After relational aesthetics: Improvised musics, the social, and (re)theorising the aesthetic

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What does it mean to speak of a social aesthetics and, in particular, to do so in relation to improvised musics? In this mainly conceptual chapter I develop some proposals concerning the relations between improvised musics and the social, and pursue the implications for retheorising the aesthetic. I will be concerned with the social mediation of music, where mediation is conceived as a two-way or co-productive process. As we will see, music engenders certain kinds of socialities, yet it also refracts or transforms existing social formations. This conceptual project responds to a series of overlapping movements: the demand issued by scholarship in ethnomusicology, musicology, popular music studies, jazz studies and sociology of music for progress in theorising the heterogeneity and the different scales of music's social mediation; the drive in art theory and criticism to take seriously and analyse those facets of recent art practices in which the social features as a dimension of aesthetic experience; and the concern within anthropological and social theory to reconceptualise the social – or 'sociality' – itself (Strathern, "'The concept of society is theoretically obsolete"; Latour; Long and Moore, "Sociality revisited"; Long and Moore, *Sociality*). These movements do not exist in isolation: that they are intertwined is evident in the way that ethnography, the method of anthropology, has become involved in contemporary collaborative art (Foster, "The artist as ethnographer?"; Schneider and Wright, *Contemporary art and anthropology*; Schneider and Wright, *Between Art and Anthropology*; Rutten, van. Dienderen et al.) and music practices (Born, "Drifting, merging and bifurcating").

Despite this convergence, it has proven surprisingly difficult to develop an approach adequate to the challenge of conceptualising how the social enters into the aesthetic operations of both music and art. Indeed, music and art set general challenges to social theory in this regard, and improvised musics pose them acutely. As I will show, however, it is precisely because of these challenges that music and art, and improvised musics in particular, can also be generative and advance the wider debates about theorising the social. This chapter therefore comes to the conceptual heart of this volume as a whole.

To begin, let us consider a number of symptomatic and contrasting ways in which the social enters into contemporary art practices and art-critical discourses. The most prominent is the paradigm of relational aesthetics enunciated by the critic and curator Nicholas Bourriaud (*Relational Aesthetics*), often taken to be emblematic in the analysis of present-day art. Relational aesthetics places art's orchestration of socialities at the core of a new conception of the aesthetic. Bourriaud contends, in a programmatic text, that art from the 1990s has revolved around 'practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context', which he equates with the production of a 'specific sociability' (*Relational Aesthetics* 113, 16). Relational aesthetics is therefore committed to assessing

contemporary art practices 'on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt' (*Relational Aesthetics* 112). Bourriaud's explanation for this turn concerns the 'extraordinary upsurge of social exchanges' given by greater mobility, rapid urbanisation, and the expansion of travel and telecommunications since the Second World War. At the same time pervasive commercialisation reaches into human affairs, such that 'the social bond has turned into a standardised artefact' and 'the space of current relations is... severely affected by general reification' (*Relational Aesthetics* 9). In reaction the new practices, which he locates within a genealogy of post-conceptual art, take as their point of departure intersubjectivity, interaction and proximity, with the effect that 'alternative forms of sociability, critical models and moments of constructed conviviality are worked out' (*Relational Aesthetics* 43-4). 'Artistic praxis', he contends in a resonant phrase, 'appears these days to be a rich loam for social experiments' (*Relational Aesthetics* 9).

In one direction, 'the artwork of the 1990s turns the beholder into a neighbour, a direct interlocutor' (*Relational Aesthetics* 43); in another direction, the exploration of social bonds takes the form of 'recreating socio-professional models', such that the artist takes 'the real field of the production of goods and services, and aims to set up a certain ambiguity... between the utilitarian function of the objects he is presenting, and their aesthetic function' (*Relational Aesthetics* 35). A precursor of this latter turn, Bourriaud argues, was the Artist Placement Group (APG), which from the late 1960s to 1980s placed artists in branches of government and industry, an alternative institutional setting to the gallery and exhibition. An example of the former direction for Bourriaud, art as interlocution, is Jens Hanning's 1994 performance event *Turkish Jokes*, in which Hanning broadcast funny stories in Turkish through a loudspeaker in a Copenhagen square, producing 'in that split second a micro-community, one made up of immigrants brought together by collective laughter which upset their exile situation', a micro-community 'formed in relation to the work and in it'. Bourriaud concludes that 'depending on the degree of participation required of the onlooker by the artist, along with… the model of sociability proposed..., an exhibition will give rise to a specific "arena of exchange"' (*Relational Aesthetics* 17). Indeed, in his concern with proximity, form and movement, Bourriaud flirts ambiguously with the anti-humanist stance of the theorists of circulation and inter-object relations (Gaonkar and Povinelli; Straw "The circulatory turn"), who find their ancestor in the recently rediscovered sociology of Gabriel Tarde. For Tarde, it is the circulation of entities, affects and behaviours that creates the very fabric of the social (Barry and Thrift; Born, "On Tardean relations"; Candea).

