THE AVANT GARDE AS EXFORM

Lauren Redhead

Abstract: Peter Bürger's critique of the historical avant garde accounts for its ineffectual nature as a political movement because of its relationship with institions.[1] He argues for hermeneutics to be employed as a critique of ideology,[2] and as a facet of the understanding of the 'historicity of aesthetic categories'.'[3] The influence of institutions on music since 1968 has served as a central part of its critique: the work concept itself seems to enshrine political ineffectiveness and the bourgeois nature of art practice that ought to be critiqued by an avant-garde. In contrast, Bourriaud's concept of the 'exform'[4] re-conceives the avant-garde as outside of institutions and an idea of 'progress' that is aligned with a dominant capitalist ideology. He frames the task of the avant-garde artist as giving energy to 'waste', outside of political and ideological institutions. This type of avant-garde practice functions to 'bring precarity to mind: to keep the notion alive that intervention in the world is possible.'[5] This article explores the exform with respect to the work of the British composer Chris Newman and the Swiss composer Annette Schmucki, and considers how Bourriaud's approach to re-thinking the avant-garde might apply specifically to contemporary and experimental music in the present.

The term 'avant garde' is not one that easily describes or differentiates contemporary music today. A recent conference at City University asked, 'is there a musical avant garde today?'[6] This question implies that there might not be, or perhaps that such a term might not even be of value for the assessment of contemporary music. The impetus for the conference identified conflicting issues of style, aesthetics, and politics in the search for a contemporary avant garde. It contended that avant-garde concerns have previously been identified in music that has 'an antagonism towards aesthetic norms and the predominant modes of political thought and practice associated with them',[7] and described the search for the avant garde as a search for 'a music more progressive than certain others'.[8] While the combination of antagonism, political stance, and progressiveness might seem reasonable criteria in the identification of an avant garde, their actual musical characteristics are not themselves well-defined; by definition they must be in flux. The avant garde of one generation, or moment, of composers is likely to be different from that of another. Indeed, what may be considered

---

1 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw, Theory and History of Literature, vol. 4 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, [1984] 2009), p.95.

2 ibid., p.6.

3 ibid., pp15-16.

4 Nicholas Bourriaud, *The Exform*, trans. by Erik Butler, Verso Futures (London: Verso, 2016).

5 ibid., p.47.

6 City, University of London, *Is there a Musical Avant Garde Today?* (London, 2017) <http://www.city.ac.uk/events/2017/july/is-there-a-musical-avant-garde-today> [accessed 04.07.2017].

7 ibid.

8 ibid.

progressive will differ not only in time, but according to the point of view of whoever is identifying the progression. Progress, as a retrospectively linear designation, is unlikely to yield the identification of a future avant grade: such music—preemptively identified—will become increasingly predictable by its historical precedence. Perhaps there are many avant gardes today; rather than whether they exist, a more productive question may be where they can be identified, and how they might be.

A similar musicological problem is described in Carl Dahlhaus's exploration of the term 'new music' in *Schoenberg and the New Music*. In this essay, Dahlhaus decides that such a term, when used to differentiate between works, is 'as unavoidable as it is precarious',[9] and perhaps less helpful in determining the 'progressiveness' of music than it is a way of situating practice in its historical context. He writes, 'what is seemingly most transient—the quality of incipient beginning, of 'for the first time'—acquires a paradoxical permanence'.[10] In this assessment 'new music' and the avant garde acquire a retrospective quality.

Similarly, Peter Bürger's critique of the 'historical avant garde' (in literature) describes the difficulty in objectively identifying avant-garde practice. In his critique, the relationship of the audience to the work is not passive. The interpreter approaches the work 'with prejudices' and interprets and applies it with respect to their own situation.[11] Thus, '[t]he perspective from which they view their subject is determined by the position they occupy among the social forces of the epoch'.[12] As a result, interpretation and ideology cannot be separated and Bürger argues for hermeneutics to be employed as a critique of ideology.[13] This enables an understanding of the 'historicity of aesthetic categories'.[14] As an aesthetic category, the avant garde is as historical as 'the new music' in Dahlhaus's conception. Both become so when retrospectively identified or constituted.

