’ (one who sees in the dark)” there is a problematic translation of the word “nyctalope” we find in the French version of *Idioms and Idiots*. This later indeed means someone who is capable of seeing in low lights. However, someone how is *not* capable of it is also referred to as “nyctalopic” in the English language. I would like to thank Guionnet for pointing out this mistake to me.

sees in the dark”. The “idiot has his/her own idiom” therefore means “nobody understands it”.²³ In other words, the idiom of the idiot is non-idiomatic.²⁴

CAGE

How does Cage relate to this distinction? An answer can be extracted from the following passage:

But taking off again and returning to the book of changes: the hexagram on grace (which is the hexagram on art) discusses the effect of a work of art as though it were a light shining on top of a mountain penetrating to a certain extent the surrounding darkness. That is to say, art described as being illuminating, and the rest of life as being dark. Naturally I disagree. If there were a part of life dark enough to keep out of a light from art, I would want to be in that darkness, fumbling around if necessary, but alive, and I rather think that contemporary music would be there in that dark too, bumping into things, knocking others over and in general, adding to the disorder that characterized life (if it is opposed to art) rather than adding to the order and stabilized truth beauty and power that characterize a masterpiece (if it is opposed to life).²⁵

Although not intentional,²⁶ Cage seems to have anticipated the distinction between the super-stranger and the super-idiot described in *I&I*. Furthermore, when taking this insight into consideration, we can draw the following conclusions: first of all, by his distancing from the standpoint resulting out of the I Ching hexagram on grace [*bi*, 贲] (“art described as illuminating”), he escapes the position of the (super-)stranger (“casting light upon idioms”). Moreover, by instead “fumbling around” in the dark, that is to say, by only accepting the label of art if it is to be blurred with life in all its mundaneness (and considering this intertwinement as characteristic of contemporary music), he makes a (super-)idiot of himself (“creat[ing] light for her own sake in total obscurity”).

How does this idiocy work? We find in Cage the notion of *indeterminacy*, as what happens without one’s intention,²⁷ and the complementary notion of the *frame*, as the necessary but minimal language set, within which indeterminacy can emerge.²⁸ What Cage considers to be his “most important piece”²⁹, *4’33”*, offers a very clear example: as the title suggests, the score merely consist of a time-frame of four minutes and thirty-three seconds, divided into three entirely silent movements.³⁰ The ‘super-idiocy’ is describable as follows: with such a framing (idiom), Cage *intends* (higher layer of self-reflection) to make all the sound emerging during the piece *unintentional*.

Guionnet wouldn’t disagree with Cage that a minimal framing is in a way inevitable. Still, he does find the way Cage sets up his frame quite problematic if we want to relate it to the non-idiomatic project: “this for me is a big lie. Because ‘intentionally being not-intentional’... I hear that the player has to be neutral. But

²³ Ircam, “Rencontre : Bertrand Denzler, Jean-Luc Guionnet , ‘the Practice of Musical Improvisation,’” *YouTube*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDrX71pcXTY&t=2759s>, 45:38. Translated by Jonas Vos.

²⁴ Brassier, Guionnet, Murayama, and Mattin “Idioms and Idiots,”

²⁵ Cage, *Silence*, 45-46.

²⁶ The lack of intentional connection between both passages has been confirmed during a private discussion with Guionnet.

²⁷ Cage’s *Silence* actually contains two chapters called ‘Indeterminacy’. 35-40, 260-273.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁹ Richard Kostelanetz and John Cage, *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 66.

³⁰ “John Cage Complete Works,” *Johncage.org*, 2020, https://johncage.org/pp/John-Cage-Work-Detail.cfm?work_ID=17.

what is neutral? It is having no accent”.³¹ The example of having *no accent* is used by Guionnet to make very intelligible the problem of those who claim to be *neutral*, in other words, *non-idiomatic*: “each time a problem is exposed as a solution, and also each time it can be taken as a universal solution, for me there is a big problem. There is a good example with language: the *accent*. For example, for many years, speakers of the French radio *France Culture* couldn’t have any accent, this actually means non-idiomacy: they shouldn’t represent any kind of idiom. So, they think that they don’t represent any idiom. But in fact, they represent the idioms of Parisian people. And this for example is very strong in non-idiomacy, many musicians think that they don’t have any accent [...] but there is never *no accent*”.³²