Bourriaud's argument is engaging, but it is hard to discern any coherence in the manifold social relations and social interactions staged by the practices he describes. Indeed, the diversity of art practices that he relates far outstrips his theoretical credo: it is impossible to reduce what he sets in motion to his oft-cited maxim that the goal of relational aesthetics is 'to heal the social bond'. Predictably, rather than turn to the disciplines of the social for assistance, he rejects sociology as a source of understanding of the variety of social forms that he adumbrates. Moreover, he dismisses any engagement with the dynamics of difference, conflict and antagonism that are in part constitutive of the social. Bourriaud's paradigm invites Hal Foster's pithy criticism of a 'happy interactivity: among "aesthetic objects" Bourriaud counts "meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals and places of conviviality"… To some readers such "relational aesthetics" will… seem to aestheticize the nicer procedures of our service economy' ("Chat rooms" 190). Bourriaud's own rendering of the social – as opposed to that of the practices that he relates – tends, then, towards reductive idealisations. Claire Bishop, a

critic and theorist who has championed participatory art, puts the key challenge acutely: 'Bourriaud wants to equate aesthetic judgment with an ethicopolitical judgment of the relationships produced by a work of art. But… the quality of the relationships in "relational aesthetics" are never examined or called into question…. If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?' ("Antagonism and relational aesthetics" 65).

Late in his book, Bourriaud reflects on the criticisms drawn by relational art practices, noting that 'They are... reproached for denying social conflict and dispute, differences and divergences, and the impossibility of communicating within an alienated social space, in favour of an illusory... modelling of sociability'. As a rejoinder, he states emphatically that 'These approaches do not stem from a "social" or "sociological" form of art'; rather, the relational exhibition 'is an interstice, defined in relation to the alienation reigning everywhere else.... The exhibition does not deny the social relationships in effect, but it does distort them and project them into a space-time frame encoded by the art system' (*Relational Aesthetics* 82). Crucially, he seems here to be arguing that relational art both participates or partakes in wider social relations *and* that it stages a micro-social space apart which may refract or 'distort' them. Bishop makes a similar observation: 'By using people as a medium, participatory art has always had a double ontological status: it is both an event in the world, and also at a remove from it' ("Participation and Spectacle" 45).

Bourriaud himself fails fully to theorise this crucial point; he has no vocabulary to distinguish between the several modalities of the social that he conflates. But Bishop's 'double ontological status' also reduces what is going on. For now, let me point not to two but to three social dimensions of the social aesthetics that are immanent in Bourriaud's own examples. First, the socialities enlivened by Hanning's *Turkish Jokes* – a 'micro-community' of laughing Turkish immigrants. This indexes a realm of immediate, co-present and affective microsocial relations and interactive associations that are regularly set in motion by the performance arts, as well as by public art and site specific works (Salter). Second, as shown again by Hanning's performance event, art's refraction of wider and pre-existing social relations – whether of class, race, ethnicity, gender or sexuality. In this light, Hanning's public art event is one that in Deleuzian terms is crossed by, or evokes, a molar politics of common ethnic-, migration- and class-based identifications (Patton 43). And third, how art can intervene in the organisational, institutional and political-economic forms in which it is embedded or with which it is articulated. It is this third type that is exemplified by APG's experimental engagement with, and expansion of, art's institutional spheres. Such practices refract or distort a quite different order of the social.

This third form deserves a brief exposition. APG was an organisation founded by John Latham with roots in conceptual art which, from the late 1960s, negotiated residencies for artists inside a series of corporations including Britain's National Coal Board, British Rail, British Steel, the Scottish Office, ICI and the Esso oil company. APG's orientation to the social therefore took the form of sustained experimental interventions in institutional processes—processes quite independent of the art institutional nexus. APG artists were charged with becoming involved in the functioning of the corporation, utilising anything to hand and retaining an 'open brief' (Metzger; Slater, Latham et al.; Bolt Rasmussen). As Andrew Barry notes, 'The artist was understood… as an "incidental person" whose presence and actions might effect change' (Barry 90). APG did not overtly criticise the institutions with which it worked, nor did it seek to provide

alternatives. Instead, it sought to 'introduce change in society through the medium of art relative to those structures with "elected" responsibility for shaping the future – governments, industries and academic institutions' (Barbara Steveni, quoted in Walker 55). Indeed, one of APG's principles was that the artist must find an outcome or intervention that was *not* politically overdetermined. In this sense, APG's projects manifested Deleuze's minor politics of the emergent, underdetermined by pre-existing political formations (Patton); yet it is worth noting that APG's politics were often misunderstood as molar politics by later artists who purported to follow them.[i] At this point we might draw a link with Peter Bürger's focus, in his analysis of the historical avant-gardes, on art as institution; in his words, 'The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art... but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men' (49). Through APG, then, we glimpse something of the spectrum and the evolution of art's imbrication with institutions: from the critique of art as institution (Fraser; Alberro and Stimson), to experimental institutional intervention without telos.

But a final way in which the social enters recent art contrasts markedly with both APG and relational aesthetics: it is in the guise of 'socially engaged art' (Thompson), politically-informed interdisciplinary practices in which 'external' social and political realms become the arena within which art stages its interventions. These practices are emphatically intended to influence the 'real' world via politicised interventions in larger institutional spheres. This is art motivated by a keen awareness that 'living itself exists in forms that must be questioned, rearranged, mobilized, and undone' (Thompson 29): 'living as form'. With roots traced to Russian Constructivism, Duchamp, Artaud, Fluxus, Situationism, the 'social sculpture' of Joseph Beuys and groups like the Critical Art Ensemble, socially-engaged art is a broad and heterogeneous lineage encompassing strategic, often sustained projects that defy discursive boundaries so as to produce 'effects and affects in the world' (Thompson 32). Apparently in a similar vein to relational aesthetics, 'participation, sociality, and the organization of bodies in space play a key feature in much of this work' (Thompson 21); yet, more than relational aesthetics, these practices seek to engage with judicial and governmental processes, as in the collaborative, prison-based practice of Laurie Jo Reynolds, who calls her work 'legislative art' by analogy with Augusto Boal's 'legislative theatre' (Boal), in turn indebted to Paolo Freire (Freire). Socially-engaged art may also become involved in community activism, as in the two-decades-old experimental housing project and art residency Project Row Houses, animated by artist Rick Lowe, which rehabilitated a low-income, mainly African-American neighbourhood in Houston by building a strong base of local participation among residents.

