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## Making noises in the factory without walls

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**Abstract.** *The paper problematises some implications of the turn towards a virtualised creative economy for the conceptualisation of sound and music, and the political and social status of music-making in late capitalist society. Assessing how modes associated with improvised, DIY musical activity can become co-opted by private or corporate interests, it is argued that open, freely improvised practices can and should be critically differentiated from machinic models of openness, through small but decisive gestures that defy subsumption.*

**Keywords:** *machinic capitalism, creativity, improvisation*

### The invisible sonic sweatshop

The rapid emergence of a creative economy in Europe, and its reliance on the co-option of immaterial labor (Lazzarato 1997, Hardie 2004, Raunig 2013) has marked an unprecedented shift in the social, economic and legal status of sonic and sound-related work, and in the means of its production, communication, valorisation and consumption. This shift, although seismic in conceptual proportions, has been rather seamlessly subsumed into the everyday post-digital experience, aided by an essential reconfiguration and re-conceptualisation of mundane everyday activities as creative acts in themselves.

A tedious walk to work becomes instant material for a few snapshots and a quick recording, an upload to a designated online platform, a social media post and potentially endless links. The blurring of boundaries between aesthetic objects and everyday processes, between artistic subjects and public space, radically advocated in Dada, Fluxus and post-war experimental music, now becomes stripped of its political powers, and re-branded through an increasing capitalist fascination with improvisation and the ephemeral (Boutang 2011, Raunig 2013). The message is clear: you cannot help but be creative; you cannot help but improvise; you cannot help but share, exchange, consume and eventually lose interest in the provisional, makeshift products of ad hoc creativity. What happens to the detritus of data you leave behind, or to the ideological content once associated with improvisatory and counter-aesthetic practices, is irrelevant.

The blossoming of ostensible forms of creativity is complemented by widening institutional interest and financial support for a) social collectives and improvising machines of all kinds, with an aim either to model or to complement the workings of the improvising human mind in social situations (Stefanou 2012 & 2015) and b)

workshops and peer learning contexts centred on DIY skills and co-creation (Koutsomichalis & Rodousakis 2015). At the same time, counter-cultural creative activities that have until recently been self-defined as amateur or underground are subjected to processes of professionalisation, under conspicuously precarious terms. These include start-up opportunities in cultural hubs for artists that can no longer afford their studio rent,<sup>1</sup> unpaid concerts in exchange for online exposure,<sup>2</sup> and private registers, licences or monetisation platforms for street artists that cannot risk local authority fines.<sup>3</sup> In short, 'the place of music' (Leyshon, Matless & Revill 1998) in late capitalism is an increasingly regulated dystopia.

Paradoxically, while the locus of playing, recording, listening to and organising sounds collaboratively, autonomously under an aesthetic framework is all but persecuted by dominant modes of contemporary cultural production, access to sound and music also appears easier and more widely available than ever before. For at least ten years now, sound and aural experiences are the chief driving force behind new cartographies and re-conceptualisations of space in decentralised, mobile but at the same time highly commodifiable terms. Global or trans-local sound maps and mobile soundscape initiatives are extending and re-shaping the audible environment through an over-arching narrative of permanence, where traces of subjective experience are presented side-by-side, and all sounds, regardless of context or social load, are presented as equal (Waldock 2011, Ouzounian 2014). The soundscape metaphor, one could argue, is no longer a reference to the local and trans-subjective imaginary. It has become synonymous with an expansive online territory, where all is happening everywhere, all the time.

Aporee.org, the driving force behind the Global Soundmap Project<sup>4</sup> for over a decade now, is an online platform where user-uploaded soundbites are tagged and located on an online map. The website functions as an ongoing radio artwork project, which is dependent on users' free participation and voluntary uploads of recordings made in various parts of the world. Recordings are 'pinned' onto the particular spot of the world map they correspond to, and are freely available for broadcast and download, as well as indexed in a searchable database, so they can be sorted and retrieved on the basis of source type, location, etc. by any user worldwide. In April 2016, Udo Noll, its Berlin-based founder, convened a workshop and performance in the context of Borderline '16 Festival in Athens.<sup>5</sup> Participants in the workshop were asked to volunteer six hours daily during a working week, co-designing a project entitled 'Mobile Miniatures'. The workshop consisted of a series

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1. See e.g. *Romantso*, at the heart of an ongoing soft gentrification project in downtown Athens, <http://www.romantso.gr/?Lang=En>.