A corollary of Bürger's argument is that an issue of the identification of avant-garde work might be that which could be described as the institutionalisation of institutional critique. The genre of visual

---

[9] Carl Dahlhaus, 'New Music as Historical Category', in *Schoenberg and the New Music*, trans. by Derrick Puffett and Alfred Clayton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1964) 1988) pp1-13; p2.

[10] Dahlhaus (1988) p13.

[11] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw, Theory and History of Literature, vol. 4 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, [1984] 2009), p.5.

[12] ibid., p.6.

[13] ibid., p.6.

[14] ibid., pp15-16.

art works labelled as 'institutional critique' can be identified as pieces that collude with the apparatus of the art world, such as museums and galleries, to expose their mechanisms of working. This can be seen in the work of, for example, Andrea Fraser.[15] Although institutional critique has been aligned with avant-garde practices, its relationship with institutions has also been its criticism. Bürger writes that,'[if] art is institutionalised as ideology in bourgeois society, then it does not suffice to make the contradictory structure of this ideology transparent; instead, one must also ask what this ideology may conceal',[16] and that, '[a]rt as an institution prevents the contents of works that press for radical change in society […] from having any practical effect'.[17] Fraser herself commented on the institutionalisation of critique, writing that '[w]ith each attempt to evade the limits of institutional determination, to embrace an outside, we expand our frame and bring more of the world into it. But we never escape it'.[18] Similarly in new music, the influence of institutions since 1968 has served as a central part of the critique of so-called avant-garde practice created in relation to such institutions: the 'work concept' itself seems to enshrine political ineffectiveness and the bourgeois nature of art practice that ought to be critiqued by an avant garde. This struggle can be observed in two recent examples of musical protest.

Johannes Kreidler's *protestaktion* (2012), presented at the Donaueschingen Musiktage, protested the merger of two regional radio orchestras. Kreidler 'interrupted' the introduction to the opening concert of the festival, snatched a (clearly planted and low-quality) violin and 'cello from the orchestra, tied them together by their strings, and delivered a short speech against the merger, after which he destroyed the hybrid instrument that he had created. Leaflets printed by the Gesellschaft für Neue Musik were then distributed; Kreidler left the stage and the orchestral performance continued as planned. Discussion immediately after this performance centred around the potential influence of works such as Peter Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969), the

---

[15] Fraser's work is a particularly relevant example, because it examines the intersectional nature of power and institutional relationships in art. The Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, describing a solo exhibition of Fraser's work, writes that: 'institutional critique is concerned with the disclosure and demystification of how the artistic subject as well as the art object are staged and reified by the art institution', and that Fraser in particular, 'treats the institution as a set of positions and social relations rather than a physical site in which institutional power can be clearly located'. cf. Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, *Andrea Fraser, "What do I as an artist, provide?"* (University of Washington in St. Louis: Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts, 2007), p.3. <http://www.kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu/files/AndreaFraser.pdf> [accessed 15.02.2018].

[16] ibid., p.14.

[17] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw, Theory and History of Literature, vol. 4 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, [1984] 2009), p.95.

[18] Andrea Fraser, 'From the critique of institutions to an institution of critique', *Artforum*, vol. 44, no.1 (2005), pp278-283; p.282.

potential effectiveness of such action and, ultimately, whether it could be considered a true protest work, since it turned out to have been commissioned by the GNM.[19]

The composer defended this work, stating: 'the stage was open for everyone else who has the courage to do something, and all other ideas [of] what could be done in this situation. [D]o it better, than we [can] talk again.'[20] The relationship of such institutional critique with music's institutions makes it easy to respond that the stage was not open to those who did not receive a commission[21] and that the courage needed to present a commissioned protest work is much less than that needed to intervene without institutional backing. Such works—part of the *soi-disant* or itular Neue-Kozeptualismus[22]—have been described as neo-conceptualism by those who see a direct comparison between them and the institutional critique of Fraser et al in the 1970s. In Fraser's terms, the frame of institutional determination is expanded in this practice, but it is not escaped.