Beyond emphasizing the impossibility of neutrality, Guionnet clearly locates a very recognizable ‘accent’ in Cage’s “decisions”, which “are obvious”.³³ If we return to *4’33”*, this could be exemplified by the clearness of Cage’s decision to ‘leave indeterminate’ the nature of the emerging sound through his temporal framing. What Guionnet seems to be pointing at, is that the distinction between the framing (rumours) and what is left open (background noise) is not blurred (idiot) but instead quite clear, which puts Cage back in the position of the stranger.

In addressing the problem of how to deal with *silence* beyond it being framed in any recognizable way,³⁴ Guionnet and *I&I* in general seem to be concerned with the same question as Peter Ablinger when he makes a distinction between *noises* and *noise*. *Noises* focuses on the technique of taking *individual* sounds from everyday life in order to *isolate* them in art. Ablinger puts Cage’s framing in this category. Indeed, regardless of how open Cage is as to ‘what these sounds are’ or ‘how much there might be’, he centers the attention on the particular and therefore recognizable sounds that will emerge. In contrast, *noise* allows for a different way to think about sound, namely as a *totality*. A simple metaphor through which Ablinger allows to think of it is white noise [*Rauschen*], which is the sound of equalizing *all sound frequencies* that is for example heard when switching between different channels of an analog television or radio. Both silence and noise are invitations to listen beyond the limits of a recognizable frame.³⁵ Which leads us to reorient our attention to totality.

TOTALITY

Returning to Hui’s description of contingency as “a strange [or perhaps we should say ‘idiotic’] possibility, since it is a threat to the necessity of laws”, we will now concentrate on the extent to which the necessities of laws can be threatened as much as possible. If we radicalize the philosopher’s elevation of contingency into necessity to its logical extreme, we arrive at Meillassoux’s elevation of contingency itself as the only

³¹ Jean-Luc Guionnet, Interview with Jean-Luc Guionnet, interviewed by Jonas Vos and Anthony Stillabower, April 14, 2024, https://eur-nl.zoom.us/rec/play/DFhVkYPW-v0xdbV_51Ub4aC8s4UKFDFCiiQc5goY-bsSiks0RidLkcuJ_KtZ9TRrXqfSNourMOxFkwpN.AP7zqgijHl_84dNI?canPlayFromShare=true&from=share_recor ding_detail&startTime=1713092862000&componentName=rec-play&originRequestUrl=https%3A%2F%2Feur-nl.zoom.us%2Frec%2Fshare%2FFqwe8qr16kURE9JCAI87RugKbIAf0pCZJl0fZT_t-X9xVIK_18NtpiiBR4F3TXWX.qUrFEkx7dpigDUDo%3FstartTime%3D1713092862000.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Jean-Luc Guionnet, “Propositions Pour Une Architecture Habitée de L’Écoute,” *Revue&Corrigée* 92 (June 1, 2012), 22.

³⁵ Peter Ablinger, “Black Square and Bottle Rack: Noise and Noises,” in *Noise in and as Music* (Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Press, 2013), 5-8.

necessity. This chapter discusses how to make sense of this ‘absolutization’ in the light of non-idiomatic practices.

BECOMING

The theme of contingency is not discussed in *I&I*, let alone absolute contingency. Let us therefore start with another absolute: although this connection is but shortly mentioned in *I&I*, in private communication Guionnet frequently returned to non-idiomaticity as a process that is to be understood through “the Deleuzian notion of ‘becomings’ (*devenirs*). Consider in this regard the link between the idea of ‘minority’ and that of ‘idiom’”.³⁶ To which extent is becoming a coherent explanation of the process of non-idiomaticity, and how would it relate with the link between the idiom and the minority?