In notable contrast to relational aesthetics, then, rather than seek to 'heal' the general reification or foster consensus, socially-engaged art animates encounters and events marked more often by social conflict, 'deep discord and frustration' (Thompson 24). Exemplary here is the infamous installation, *Please Love Austria* (2000), devised by the German artist Christoph Schlingensief, which staged in a public square outside the Vienna State Opera House a parodic 'Big Brother'-style media event in which real asylum-seekers were housed in a shipping container, their activities televised live on the internet, while the public was asked to vote daily on the least popular detainees, who were returned to a real detention centre outside the city. The provocative, parodic and politically ambiguous installation stimulated heated debate, scandalising and antagonising elements of the public.

In avowedly instrumental terms, Nato Thompson notes that socially-engaged art has 'become an instructive space to gain valuable skill sets in the techniques of performativity, representation, aesthetics, and the creation of affect' (22). Hence, the stress on methodologies, research and long-term activism, and the reflexive interest in the *forms* of the social, are efforts both at shifting the focus away from traditional aesthetic concerns and at enriching and transforming what is meant by the term aesthetics (Born, "The social and the aesthetic" 198-200). The critical questions to be asked of socially-engaged art therefore differ from those raised by relational aesthetics. For the problem is not one of the cultivation of sociality as an end in itself, but the opposite: that art and its socialities are mobilised and valorised primarily by reference to given or prior political and social justice ends. As Bishop notes ("Antagonism and relational aesthetics"; *Participation*), such practices risk negating the specifically aesthetic dimension, reducing 'art to a question of the ethically good or bad', as well as making a problematic equation between 'forms of democracy in art and forms of democracy in society' ("Participation and spectacle" 41). Instead, Bishop calls for art that respects its own mediating role, thereby holding 'artistic and social critiques in tension' ("Participation and spectacle" 40).

Contemporary art therefore manifests diverse engagements with the social that can be traced back at least to the 1960s. Art historian Luke Skrebowski comments that this was a transitional era in which '[t]he art and the social context were of a piece. Indeed, the recognition that art's social context impacts its character constituted a fundamental tenet of the alternative to formalist modernism' (67). In the preceding paragraphs I have distinguished four modalities of the social in recent art and aesthetics, however, with the precise purpose of *resisting* their reduction to notions of social 'context'. In analyzing these variants, my aim has been twofold: to show that while the social is increasingly manifest in contemporary art and aesthetics, and theorised as such, it takes distinctive forms, which matter and should not be conceptually elided; and on this basis, to enable fertile comparisons to be drawn between the varieties of social aesthetics in contemporary art practices and those evident in improvised musics.

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At this point it is productive to turn to music and the other performance-based arts, and a foundational difference is immediately apparent: for it is not difficult to recognise that the social forms an immanent part of performance situations, in music as in the other performance-based arts. That is, specific socialities are created in performance situations among the performers, between performers and audiences, and among audiences (Born, "Refraction and protention"). While the guardians of formalism or of the philosophical legacies of German idealism might strive to maintain that music is an art of pure sounding form and that its social manifestations are secondary, they are now matched by writers for whom music's social qualities are considered in various ways intrinsic to aesthetic experience; indeed, this is now arguably an established view in ethnomusicology (Blacking; Keil; Turino) and in popular music studies (Frith). Of course, to highlight the social is not necessarily to override the significance of other components of aesthetic experience. Moreover, the social can be more or less reflexively grasped or foregrounded by musical actors – composers, musicians, listeners – as a dimension of aesthetic concern. Such a reflexive awareness can in turn be more or less experimental or inventive in its orientation.

Strikingly, it is possible to draw a contrast between the evolving concert performance tradition

associated with western art musics of the past two centuries and performance in certain improvised musics since the 1960s. In the former tradition, as historians have shown, the social is relatively less foregrounded and is subject to a weak reflexivity. The emergence of this tradition has been traced in the first decades of the 19th century by James Johnson, who identifies it with the rise of bourgeois individualism and its manifestation in 'intensely subjective' modes of musical experience in which 'interior communion met… romantic spirituality' (J. Johnson 277). Absorbed listening and attention to music's abstract meaning were accompanied by a policing of manners and 'anonymous and rule-bound' (J. Johnson 233) allegiance to notions of decency and respectability. While Richard Sennett, for the same period, points to a spate of urban social and architectural transformations allied to a burgeoning obsession with privacy, such that concert life saw the cultivation of silent, self-disciplined, contemplative and interiorised spectatorship - a bourgeois 'act of purification' that, in his compelling phrase, amounted to 'a defense against the experience of social relations' (Sennett 214, 213). For Sennett, intensifying urban processes of individualisation and privatisation, effecting an erosion of social interaction, were matched by new behavioural norms and by the constitution of new modes of subjectivity suited to the concert and theatre. By the late 19th century, he concludes, 'the whole rationale of public culture had cracked apart' (Sennett 218). We might say that a defining feature of the ontology of western art musics from the 19th century to the present has been a disavowal of music's social mediations (Born, "On musical mediation"; Born, "Music").