In contrast, the Dutch composer Cornelis de Bondt and his students Jeremiah Runnels and Yedo Gibson unexpectedly intervened at an orchestral concert in the Netherlands on 18 January 2013. Their protest released a helium balloon with an alarm attached to it into the auditorium; their action was intended to protest the abolition of the Radio Kammer Filharmonie. This event was within the tradition of the Notenkraker group's disruptive protests in the 1960s.[23] In this piece, unlike Kreidler's protest, de Bondt et al succeeded in halting the concert. But the consequences were greater than this: *The Journal of Music* reported that American national Runnels was issued with a deportation notice ending his student status in Europe.[24] The comparison between this work and Kreidler's highlights Bürger's reflection on the institutionalisation of avant-garde critique. He

---

[19] This was disputed, and the composer claimed that he was paid for the 'performance' and not the piece, writing: 'the idea i gave GNM for free, for the performance i received a compensation. since it has nothing to do with self-publicity, it was simply a performance job' [sic]. Johannes Kreidler, Facebook Post, 30.10.2012, archived at Ian Pace, 'The Johannes Kreidler protest at Donaueschingen about the fusion of the radio orchestras at Baden-Baden/Freiburg and Stuttgart – a discussion (from Facebook!)', *Desiring Progress* (7.11.2012) <https://ianpace.wordpress.com/2012/11/07/the-johannes-kreidler-protest-at-donaueschingen-about-the-fusion-of-the-radio-orchestras-at-baden-badenfreiburg-and-stuttgart-a-discussion-from-facebook/> [accessed 15.02.2018]. This statement implies that Kreidler believes the work concept to be preserved in the case of this protest work, since he separates the intellectual labour of composing and the physical labour of performing in this way.

[20] Johannes Kreidler, Facebook Post, 25.10.2012, archived at ibid.

[21] Or a 'compensation'; the composer's quibbling over terms notwithstanding.

[22] cf. Johannes Kreidler, 'Das Neue am Neuen Konzeptualismus', published as 'Das Neue and der Konzeptmusik', *Neue Zeitschrift für Muzik*, vol. 175, no. 1 (2014), pp44-49, <http://www.kreidler-net.de/theorie/Kreidler_Das_Neue_am_Neuen_Konzeptualismus.pdf> [accessed 13.05.2017].

[23] cf. Robert Adlington, *Composing Dissent: Avant-Garde Music in 1960s Amsterdam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp237-38.

[24] Unsigned, 'A Tough Week for Orchestras, *The Journal of Music* (28.01.2013), <http://journalofmusic.com/radar/tough-week-orchestras> [15.02.2018]. It appears that this notice was later rescinded.

writes, '[t]he neo avant-garde institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-garde intentions.'[25] This is the issue that differentiates these two protest works: Kreidler was paid; Runnels was nearly deported.

These examples imply that, in addition to not requiring retrospective assessment of works in their context, an effective avant garde must be outside of institutions. Nicholas Bourriaud's recent concept of the 'exform' reconceives the avant-garde as both outside of institutions and apart from an idea of linear 'progress' that can be aligned with a dominant capitalist ideology.[26] Bourriaud's assessment begins from what he sees as the actual conditions of art and life. Progress, as part of a capitalist narrative, both creates and abhors waste. He observes that capitalism desires frictionless movement of 'commodities (beings/objects)',[27] but that capitalism also wastes energy through its methods of production. These two points are fundamentally antithetical to each other. 'Waste', as a metaphor found in economics, describes anything that is not 'at work' in capitalism. For Bourriaud the task of the avant-garde artist is to give energy to this waste, outside of political and ideological institutions. Such works are 'realist', defined here as 'art that resists the operation of triage' into aesthetic-political designations such as politically correct art, simple denunciation, etc.[28] They 'lift the ideological veils which apparatuses of power drape over the mechanism of expulsion and its refuse, whether material or not.'[29] Such political work is not a method of simply re-presenting reality to the audience in order to make it grotesque (such as by presenting a hybrid instrument) but of resisting engagement in the ideological narrative of contemporary society completely (such as by disrupting the farewell concert of an orchestra and presenting it from taking place).