Deleuze and Guattari contrast *minorities* with *majorities*. This latter is not referring to something quantitative, but representational. The ‘adults’, ‘men’, ‘causians’ are not necessarily more, but they are more represented than ‘women’, ‘animals’, ‘children’, ‘plants’, etc...³⁷ How can we find a link between minorities and idioms suggested in *I&I*? Just like with idioms, there are all kind of different recognizable minorities, even though they are less recognizable than majorities. Where is the link between non-idiomaticity and becoming? If the relative diminishment of recognizability of minorities in relation to majorities is a *stable fact*, then becoming turns it into a *process*. In other words, *becoming is a process that is tending towards being less recognizable (non-idiomaticity)*. Although they consider this an ongoing ‘change’ of perception,³⁸ it doesn’t prevent Deleuze and Guattari from being aware of the danger of turning into what *I&I* refers to as a stranger. If ultimately, becoming is tending towards ‘becoming-imperceptible’, then being ‘outside’ perceptibility turns into a very recognizable process³⁹ (We have referred to the early free improviser or self-entrepreneur who’s hyper-adaptability ‘stands out’). Becoming is therefore by definition *becoming-minority*, which does not suggest that it aims to become a minority.⁴⁰ Literally becoming a woman, for example going through gender reassignment surgery, is a process that is going somewhere (towards a different gender), which is something different. Instead, becoming is an absolute ongoing process *in itself*, which means it isn’t trying go anywhere. It is tending towards anonymity, being in the middle of anyone else, it happens by “alliance” with minorities insofar as it is turning their discreet and unsusceptible characteristics of their existence into an ongoing process.⁴¹

As it turns out, it seems very fitting to understand *becoming* as the underlying process of non-idiomaticity. It actually reflects the following equation presented in *I&I*: “Non-idiomatic = popularity against the popular (idiom against fame).”⁴² This unfamous, “anonymous” idiom is an idiotic one, which higher, “super-idiomatic” layer of consciousness about the idioms in which one is playing is “re-injected” into the lower, “popular” one, as is made explicit underneath:

There’s an ‘as if’ at work here but one that is not of representation: “I play what I play, where and when I play it, knowing what I know, as if I were a real popular (i.e. ethnic which is not to say ‘popular’) musician” [...] by adding a layer that is a ‘minus one’, NON precludes the idea of a super idiom.⁴³

³⁶ Brassier, Guionnet, Murayama, and Mattin “Idioms and Idiots,”.

³⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux* (Les Éditions De Minuit, 1980), 356.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 346.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 308, 342.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 356.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 342.

⁴² Brassier, Guionnet, Murayama, and Mattin “Idioms and Idiots,”.

⁴³ *Ibid*,.

‘AS IF’

Let us take a closer look at the previous passage. The higher layer of self-consciousness can in a *non-representational* way be considered ‘as if’ it were a ‘minus one’. As written in *I&I*, “the non-idiom supposes an ‘as if’” that is considered “close to the one scientists use with regard to their own work: “Everything happens as if...”⁴⁴ However, what is this “...”, if not an association that is representative of whatever “happens”? In other words, if “the non-idiom supposes an ‘as if’”, how can it be “one that is not of representation”?

That same passage fills in the “...” with “I were a real popular (i.e. ethnic which is not to say ‘popular’) musician”. Popular here does not mean famous or popularized, but belonging to a certain ethnic (having a particular cultural origin, a historical ground), that is, being idiomatic. *I&I* therefore highlights the following tension: on the one hand, non-idiomaticity has no historical ground (no idiom), on the other its practice is still taken seriously ‘as if’ it had one. *Non-idiomaticity, which by definition does not represent any idiom, is taking its strength as if it represented something.*

This tension that is kept together by the ‘as if’ has been further developed by another collective writing that was made public the same year as *I&I* (2010), namely van den Akker’s and Vermeulen’s *Notes on metamodernism*. This latter reflects on the emerging art practices that can be rooted in the Kantian notion of the ‘as if’, who thought of “[e]ach [...] people, *as if* [they were] following some guiding thread, go toward a natural but to each of them unknown goal”⁴⁵ The name they give to this ‘as if’ driven tendency is *metamodernism*, which “oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony”⁴⁶ This ‘oscillating’ approach is an insights resulting from an intensive case study-driven analysis, which can be summarized by the following passage:

[O]ur inquiries into the discursivity by which current geopolitical tendencies can be explained and the sensibility by which the arts express themselves have led us precisely to those three concerns: a deliberate being out of time, an intentional being out of place, and the pretense that that desired atemporality and displacement are actually possible even though they are not.⁴⁷

This passage refers to non-idiomatic practices insofar as they are not interested in the *representation* of things within the finiteness of our experiences in traceable time and space. But while being aware that they cannot reach infinity, the artists still stand for their practices, ‘as if’ they were as possible as representative (idiomatic) practices. This tension is made sense of as the oscillation between the inherent characteristic attributed to the two conflicting sides: “[i]nspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility”⁴⁸ In addition to that, in the *Notes* conclusion one can find where metamodernism seeks an alternative shelter to the modern and postmodern architecture, namely the *romantic* Heimat: Vermeulen and van den Akker make the term “metamodernism” and “neoromanticism” synonymous, as they consider to have captured a new

⁴⁴ Ibid.,

⁴⁵ Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” in *Kant on History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2001), 11-12. Passage mentioned in Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2, no. 1 (January 2010): 56–77, doi:<https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677>, 5.

⁴⁶ Van der Akker, and Vermeulen, “Notes on metamodernism,”⁴.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 12.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 5.

movement that is doing nothing else than perpetuating the “impossible possibility” of *enchaining the everyday life* as already theorized by the romantic Novalis in the 1790’s.⁴⁹

The authors of *I&I* do actually also make a combination of these aesthetical traditions, although in a slightly different way:

Of course, we do not believe that music harbors some sort of intrinsic affective dimension and we fully embrace the Modernist critique of sentimentalist romanticism. But this critique on its own is insufficient; it has too often encouraged a sort of aestheticized formalism. We wanted to cut through the paralyzing double bind: either emotional impact via rhetorical expressionism or reflexive lucidity via safely disengaged formalism. We wanted to achieve something that would be at once theoretically and viscerally exacting.⁵⁰

Here the following clarifications are to be made. It is clear that the way Brassier, Guionnet, Murayama and Mattin position themselves in relation to the romantic and modern movement is different from van den Akker and Vermeulen’s metamodern stance.⁵¹ This, however, is a superfluous distinction, for the consideration of the ‘enthusiastic’ or ‘naïve’ as well as the ‘sceptic’ or ‘ironic’ perspective are also very clear in this passage. The only difference is that the two perspectives are attributed to different traditions. What the *I&I* passage refers to as “cut[ting] through the paralyzing double bind” is similar to the metamodern “oscillating” way of positioning one’s work in between both perspectives.

The metamodern detour allows to clarify the ‘as if’ approach in terms of a tension holder between an enthusiastic and sceptic conviction concerning the accessibility of practices beyond the finiteness of representation. However, isn’t this an artistic contextualisation of a concept Meillassoux already introduced in 2006, namely *absolute contingency*? By taking this path we choose to explore precursive ideas on totality. This will on the one hand allow us to provide a richer idea of this particular way of thinking about totality, and on the other hand remain critical of ideas that do not cope with *non-idiom* as a practice.

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Is considered *absolute* that which *is* without any limitation, something that never stops being; is considered *contingent* that which is both possible to be or not to be. Therefore, *absolute contingency* means: that which never stops being, is the very *possibility* of something to be or not to be.

Moreover, Meillassoux presents contingency as the one and only absolute necessity lying underneath the presupposition that there is nothing which can be considered to be absolute. This latter presupposition has been a problem introduced by *strong correlationism*. More generally, *correlationism* is what Meillassoux calls the conviction that there is nothing *in reality* that can be known as an *absolute*. What we call ‘reality’ is limited to something that is thought of, something that is *represented* in one’s mind, and therefore not something that can be known *in-itself*, in any absolute way. However, if reality *in-itself* cannot be known, we can still *think* it, without actually knowing. And this “thinkability of the in-itself” then becomes the new

⁴⁹ Ibid, 12.

⁵⁰ Brassier, Guionnet, Murayama, and Mattin “Idioms and Idiots,”.