In marked contrast, the lineages of improvised musics of the late 20th century often manifested a heightened reflexivity about the socialities engendered by performance, just as some practitioners set out to engage with the social in inventive ways. If we take the three modalities of the social identified earlier that are elided in Bourriaud's portrayal of relational aesthetics – the co-present socialities set in motion by performance, how these socialities refract wider and pre-existing social relations, and how art can intervene in the institutional and political-economic forms in which it is embedded or with which it is articulated – each has found striking expression in certain traditions of improvised musics. Regarding the first: improvising musicians have often evidenced a self-conscious interest in the aesthetic potential and/or effects of the socialities of performance, including the dialogical and multilateral expressive exchanges enlivened by collective improvisations (Monson, *Saying Something*). Regarding the second: to different degrees, improvising musicians have shown a concern with how wider, enduring social relations of difference – of race, class and/or gender, for example – enter into and may be reproduced, entrenched, refracted or re-imagined in the socialities of musical performance. And regarding the third: certain practitioners of improvisation have seen an active engagement with institutional forms, primarily those through which their music is produced and distributed, as a necessary or even unavoidable extension of their creative practice. But the fourth modality identified above is also evident in the history of improvised music. That is to say, like socially-engaged art, improvised music has in some of its manifestations been engaged in catalyzing wider political struggles for social justice and social equality (Fischlin and Heble, *The Other Side of Nowhere*; G.E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself*; Fischlin, Heble et al., *The Fierce Urgency of Now*). I return to amplify these arguments below.

In sum, as with contemporary art, at issue in these several modalities is how improvised musics both mediate and can transform the social – by animating novel socialities – and how they are themselves mediated or traversed by wider social formations. In what follows I suggest that to theorise these distinctive modalities, what is required is a heuristic analytical framework centred

on music's social mediations as they imbue music's aesthetic operations. This must immediately be qualified, for improvised musics are not unique in exhibiting these types of social mediation, which are shared with other musical traditions (Born, "Music and the social"). On the other hand, there is perhaps something singular about improvisation in that improvised performances are marked by degrees of openness, mutuality and collaboration that are heightened and intensified when compared with the interpretation of scored works, and that necessitate participants' real time co-creation and negotiation of social-and-musical relationships. From one perspective, then, such performances may become sites for empractising ways of 'being differently in the world' based on a 'recognition that alternatives to orthodox practices are available' (Fischlin and Heble, *The Other Side of Nowhere* 11).[ii]

How well positioned are the academic music disciplines to address these questions of music's social mediation? It is striking that when we turn to recent attempts to theorise the relations between music and the social – whether in popular music studies, music sociology or ethnomusicology - no adequate, encompassing paradigm is on offer. I want to outline two current and symptomatic positions in this regard, both productive but neither sufficient.

First, David Hesmondhalgh's review of a series of concepts employed in recent years to analyse the nature of collective musical identities: subculture, scene and tribe. Hesmondhalgh poses them as amounting to the analysis of music's social mediation *per se*, and finds that none of the terms bear the explanatory weight required of them. Instead he turns to notions of articulation and genre, drawing on the work of such writers as Richard Middleton and Jason Toynbee. The upshot is to argue against any homology model in which music is taken to reflect some prior metacategory such as class, race or nation, and for a differentiated approach to the analysis of music and social identities – although he generates no wider framework. In my view Hesmondhalgh throws out one important conceptual gain in the shift from subculture to scene: the way that the concept of scene captures music's autonomous capacity to generate specifically *musically* imagined communities that are irreducible to wider categories of social identity (Straw, "Systems of articulation, logics of change"; Born, "Understanding music as culture"; Born and Hesmondhalgh).

A second perspective comes from the work of music sociologists Tia DeNora and Antoine Hennion, specifically their theorisation of music's mediation of subject-object relations. Expanding on Adorno's analysis, both rightly point to the bidirectional mediation between music and the social. Music, in their distinctive accounts, mediates or co-produces human socialities and subjectivities; in turn, music is itself constituted by human imagination, enmeshed in discourses and practices, and embodied in socio-technical arrangements (cf. Theberge; Sterne). Thus, 'Music is active within social life… because it offers specific materials to which actors may turn when they engage in the work of organizing social life. Music is a resource-—it provides affordances—for world-building…. [J]ust as music's meanings may be constructed in relation to things outside it, so, too, things outside music may be constructed in relation to music'. Music, moreover, can take the lead 'in the world-clarification, world-building process of meaning-making…. [It] serves as a kind of template against which feeling, perception, representation and social situation are created and sustained' (DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* 44). Hennion contends, in turn, that music 'transforms those who take possession of it' such that we can speak of 'the co-formation of a music and of those who make and listen to it' (Hennion, "Music lovers" 3). While their insistence on the bidirectional nature of mediation is invaluable,

Hennion and DeNora tend to reduce the socio-musical universe to the microsocial space of relations and practices favoured by ethnomethodological and symbolic interactionist sociologies. For my purposes, too much is occluded by adopting this stance.

Both of these perspectives foreshorten music's social mediation, neglecting other dimensions of the social in play, which are addressed by different areas of scholarship and which demand to be brought together and thought in their complex interrelations. My argument, then, is that music necessitates an expansion of the conceptual framework of social mediation; that if music engenders myriad social forms, it is productive to analyse them in terms of four planes of social mediation. In what follows I give an overview of the four planes, before returning to improvised musics.