Bourriaud describes works that exhibit these criteria as *exformal*. The *exformal* is 'the site where border negotiations unfold between what is rejected and what is admitted, products and waste', and forms 'an authentically organic link between the aesthetic and the political.'[30] This type of avant-garde practice functions to 'bring precarity to mind: to keep the notion alive that intervention in the

---

[25] Bürger, p.58.

[26] Nicholas Bourriaud, *The Exform*, trans. by Erik Butler, Verso Futures (London: Verso, 2016).

[27] ibid., p.8.

[28] ibid., p.10.

[29] ibid.

[30] ibid., p.10.

world is possible.'[31] Three key aspects of the exformal—precarity,[32] insularity, and the use of waste—might be used as criteria for identifying avant-garde practice today. Two composers whose work exhibits these properties are the Berlin-based British Composer Chris Newman, and the Swiss composer Annette Schmucki. Although their works achieve quite different sonic results, and quite different approaches to compositional practice, similarities can be drawn along these aesthetic categories of precarity, insularity, and waste, which suggest avant-garde practice in both cases and, furthermore, demonstrate that avant-garde practice and musical style are not synonymous.

Precarity of aesthetic categories is not unique to Bourriaud's conception of the avant garde. In 1947, Adorno claimed that 'today the only works which really count are no longer works at all.'[33] For a work to be 'no longer a work' it must transcend or evade existing aesthetic categories. The conscious seeking of avant-garde practice would result in the same problems that Dahlhaus identifies in the search for the 'new music'. Today, aesthetic ideas once considered avant-garde or progressive and that may once have challenged the establishment—such as those identified by Helmut Lachenmann[34]—are now seen as part of an established institutional practice that is signalled by, for example, the Donaueschingen Musiktage or the Amsterdam Concertgebouw as in the examples I have given above. Anti-aesthetics—a rejection of institutions through the offence of taste—is a way that artists can produce the exformal without the collaboration of institutions; something that evaded even Andrea Fraser's 'expanded frame' of institutional critique.

Precarity can be found in Chris Newman's work in his selection and use of texts as self-composed or found objects. *Cologne* (1986/7) for voice and instruments features Newman's voice, on this occasion borrowing text from a travel guide to the city that contained many mistakes in translation. This text fails in its functions as a translation and as a source of information about Cologne. But it also 'fails' in its musical function in terms of its integration into the work. The accompanying part of *Cologne*, written for ensemble KNM Berlin (string quartet, wind quartet, and percussion), is made up of a mixture of unison and homophonic, mostly tonal, material, which indicates a 'celebratory' mode through rising melodic material, upward glissandos, and building heterophony. In comparison, the text progresses haltingly, Newman combining single words or phrases with bars

---

[31] ibid., p.47.

[32] The precarity referred to by Bourriaud, and in the rest of this essay, is that of aesthetic categories, and not of the working conditions of the artist. The latter precarity has rightly been highlighted and protested in many recent discussions in music.

[33] Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. by Anne G Mitchell and Wesley V Blomster (New York: Continuum, 1973), p.30.