⁵¹ Note that on the one hand, the *Notes* do namedrop the term ‘local animism’ in a way that seems to be very much in line with Novalis’ *romantization* and on the other Guionnet in particular claims also refers to the term ‘animism’ (in a local way). He explains that the music instrument, and more generally the concert space, is *charged* with a gigantic history which invites to be ‘interpreted’ properly during the performance. Tone Glow, “Tone Glow 075: Jean-Luc Guionnet,” *Tone Glow*, September 1, 2021, <https://toneglow.substack.com/p/tone-glow-075-jean-luc-guionnet>.

absolute. This is what Meillassoux refers to as the *weak* model of correlationism.⁵² The *strong* model however, deems it impossible, for it presupposes an impossible distinction between an absolute that can be thought of, and limited act of thinking it.⁵³

Upon revisiting the matter, ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ correlationism seems to resonate with the ‘enthusiastic’ and ‘sceptic’ perspectives. And just like in *I&I* and more elaborately in the *Notes on metamodernism*, Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* considers both perspectives in order to surpass them.⁵⁴ Meillassoux’s way out of correlationism being contingency, stretched beyond the limits of representation onto the absolute, seems indeed to be considerable as the principle towards which the ‘as if’ driven practice tends toward. However, isn’t Meillassoux’s absolute contingency but an ontological contextualisation of a concept Stockhausen already introduced in 1960, namely the *momentform*?

The *moment* is an experience that is happening *right now*, regardless whether one is currently accessing a physical musical experience,⁵⁵ any criterion is includable to grasp, tune in and out of a moment.⁵⁶ Used as a compositional approach, Stockhausen thinks of a *moment* as that which has “always already started, and could continue forever”,⁵⁷ which anticipates the concept of *hyper-chaos*, through which Meillassoux’s describes the functioning of absolute contingency:

By chaos we usually mean disorder, randomness, the eternal becoming of everything. But these properties are not properties of Hyper-Chaos: its contingency is so radical that even becoming, disorder, or randomness can be destroyed by it, and replaced by order, determinism, and fixity. Things are so contingent in Hyper-chaos, that time is able to destroy even the becoming of things.⁵⁸

The *possibility* of the moment to be an eternally *fixed* presence is clearly echoed by the properties of hyper-chaos. There is however an important distinction to make between the two concepts when relating them to the non-idiomatic project as articulated so far.

On the one hand, the relation between Stockhausen’s *momentform* and *I&I*’s idiot can be presented under continuous lights. If Ablinger’s notion of *noise* emphasizes the *relation between the listening experience and totality*, it is mostly as a negative contrast to the isolating aspect of what he calls *noises* than a clearly articulated positive idea. Stockhausen’s *momentform* is more positive by putting the emphasis on absolute contingency, which he puts in direct relation with the listening experience. Although the contingent dimension is not made explicit in *I&I*, I suggest the idiot is a further development from this same contingent background, from which results a more fleshed out figure. Stockhausen emphasizes the potentially eternal continuity of the moment and the discontinuity of its listening experience. *I&I* emphasizes the idiot’s contingency reflected in the naïve as well as skeptic attitude toward his/her/their practice, which consists

⁵² Quentin Meillassoux, *Après La Finitude* (Editions du Seuil, 2006), 102. Citation translated by Jonas Vos.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 19.

⁵⁴ Since in *I&I* and the *Notes in metamodernism* the description of romanticism, modernism and postmodernism tend to be generalized, it would be problematic to assume a stronger connection with the two modes of correlationsim without turning into speculation. However, considering van den Akker and Vermeulen identification of metamodernism as a neoromantic movement, we can at least acknowledge the general point made by Hui, consistin in considering *contingency* as the modern variant of the absolute that the romantics saw in *nature*. Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency*, 35.

⁵⁵ Karlheinz Stockhausen, “Momentform: Neue Beziehungen Zwischen Aufführungsdauer, Werkdauer Und Moment,” in *Texte Zur Musik, Vol. 1* (Cologne: DuMont Schauberg, 1963), 199.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 201-204.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 199.

⁵⁸ Quentin Meillassoux, *Time without Becoming*, ed. Anna Longo (Mimesis International, 2014), 25.

of blurring the distinction between the *absoluteness* of unrepresentable background noise and the *limits* of our attention for representable rumours (signs).