In the first plane, music produces its own diverse socialities – in the immediate microsocialities of musical performance and practice, in the social relations embodied in musical ensembles and associations, and in the musical division of labour. It is this first plane that is most apparent in all the performance arts. In the second plane, music has powers to animate imagined communities, aggregating its listeners into affective alliances, virtual collectivities or publics based on musical and other identifications. In the third plane, music refracts wider social relations, from the most concrete to the most abstract of collectivities – music's instantiation of the nation, of social hierarchies, or of the social relations of class, race, religion, ethnicity, gender or sexuality. In the fourth plane, music is bound up in the broader institutional forces that provide the basis for its production, reproduction and transformation, whether elite or religious patronage, market or non-market exchange, public and subsidized cultural institutions, or late capitalism's multi-polar cultural economy. The first two planes amount to socialities, social relations and social imaginaries that are assembled or affectively constituted specifically by musical practice and musical experience. In contrast, the last two planes amount to wider social relations and institutions that themselves afford or condition certain kinds of musical practice – although these relations also enter into the nature of musical experience, permeating music's immediate socialities and imagined communities, just as music refracts the wider conditions.

Several propositions central to this chapter follow. First, and strikingly, the first two planes – music's microsocialities and imagined communities – are underdetermined by and have a certain autonomy from the last two – music's wider social conditions. Second, all four planes of social mediation enter into the musical assemblage - although they are invariably treated separately in existing discussions of music and the social. Moreover, the four planes are irreducible to one another, yet they are articulated in contingent and non-linear ways through relations of conditioning, affordance or causality. It is precisely the mutual mediations of and complex articulations among the four planes that enable musical assemblages to engender certain kinds of socio-musical experience and thus also certain kinds of aesthetic experience, as well as offering the potential for experimentation with those diverse modes of social aesthetic experience.

In writing here of four planes of social mediation and of a musical assemblage, I draw on earlier papers in which I've proposed that, more obviously than visual and literary media, music has no material essence but a plural and distributed material being; and that music's multiple simultaneous forms of existence – as sound, score, discourse, site, performance, social relations, technological media – indicate the necessity of conceiving of the musical object as a constellation. Compared with the visual and literary arts, then, music has to be grasped as an

extraordinarily complex kind of cultural object - as an aggregation of sonic, visual, discursive, social, corporeal, technological and temporal mediations: as an assemblage (Deleuze, *Foucault*; Rabinow), where a musical assemblage can be defined as a characteristic constellation of such mediations (Born, "On musical mediation"; Born, "Music and the social"). Thus the properties (or meanings) of music must be cognised in terms of the assemblage - or constellation of mediations – of which it is composed; while the affordances of any musical assemblage can be traced through the network of associations between human and non-human entities that it mobilises (Latour). In its plurality, music has the oxymoronic quality of being at once immaterial (as sound, or code) and multiply material; it might be conceived as the 'paradigmatic multiply-mediated, immaterial-and-material, fluid quasi-object' (Born, "On musical mediation" 7), one in which subjects and objects are entangled. I detail this approach to counter any view that by foregrounding an analytics of the social I intend at the same time to privilege a musical humanism; indeed a central aim of my approach is to combat the limited account of the social offered by such anti-humanists as Latour, and to argue that it is imperative to rejoin a critical analytics of the social with a nuanced account of mediation and materiality; that is, to proffer a combined analytics of the social-and-material.

Turning to the first plane, the immediate microsocialities engendered by musical performance and practice: what is striking about research in this area is that it is divided between compelling empirical, often ethnographic studies from ethnomusicology, popular music studies and music sociology (as in the work of DeNora, Hennion, Sara Cohen, Steven Feld, Ruth Finnegan, Jocelyne Guibault, Charles Keil, Ingrid Monson and many others), and broad theoretical statements. Such theoretical statements invariably draw their inspiration from three sources: the social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz ("Making music together"), the post-Foucauldian stance of Jacques Attali's *Noise*, and specifically his final chapter on 'Composing', and the writings of Christopher Small (*Musicking*). Common to these three writers is a tendency to idealise the realm of microsocial relations in music through a reductive sociology that metaphysically overcodes social realities. To begin with Small: despite his quasi-ethnographic descriptions of the socialities of rock and folk festivals, rap gigs and symphony concerts, he arrives at problematic normative generalisations:

> 'What we need to keep in mind is that those taking part in performances of different kinds are looking for different kinds of relationships, and we should not project the ideals of one kind of performance onto another. [But a]ny performance, and that includes a symphony concert, should be judged finally on its success in bringing into existence for as long as it lasts a set of relationships that those taking part feel to be ideal and in enabling those taking part to explore, affirm and celebrate those relationships'.[iii] (Small 49)

Schutz and Attali, for their part, offer compelling analyses, yet both entail idealisations. In Attali's frankly speculative account of 'Composing', embedded as it is within a larger historical analysis of music and power, Free Jazz is taken as the model for a 'coming order' of music-making 'exterior to the institutions' (133) in which 'creative labour is collective.... Production takes the form of… collective composition, without a predetermined program imposed upon the players, and without commercialisation. [This is] a new practice of music among the people…. By subverting objects, it heralds a new form of the collective imaginary, a reconciliation between work and play' (Attali 141). Improvisation is therefore central to Attali's speculative and optimistic socio-musical vision.