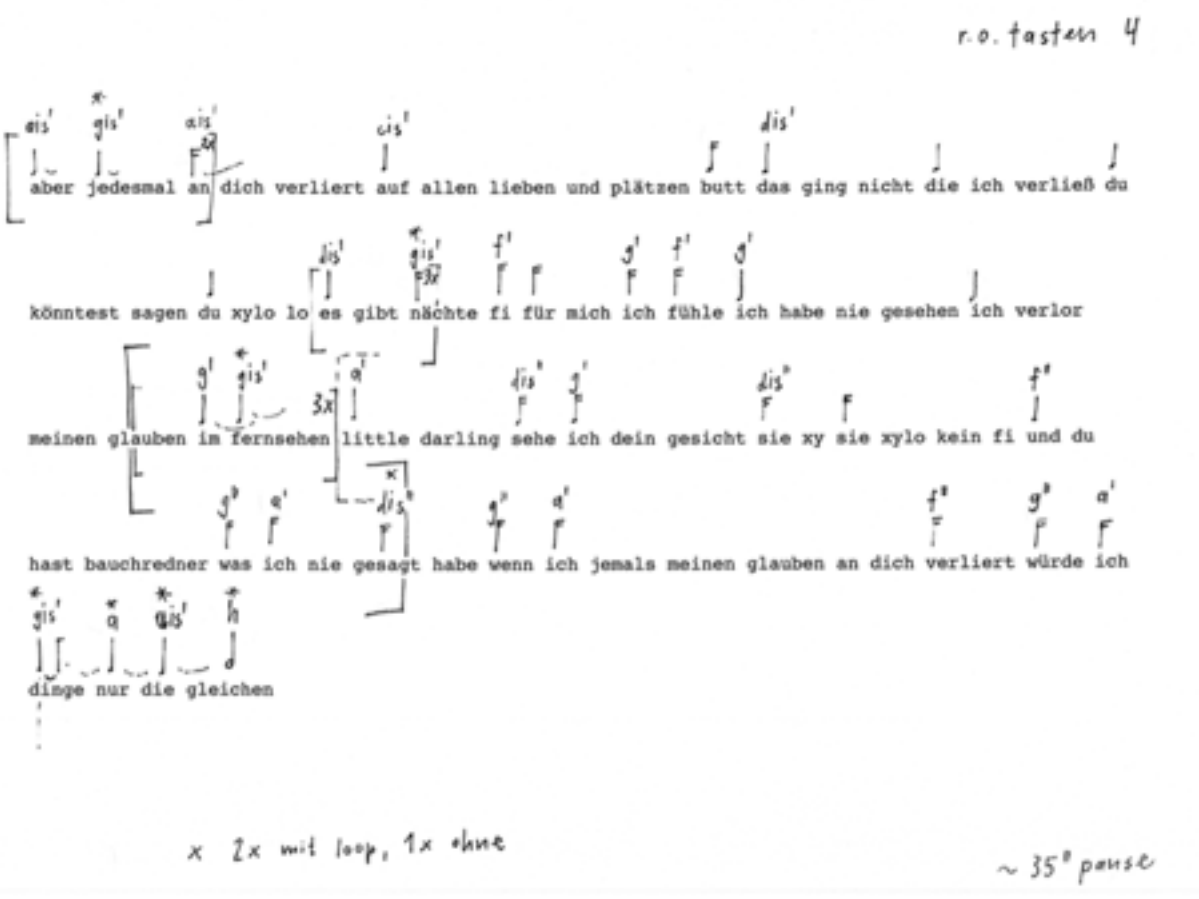
[34] Helmut Lachenmann, 'The 'Beautiful' in Music Today', *Tempo*, New Series 135, (December 1980), pp.20-24. Lachemann notes that the avant-garde of the past, at his time of writing, had 'led to complacent mannerism'. (p. 21)

of the musical material (in a manner similar to Cage's lectures); members of the ensemble eventually join in, singing. The ensemble music is undermined and disrupted by the inclusion of the text. The performance of the text by the composer foregrounds his intervention in the music by the presence of his voice, whilst the text itself highlights this disruption through its own new and disrupted meanings that arise from its 'mistakes'.