On the other hand, as is explicitly highlighted in the passage above, if hyper-chaos, and therefore also the moment, is a possible eternal *fixity*, it challenges the (Deleuzian) concept of *becoming*. However, if Meillassoux rules out the “change of perception” characteristic of becoming, the question of how to get a grasp of absolute contingency remains. Meillassoux initially provides *intellectual intuition* as an answer, and clarifies the two terms: Intuition, because that is how we discover contingency in its absoluteness; Intellectual, because the contingency of things cannot be *perceived*, “only *thought* accesses it”.⁵⁹ Even after posterior attempts of justification in private conversations with Brassier,⁶⁰ Meillassoux does not seem to have surpassed the self-contradictory cycle of grasping the *absoluteness* of contingency within the *limits* of thought; he remains trapped in a formalism that cannot be articulated in a materialized experience, when this latter is necessary for the practice of striving towards *non-idiomacy* to be ongoing.

CONCLUSION

Considering Hui’s description of contingency as “a strange possibility, since it is a threat to the necessity of laws”, we have distinguished practices of contingency. While the *new idiom* “threat[ens] the necessity of [idiomatic] laws” for the sake of an aesthetical *result*, the *non-idiomacy* aims to elevate the ongoing *process* of this threatening to a necessity. This resonates in Bailey’s description of non-idiomacy as the process of “questioning the ‘rules’ governing musical language”. Through this process-driven practice; the non-idiom aims to bypass the representation of recognizable idioms. Bailey’s initial association of *non-idiomacy* as a practice of the first generation of free improvisation is limited. This is due to the recognizability of the hyper-adaptive skills, that seems to promote the required attitude of a successful self-entrepreneur in a neo-liberal society.

In order to surpass the limits of the first generation of free improvisation, Hui’s description of contingency as a ‘strange’ possibility is revisited. In *Idioms and Idiots*, Brassier, Guionnet, Murayama and Mattin set the challenge for the new generation by distinguishing the *stranger* from the *idiot*. By marking the line between *rumors* and *background noise* elsewhere, the stranger makes idioms visible, while the idiot makes no distinction between the two, making his own idiom unrecognizable, and therefore non-idiomatic. Instead of the ‘strange’ adaptative practices, *I&I* suggests a more idiotic focus on silence. The silence-driven practices of Beckett of Cage allow for a limited understanding of idiocy. The former comes closer to an idea of idiocy but in a very representational way, the latter is more discrete but still isolates sound by framing background noise in a recognizable way. Ablinger’s distinction between *noises* (isolated) and *noise* (totality) accentuates the relation of non-idiomacy and *totality*, for this latter is beyond representation, and therefore non-idiomatic.

In order to surpass the limits of isolating sound, Hui’s description of contingency as a ‘threatening’ is discussed in the lights of totality. In order to get a clearer image of how to think of this totality, the first thing to look at was the notion of the ‘as if’ in *I&I*. With the assistance of the concept of *becoming*, the relation between the ‘as if’ and non-idiomacy is better understood as staying unrecognizable by persisting one’s practice ‘as if’ it was an idiom among any other. With the assistance of the concept of *metamodernism*, the ‘as if’ approach can be understood as a tension between enthusiasm and scepticism that is extended to the absolute (or totality), which makes the absolute an absolute contingency. This is an ontological concept that was previously developed by Meillassoux, although taking a look at its incoherency with *becoming* invites us to be critical of the formalist, and therefore unpractical, presuppositions of the concept. However,

⁵⁹ Meillassoux, *Après La Finitude*, 123 (italics added by Jonas Vos).

⁶⁰ Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound : Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 91-92.

even before Meillassoux, it was anticipated by Stockhausen's compositional *practices* through the *momentform*. The idiot can therefore be considered the further development of absolute contingency driven practice anticipated by the *momentform*.

Through the approach of the idiot, this thesis highlights the following answers to the question how one's practice may strive towards something else than representations of idioms: instead of excessive change and isolation of sounds, a particular attention to the non-representative possibilities of noise- and especially silence-driven approaches, with a non-formalist consideration of absolute contingency through 'as if'-driven practices.

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