Schutz is deservedly the most influential of the theorists of the microsocial, and his social phenomenology centres on an analysis of intersubjectivity in music, which he portrays as a paradigm of human communication and relatedness. Schutz discerns three modes of intersubjectivity in musical performance. The first involves performer and listener, who experience simultaneously 'the polythetic steps by which the musical content articulates itself in [music's] inner time' (Schutz, "Making music together" 175). The second involves composer and listener or performer, such that, '(a)lthough separated by hundreds of years, the latter participate with quasi-simultaneity in the [composer's] stream of consciousness, performing with him (sic)… the ongoing articulation of his musical thought' (Schutz, "Making music together" 171). Third, Schutz points to the intersubjective relations of musical ensembles, in which 'each coperformer's action is oriented… reciprocally by the experiences in inner and outer time of his fellow' performers ("Making music together" 175). Such 'tuning-in' involves not merely consciousness, but mutual responses among the coperformers to each others' gestures and expressions 'in immediacy' and in shared space (Schutz, "Making music together" 176). While highly suggestive, particularly for improvised practices in which heightened communicative and social mutualities are arguably more to the fore than in the collective interpretation of scored musics, Schutz's portrayal of the social consolations of live performance results finally in an idealised metaphysics of musical co-presence, one that is consonant both with the discourse of absolute music and with the 'audiovisual litany' identified by Jonathan Sterne as central to the history of auditory media (Sterne 15-9).

In sum, if all three writers idealise the microsocialities of musical practice, this is made possible by the way these microsocialities are illusorily 'autonomised' by being detached from the larger circuits of social relations in which they are embedded or with which they are articulated. In light of this tendency to focus only on the microsocialities of performance, the task is to rethink music's (and art's) social mediation across the four planes. To indicate the utility of such an approach from a classic study of an African-American improvisational music: Keil's (*Urban Blues*) analysis of urban blues in Chicago in the 1960s dwells insistently on how the microsocialities of club-based blues performance (first plane) were entangled in and refracted the wider social relations of race and class to which both musicians and audiences were subject (third plane); while the affective conjoining of these superimposed socialities was achieved, and heightened, through the emotionally charged musically imagined community animated by the sounds of blues music (second plane). Keil describes how, in the midst of performance, blues singer Bobby Bland and his band engendered a sociality both between themselves and with their audience. Minute gestures and vocal inflections, humour and innuendo, conjured up social solidarities and collective catharsis, in part through constant implicit references to the 'stylistic common denominators' (Keil 143) that linked blues performance and religious preaching in the lives of black Chicagoans in this era.

Keil's study points to a final dimension of the framework I am proposing: that it participates in a larger project of critical social theory which assumes, in the words of Chantal Mouffe, that 'relations of power are constitutive of the social' (125). Thus, rather than conceive of social relations in a pluralistic world as integrative, or as oriented to consensus or community, we should address them as constituted equally by difference, as well as by agonism and antagonism. This is a foundational assumption in what follows. Only by adopting this approach, which depends on empirical work (whether historical or ethnographic) as a basis for critical analysis, is

it possible to vault over Schutz and develop a less metaphysical social phenomenology, one that is attentive to the microsocialities of musical practice and performance but, in addition, as they are imbricated with other social relations – other planes of the social.

* * *

In light of these theoretical and methodological proposals, how have the socialities and social aesthetics of improvised musics been addressed?

Initially, it is intriguing to note how often practitioners' accounts of improvisation focus on the first plane: on the nature of and the potentials immanent in the microsocialities of performance and practice. At the same time they provide a kind of auto-ethnography of the social in performance, of improvisation as a crucible of intensified and reflexive social experience, and of improvised performance as commonly also a space of microsocial experiment. Most striking is how – akin to Bourriaud – these qualities of musico-social experience are spoken of as synonymous with the *aesthetic* qualities of performance. This is evident in diverse musicians' commentaries reported in Derek Bailey's pioneering book on improvisation (*Improvisation*). Perhaps the most characteristic stance is to conceive of improvisation as fomenting a kind of labile movement between individual and collectivity, such that individuality becomes a relational moment in a larger entity. As Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, neo-Spinozist philosophers concerned with conceptualising this labile movement, put it: 'for Spinoza, there are collective dimensions to individual selfhood. For him there is no possibility of selfhood in isolation. To be an individual – a determinate self – at all is to be embedded in wider social wholes in which the power of bodies are strengthened or impeded. To be an individual self is to be inserted into economies of affect and imagination which bind us to others in relations of joy and sadness, love and hate, co-operation and antagonism' (73). The philosopher Garry Hagberg develops a liberal variant of this focus on the relation between individual and collectivity, and one that is specifically attuned to jazz improvisation. Hagberg criticises what he calls the 'social contract model' in which 'the collective is no more than a convergence of individuals who, *as individuals first*, choose… to join a group that offers [musical] benefits… that expand what the individual could create alone'. In this account, 'the individual, *as individual* (in political and ontological terms), is present and intact from start to finish' and '[t]he entire content of the collective is simply the sum of the individuals combined' (Hagberg 1-2). Instead, Hagberg develops a notion of 'collective' or 'group-emergent intention' at the heart of improvising ensembles, which he links to 'de-individuation' (9-10). Such 'shared intention', he argues, should be understood as '(1) non-summative, (2) irreducible… to the individual…, and (3) [as] worked out, with limited variations, across the span of its enactment' (Hagberg 5).