In the case of *Cologne*, the status of the musical work as an object is undermined as the piece both performs, and fails at, imparting information. In the case of Annette Schmucki's work, music is re-developed as an object from its initial aesthetic principles. Of this she writes:

> my ground musical material is always language. I like to compose lists of words in which from one word to the next there are specific changes: rules on vowels and consonants, syllables and number of phonemes or letters - these lists show me straight rhythms I wouldnt've had the possibility to invent or sounds: 'melodies' that are beyond personal imagination.[35]

This can be seen in the piece *repeat one* (2017) for flute, bass clarinet, violin, 'cello, and piano-synthesiser (controlling electronic samples that include speech). The score for this piece shows how Schmucki uses language as a structuring component of the music.



[35] Annette Schmucki, email communication with the author, 12.02.2018.

Example 1: *repeat one*, 'key 4', score detail. Pitches A#, G#, C#, D#, F, G and A are named; the instructions indicate to place twice with the loop, and once without.[36]

Example 1 shows an example of Schmucki's 'playing instructions'. Here, even if the text is redacted, the 'absent' text is assumed as the originator of the rhythmic material and musical layering. The musical parts are not derived from the text but inextricably connected to it.

The use of speech and text in structuring musical detail is not in itself a new or avant-garde idea: earlier examples of such an idea can be found, for example, in the music of Leoš Janáček.[37] Schmucki's work, however, foregrounds language not just as a structuring principle of the music but as its primary idea. While the status of music as a language is open to debate, this work presents language as music. Similarly, Sprachmusik is not in itself an innovation, nor was it in the 1980s. The inclusion of text itself is not the element of this music that indicates the avant garde or exformal, even though these two examples show how the inclusion and choice of text might influence this. Instead it is the act of making the status of the work precarious that does so. In the cases of Newman and Schmucki, precarity is achieved through elevating the value of something considered peripheral to the musical work in nineteenth and twentieth century aesthetics. In this period, instrumental music became valued over its vocal counterpart. Even previous aesthetic categories, which valued vocal music more highly, emphasised the sacred over the secular. Therefore in the creation of secular—both as non-religious music and as music not bound to institutions—vocal works, these composers elevate the least institutionally aesthetically desirable aspects of their music: those that are found on the margins.

The use of text and speech is often combined in these composers' work with the inclusion of their personal voices (as in *Cologne*). This indicates a further exformal property of insularity, through elements of the music that belong exclusively to the person of the composer, and are signified through paralinguistic elements of the work. These elements restrict the music to performances where the composer is present, and the death or absence of the creator will negate their works *as* works (that can be considered by the work concept). These exact sounds cannot be recreated even when others perform them. When others perform Newman's songs, for example, they perform 'Newman' as well as performing the songs.

The reliance of the music on the sound of the composer has a further insular aspect beyond that of limiting possible performances. Annette Schmucki's music contains the sound of her Swiss-

---

[36] Annette Schmucki, *repeat one* (2017) [music score].

[37] cf. Paul Wingfield, 'Janáček's Speech-Melody Theory in Concept and Practice', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 4, no. 3 (1992), pp281-301.

German, heard, for example, in her improved performances with Petra Ronner in their *band* project.[38] The contrast between Schweizerdeutsch and Hochdeutsch is important because foregrounding this dialect foregrounds a minority voice among German speakers. Other Sprachmusik that draws on the German language—for example that by Cornelius Schwehr—does not necessarily perform insularity in the same way as that by Schmucki that includes a minority dialect. Schwehr's music performs the German language as part of a collective idea (in the same way that upper-class south-eastern English accents are presented as neutral) rather than as an individual identity, which contains musical information. Schmucki describes the notational function of speech and text in the following way: 'when I perform solo (sampler and voice) or with the 'band' I do not have scores—I have just *spielanweisungen* [performance instructions], notes, material, fragments of text—but the samples are kind of composition.'[39] The voice as a part of a personal performance practice becomes insular since it indicates performance that takes place aside from and in spite of institutions, or the audience. Newman's and Schmucki's use and re-use of their voices, either physically, as samples, or through quotation of their previous compositions, makes their works highly personally specific. Such approaches refuse to integrate the audience into the process of the music and instead exclude the audience by refusing to collude with them in the music's reception.