2. See e.g. *Sofar*, an international online platform for secret house concerts, <https://www.sofarsounds.com/> or *Music Is network's Athens-based Impro Fest*, <http://musicisnetwork.wordpress.com>.

3. See e.g. *Busk*, an international online platform where buskers can register <http://busk.co/blog/> or *AppLoud*, an application which «monetizes fan-generated videos» of live performances, including those in public places, «on behalf of artists» <http://apploud.co/home/>.

4. <http://aporee.org/maps/info/#content>.

5. <http://www.sgt.gr/eng/SPG1510/>

of group meetings and subsequent walks to a selection of areas in Athens, to effect recordings, which were then uploaded onto [aporee.org](http://aporee.org).

Upon completing the workshop, Noll demonstrated the work by playing an improvised DJ set, including the miniatures recorded by workshop participants, as well as a number of other sounds, tagged and classified by type and/or location. This was the culmination and chief end-deliverable of the workshop. 'You played God', one of the audience members exclaimed at the end of the presentation, referring to one's ability to virtually navigate through a global map of de-contextualised sounds and create all kinds of soundscape combinations that might never physically be heard sounding together in one location. Perhaps unwittingly, she had also hinted to a latent ethical issue. One of the samples chosen was a field recording of police radio, during one of the most violent anti-austerity protests in Athens during May 2010, where three people had lost their lives. The recording was made just around the corner from this incident. During the improvisation, this soundclip, voluntarily uploaded some years ago, was played alongside recordings contributed by the 2016 workshop participants, and superimposed over a global array of other sounds, including bypasser recordings of street musicians in various cities, projected across a dynamic world map.

The implications of this seemingly chance encounter, between a moment of enormous political risk and significance and the sounds idly gathered by contemporary *flâneurs* who attended a workshop in what was essentially voluntary data harnessing, remained unassessed during the discussion. They will probably also remain unassessed in current literature on Radio Aporee and similar soundmap platforms. Workshops will probably continue to be held, enabling more and more urban eavesdroppers to transform their subjective experiences into all-purpose, crowdsourced data.

## Noisy undercommons

As this paper was being finalised, news arrived of the closure of Dal Verme, a venue in Rome that has paid host to hundreds of local and international music gigs and workshops. Reputedly, the venue was shut down under a 1931 law, according to which 'the Commissioner may suspend the licence of a period in which occurred riots or severe disturbances, or habitual haunt of people affected or dangerous or that constitute a danger to public order, public morality and the morality or for the security of citizens'.<sup>6</sup>

The story sounded all too familiar. In 2013, Knot Gallery, the only dedicated venue for experimental music in Athens was locked down by the Municipality of Athens, on the grounds of operating without appropriate licence. The closure documents referenced a 1937 law that had not been enforced for decades. Unable to acquire adequate licensing, the gallery was forced to close with significant financial damage, along with dozens of other co-operative, self-run venues that had opened up in cheaply rented venues in downtown Athens since the onset of the economic crisis

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6. <http://roma.fanpage.it/pigneto-chiuso-il-dal-verme-per-la-polizia-ritrovo-di-pregiudicati-e-persone-pericolose/>

(Stefanou, forthcoming). The music-making activities that had been given a space in such venues have since either been embraced by large cultural foundations for sparse, annual concerts in the context of large-scale festivals, or re-fashioned for more frequent presentation in burgeoning 'incubators' and 'cultural entertainment centres'. When not silenced by state powers, live music is therefore largely instrumentalised to impart added value to promotional or communication-related events not in any way related to musical production (Stefanou, forthcoming).