A more radical challenge to the individual-collective dualism comes from anthropologist Marilyn Strathern in her attempt to supersede the twin reifications – 'society' and asocial 'individual' – that underpin Durkheimian social theory ("The concept of society is theoretically obsolete" 5). For Strathern, such reifications should be abandoned in favour of a processual conception of sociality and a view of persons as both multiple and fully social. Thus, in Melanesia, for example, where she did ethnographic research, 'persons are as "dividually" as they are individually conceived. They contain a generalised sociality within' (Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift* 13); while 'society' should give way to a conception of social processes as involving 'a constant movement… from one type of sociality to another' (Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift* 13-4),

where sociality refers in turn to 'the creating and maintaining of relationships'. Sociality can result in aggregations that entail either the elimination of difference, presenting 'an image of unity… created out of internal homogeneity, a process of de-pluralization', or, on the contrary, the elaboration of heterogeneity.

An eloquent concretisation of the preoccupation with the relation between individuality and collectivity is provided by Eddie Prévost's reflections on the microsocialities of the influential British improvising group, AMM: 'The personalities within the ensemble are clearly defined. They have maintained their integrity. Part of AMM's philosophy… is the idea of concurrent commentary: separate voices speaking at the same time, interweaving and interleaving. But each voice is not atomized or individuated. Paradoxically, it may be that individuality can only exist and develop in a collective context…. We are part of a movement that has, arguably, remade music…. I'm inclined to think of it… as a meta-music. One of the generative themes of this meta-music is the relationship between musicians…. I doubt if our strong friendships could survive very long without the creative vehicle of AMM. It gives the meaning to our association' (quoted in Bailey 129-30).

Other improvisers, in contrast, adopt more mannerist stances on the first plane, the microsocialities of improvised performance, conveying both how the orchestration of these socialities is taken to be immanent in performance aesthetics, and how the microsocialities are conceived of reflexively as a locus of experimentation. In John Zorn's 'game pieces', improvisation is empractised as a kind of parodic authoritarian staging of controlled social encounters modeled on sports or war games: 'I pick the bands and in that sense the Ellington tradition, the selection of the people, is very important…. You take one person out and the chemistry is going to be different…. You need people who are aggressive, you need people who are going to be docile, you need people with a sense of humour, you need people who are assholes…. I basically create a small society and everybody finds their own position in that society. It really becomes like a psycho drama. People are given power and it's very interesting to see which people like to run away from it, who are very docile and just do what they are told, [while] others try very hard to get more control and more power. So it's very much like the political arena in a certain kind of way' (quoted in Bailey 77-8). Alternatively, musicians may link the microsocialities of performance to wider social spaces, as in Misha Mengelberg's portrayal of improvisation, influenced by Situationist and anarchist currents (Adlington, *Red Strains*), as akin to the everyday lifeworld: 'One of the things that inspires me in making any gesture, musically and theoretically, is its relation with daily life in which there is no such thing as an exclusion. One moment I meet you and the next I am washing dishes or playing chess…. In certain respects there are parallels between the music and daily life…. The sort of improvisation I am interested in is the sort that everyone does in their lives' (quoted in Bailey 131-2).

Probably the strongest historical example of improvisation as driven by reflexive experimentation with the microsocialities of musical practice is the Scratch Orchestra, founded in 1969 by Cornelius Cardew and others in the wake of Cardew's experiences performing with AMM in the late 60s. The SO was an experimental music collective of about fifty people with mixed musical skills and experience – students, amateur musicians, avant-garde artists and others. It embodied the politicised wing of British experimental music in this period, and responded to 'the demand of a lot of young people who weren't trained musicians to get together to make what we called experimental music' (Cardew in 1972, quoted in Taylor 556). The SO constitution called for a

'montage of contemporary practices' including scratch music, popular classics, composition, 'improvisation rites' and research projects. Devoted to the democratisation of musical expression, the SO mobilized 'a large number of enthusiasts pooling their resources (not primarily material resources) and assembling for action (music making, performance, edification)'. Tellingly, this experimental period was not sustained. Following two years of growing factionalism, the fluid entity that had been the SO morphed into a 'hard-line Maoism [led by Cardew]… [which] gradually throttled any activity which did not have clear and explicit political objectives and content'.[iv]

* * *

In the remainder of the chapter I want to move beyond these engagements with the first plane microsocialities of musical practice – which represent only the most obvious manifestations of a social aesthetics in improvised musics. Through commentaries on two historical cases I intend to show, first, how all four planes of social mediation, articulated in diverse ways, can be mobilised to effect a social aesthetics; second, how experimentation with those planes of social mediation *can* be the locus – as in the Scratch Orchestra – of various kinds of politicisation of improvised musics (although this is not inevitable); and third, through reflection on an ensemble in which I was myself involved, how problematic it is to invest even the most apparently politically worthwhile experiments in social aesthetics with idealised projections that traduce or misrepresent the nature of the assemblage. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble argue that improvised musics have often been aligned with antihegemonic practices of resistance: there are 'identifiable and radical [forms] of improvisational practices in which concepts of alternative community formation, social activism, rehistoricization of minority cultures, and critical modes of resistance and dialogue are in evidence' (*The Other Side of Nowhere* 2). This is unarguable. But one intention of this chapter is to suggest, without contesting these important historical truths, that we might productively be alert to the distinctive nature of these counterpractices, grasp how their orchestration of socialities is immanent in their combined aesthetic and political operations, and permit ourselves through critical appraisal—where appropriate—to acknowledge their fallibility.