An example of insularity through lack of collusion is Chris Newman's *String Quartet* (1981/1988): a misleading title since it is actually music for solo violin, with Newman as vocalist, in its second version. The vocalist's text is taken from Newman's own poetry and performed by the composer. This piece exhibits a juxtaposition between institutional norms (semi-virtuosic violin performance) and vocal production: Newman's phrase lengths are defined by the length of his breath rather than by the text. A potential comparison with punk performance might be made, and is worth considering: the original piece was described as 'for string quartet or rock group' and perhaps the revised version has updated this popular culture reference. Yet there is no resolution in which the audience are brought in on the 'joke'. Rather there is something voyeuristic about Newman's *String Quartet* performance, to which musicological critiques of the performance of madness might be applied (as is also the case in the comparison between Peter Maxwell Davies's work and Kreidler's performance discussed earlier). But such readings of madness only further indicate the insular quality of the music: the 'audience'—and the institutions who represent them—cannot influence it and their potential discomfort is not acknowledged. In both Newman's awkward, personal performance practice and Schmucki's minority dialect, the individual is emphasised over the collective and the institutional.

---

[38] band, *band* (n.d.) <http://www.bandpage.ch> [accessed 15.02.2018].

[39] Annette Schmucki, email communication with the author, 11.02.2018.

The use of musical 'waste' is the final exformal property in the music of these composers. By 'waste' I refer here to those materials discarded in the capitalist system of music whose inclusion by artists Bourriaud has described as 'viatorizing' or giving energy to forms.[40] The use of borrowed materials without an attempt to integrate them into a new musical symbolic system destabilises their status: once 'at work' in a piece of music 'materials' such as quotations and samples are revealed as 'waste' or as not having been 'at work' previously. Newman describes his approach to material in an interview with Gisela Gronemeyer, saying:

> Es ist fast wie nichts, ich will, daß dieses material fast wie Schrott ist. So nahe am Schrott wie möglich. Wie die Reste, die am Rand des Tellers übrigblieben. So wenig und so nahe am Nichts wie möglich.[41]

Newman goes on to describe the 'Schrottplatz' (dump) of music history as a 'Materialreservoir'. Just as one might go to the tip to find materials to recycle, one might also find material in music history to re-use. 'Schrott' finds a parallel in Bourriaud's thought. He writes:

> cultural production offers an immense constellation of signs from heterogenous spaces and times—or, to use another metaphorical register, a heap of rubble. Classifications and hierarchies belong to another universe: a world of norms, precalibrated forms and categories—in other words, all that stems from the fixative power of ideology.[42]

Newman's 'Schrott' and Bourriaud's 'heap of rubble' are both groupings of materials that are not currently in artistic use. These materials avoid the classifications, hierarchies and ideologies that would result from being 'at work', in the case of Newman's materials, in the musical world. To use these materials is to create the potential for new meanings that function outside of the norms of new music's symbolic system, making it precarious. For Bourriaud, when artists deal with waste, they avoid norms.

Newman's 6th Piano Sonata (1997), sounds Beethoven's E minor Piano Sonata op.90 in the pianist's right hand, accompanied in the left hand by Newman's own *Third Symphony* (now absent

---

[40] Nicholas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, trans. by James Gussen and Lili Porten (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2010) p.184.