As the story of Dal Verme's closure began to circulate online, the collective involved in its running issued a statement, to enlist support from members of the venue's extended circle. As the statement explained, 'the association has been actively involved in the diffusion of innovative and local culture and creativity for more than 7 years ... during which we have constructed a permanent workshop open to any artistic and creative proposal.'<sup>7</sup> How easily could one envisage or effect a 'permanent open workshop' like the one described here, and what kinds of expectations would one have from such a structure? Workshops like the Radio Aporee example abound in recent years, and so do workshop leaders, whose role has been increasingly professionalised and formalised. Since the onset of the global economic crisis, a growing ad-hoc workshop culture has begun to appear across visual, and by extension, sonic arts circles, following a format of ephemeral contact time with a paid professional who 'leads' a group of learners through a series of co-creative processes (Koutsomichalis & Rodousakis 2015). In effect, peer learning and crowdsourcing are sometimes both conflated into the broader, loose category of the workshop. What is unclear however, is if and how this form of workshop can co-exist, side-by-side with the ideas of permanency and openness evoked in the Dal Verme closure statement.

A workshop can mean many things, and take many guises. It may refer to an actual space, where craftsmen work on their projects, and present or sell them to end-product users. This rather literal definition has become highly diversified over the years; the idea of 'maker spaces', for instance, or even 'project spaces' has become a modern-day equivalent of the craftsman's workshop. As processes, workshops may also entail sharing, collaboration and peer learning between like-minded practitioners. It is important to remember however that a workshop might not only refer to a hierarchical learning platform revolving around a workshop leader who co-ordinates this learning process. It may also refer to a gathering of people who form an informal, horizontally structured learning community.

'Workshop' is also the term of choice for regular open meetings of music improvisers, who choose to freely interact with each other sonically for two or three hours, without any intention to 'fix' the materials of their improvisation into a concrete compositional product, or a band. Such meetings include both more prominent (Clark 2012) and less documented examples (Stefanou 2011), but share a number of common characteristics.

1. *They are not-for-profit.* Payment, if any, occurs only on the basis of small donations, which are pooled e.g. towards a weekly inexpensive rent

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7. Text available on <http://dalverme8.tumblr.com/post/144104664238/english-version>.

2. *They do not have an end product.* Many individual and collective pieces as well as personal and group projects may originate in processes initiated during a workshop. However, the workshops themselves do not aim at a pre-determined deliverable, and participants may in fact specifically resist setting such goals in the context of a workshop.
3. *They are long-term processes with no expected completion date.* To the extent permissible by the structures that host them, such workshops may occur for months, years, or decades.

The workshop originally founded by percussionist Eddie Prevost in South London, and convened weekly since 1999, is a good case in point. After over a decade of activity, the workshop did in fact receive some attention through a dedicated book by Prevost himself (Prevost 2011) and a feature in *Wire* magazine. While one could critically discern tendencies towards professionalisation in these gestures, one of the participants quoted in the *Wire* article, nailed the significant divergence of this model from the very core of the machinic economy alluded to above. Following a discussion as to whether the workshop, now increasingly more popular across an international community of improvisers, should have a website for related documents and announcements, he exclaimed: ‘Why a website? We have nothing to sell’ (Clark 2012, 39).

Traditionally, the very notion of an experimental & improvised music community has been directly related to counter-cultural activities and loosely mapped as ‘underground’, both in terms of ideologies and aesthetics (Graham 2012 & 2016, Moutsopoulos 2012). For Graham, the heterogeneous grid of practices that make up the concept of the underground is in itself an “unintermediated” cultural configuration’ so foreign to dominant conceptions of creative economy, that it largely manages to ‘escape ... post-Fordist capitalist subsumption’ (2012, p.3). Such moments of differentiation between collective musical processes (a regular meeting of improvisers) and their reification into creative commodities (a promotional website) are decisions. They might be later cancelled or reversed. But they do signify a meaningful distinction and deliberation to attach more importance to situated social interaction and the relational ontologies it gives rise to over time, and less value to the processes of mediation and branding that would allow for an improvising practice to be capitalised upon. As Borgo notes, ‘improvising music together does not necessarily produce optimal outcomes, but the decision to improvise together does’ (2006, p. 194). Whenever such decisions are made, they constitute, in Manning’s terms, ‘minor gestures’, through which subjects re-claim and re-assert musical agency. Under the soundscape factory without walls, there is still space, and there is yet space to be produced, for music-making as an embodied, socially situated process; and for musical improvisation, as an act of defiance and radical dissent.

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