[41] "...ohne die Berührung der menschlichen Hand": Chris Newman im Gespräch mit Gisela Gronemeyer (without the touch of a human hand), *MusikTexte: Zeitschrift für neue Musik*, 38 (February, 1991) pp3-6; p.3.
[It is almost like nothing, I want this material to be like scrap. As near to scrap as possible. Like whatever is left at the edge of the plate (leftovers). As little and as close to nothing as possible. My translation; Gronemeyer suggests 'garbage' as a translation of the word 'Schrott'.]

[42] Bourriaud (2016), p.34.

from his list of compositions on his website). The reviewer Dan Warburton criticises the work for its lack of collusion with the musical institution. He writes:

> [w]e find Barlow and Mengelberg's "wrong" notes funny because we know from experience what the "right" ones should be, but Newman's non-resolving chord sequences, disappearing trills and sudden stops […] soon lose their power to amuse […] and listener fatigue soon sets in.[43]

The idea of Beethoven as 'Schrott' is perhaps unpalatable to the contemporary music establishment, particularly since Newman gives no clue as to whether he values Beethoven as an authority after all.

In Annette Schmucki's music the same attitude to employing material disregarded elsewhere can be found in her use of samples. Samples heard in *repeat one* introduce repetitive, metric, percussive material that is at odds with the slow-moving music heard in the ensemble. Similarly, the piece *staben_extended* (2014/16) introduces samples including bird song, dogs barking, and distorted electronic tones as a part of the ensemble texture. *die sprache als höhle denken* (2015) also begins with a percussive, programmed beat that might more often be found in a commercial record than a piece of new music, and progresses combining distorted electronic tones, percussive sounds, and electronic stabs—that might sound at home in an arcade game—with the sound of Schmucki's voice. The approach in these pieces does not attempt to contextualise the samples as part of 'new music' but presents them without musical contextualisation, in the same way that in *die sprache als höhle denken* the text is presented in a straight and even tone, devoid of theatrical intent, in the composer's speaking voice. In Schmucki's case, as in Newman's, no resolution is offered that integrates these sounds into the institutional world of new music.

The exformal properties of the artistic practices of Newman and Schmucki—the attributes of precarity, waste, and insularity—exclude their works from easily complying with the 'work concept' and the institutions of Western Art Music that promote it. Their self-exclusion through their material practices identifies their works as exformal and, therefore—in Bourriaud's terms—as avant-garde practice. However, neither composer sets out to be part of the avant garde. To do so would be to become part of the institution that the avant garde seeks to transcend. The exformal characteristics of the practices described in this article do not deal with musical style but the relationality of the music at the time it is made, performed or reproduced. 'Exformal' identifies works at the margins of acceptable institutional practice, allowing them to embody 'political' ideas and 'progressive' musical attitudes, but situating these as arising from the music rather than from its retrospective assessment.

---

[43] Dan Warburton, www.paristransatlantic.com/ (Autumn 2008) quoted at Mode Records *Chris Newman, Mode 201* (n.d.) <http://www.moderecords.com/catalog/201newman.html> [accessed 04.07.2017].

The question of whether an avant garde can be found today is not conclusively answered by the music of these two composers but their work demonstrates that the path to the identification of an avant garde will be on the margins of contemporary practice. It also demonstrates that such an identification will not, or does not need to, be determined by a retrospective or an institutional assessment of the music; rather it can arise from the hermeneutics of the music itself. The exform offers one set of tools by which art practice on the borders might be identified and assessed. Such practice may be precarious, insular, or marginal, and may never reach a mainstream status, even in the future; whether or not it does so does not undermine its exformal status in the present moment. Such work therefore undermines a linear narrative of progress that has been associated with historical avant gardes. In Fraser's terms, the frame of the mainstream may expand, but it may never include such practices. Music such as that of Newman and Schmucki offers insight not into radical artistic revolution but into the ways that avant garde art may make the components of the everyday precarious, may animate those materials discarded by capitalism, and may challenge institutions from outside their borders. Exformal, avant-garde practice as described by Bourriaud exhibits these features; the work of these composers indicates that avant gardes may still be identified today.