Recent seminal research portrays the four planes at work in African-American improvised musics. In his writings on distinctive genealogies of musical improvisation, George Lewis contrasts the real-time music-making of 'two towering figures of 1950s American experimental musics – Charlie "Bird" Parker and John Cage', as well as the musical lineages they begat. Lewis contends that the differences they exhibit are not only musical but concern 'areas once thought of as "extra-musical," including race and ethnicity, class, and social and political philosophy' ("Improvised music after 1950" 94). On this basis, he charts the commitment in the history of Bird-descended African-American improvisation to the way that 'sonic symbolism is often constructed with a view toward social instrumentality as well as form' (G. E. Lewis, "Improvised music after 1950" 94). Tracing the goal of social instrumentality back to Bebop's provision of 'models of both individual and collective creativity' (G. E. Lewis, "Improvised music after 1950" 95), and its reinvention of African-American improvisative musicality as explicitly experimental, Lewis argues that 'this radical redefinition was viewed as a direct challenge… to the entire social order as it applied to blacks in 1940s apartheid America' (95). Lewis's argument is expanded on to a vast canvas in his study of the multiple activities and achievements of the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians: a non-profit, cooperative musicians' collective founded in Chicago in 1965. The AACM developed a politics that spanned not only

musical creativity, sonic aesthetics and performance practices but, as evident in the organisation itself, invention in relation to institutional form – a 'communitarian institution-building' (G. E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself* xi) manifest in the evolving infrastructure created to support the AACM's burgeoning artistic and educational endeavours. Lewis points out that 'The AACM is part of a long tradition of organizational efforts in which African American musicians took leadership roles, including the early-twentieth-century Clef Club, the short-lived Jazz Composers Guild, the Collective [of] Black Artists, and the Los Angeles-based Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension, or Underground Musicians Association' (G. E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself* x). The directions taken by these organisations responded to accelerating urban impoverishment and decay, along with racial segregation in the music and cultural industries. Thus, 'The Clef Club's strategy of control of their products had long been pursued by black artists, notably including theater artists and composers Bob Cole, James Weldon Johnson, and J. Rosamond Johnson, who sought to maintain both creative and financial control of their productions in the face of legal chicanery, boycotts, and blacklisting' (G. E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself* 88). The AACM, however, 'became the most well known and influential of the post-1960 organizations, achieving lasting international significance' (G. E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself* x) in the history of experimental musics.

Lewis argues throughout the book that it is only by charting both the AACM's sustained pedagogical and institution-building efforts and the profuse aesthetic experimentation manifest in its members' compositional and improvising activities, as well as – crucially - the synergies between these dimensions, that the scale and ambition of the AACM's interventions can be assessed. He contends emphatically that these efforts can only be understood as interventions in the musical politics of race. Focusing on performances of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, one of the best-known AACM groups, it is clear that compounding the combined sonic, visual, theatrical and cross-media elements of their performance aesthetic were the particular socialities orchestrated in performance. Paul Steinbeck conveys these dynamics well in his analysis of a 1972 AEC performance, which resonates powerfully with Strathern's conceptualisation of sociality outlined earlier: 'At certain moments in Art Ensemble performances, all of the musicians seem to be moving the improvisation in the same direction, and their contributions… are easily heard as affirming a processual consensus. At other times the members of the Art Ensemble create interactive frameworks that are multi-directional or "multi-centered," in which the individual musicians temporarily inhabit interactive roles that "function completely independently," as Roscoe Mitchell has stated, or generate musical structures that are oppositional, even unstable…. [Indeed] Art Ensemble performances characteristically pass through multiple divergent and convergent stages before concluding.... [A]s the musicians assemble and disassemble interactive frameworks, transforming one texture into another, the rules change: what was a divergent or multi-centered idea in the context of one interactive framework can become a convergent gesture in another interactive framework, and vice versa' (Steinbeck 401-2). Ultimately, 'the ensemble improvisation is balanced between multiple opposing possibilities' (Steinbeck 409). Clearly, for the AEC, the microsocialities of performance play not an incidental but a *formative* part in the aesthetics – or, better, the social aesthetics - of performance.

What the AACM and AEC show, then, is how their creative and musical activities were crossed by inventive and politicised engagements in all four planes of social mediation. Regarding the first plane: how the microsocialities of performance were immanent in the social aesthetics of

performance. Regarding the fourth plane: how these social aesthetics were enabled, compounded and complemented by invention in the institutional forms supporting the artistic work, institutional forms that themselves modelled creative social cooperation and the toleration of difference. Regarding the third plane: how the first and fourth planes, in turn, refracted evolving wider social formations of race and class, including the racialised injustices and inequalities faced by African-American musicians, that characterised the AACM's environment in and beyond Chicago's South Side. And regarding the second plane, as Lewis eloquently attests: how the AACM affectively mobilised a musically imagined community that enrolled not only its members and supporters in the African-American community and, as audiences grew, transnational publics, but that projected social relations across space and time to African heritages. As he summarises in relation to the AEC: 'The group's blend of sonic, visual, and textual iconography emanated from an overall creative environment – the AACM – that encouraged the assertion of interdisciplinary responsibility for the integration of sonic, visual, and textual materials with intellectual and social history, spirituality, and community accountability'. Indeed, the 'AEC and AACM use of body paint… is transformative in terms of identity, evocative in terms of spirituality, and promulgative in terms of linkages to African cultural practices' (G. E. Lewis, "Singing Omar's song" 90). In short, to grasp the magnitude of the AACM's aspirations and achievements is to trace its imaginative contributions across all four planes of social mediation, along with their resonant articulations, as they produce or result in the social aesthetics manifest in, among others, AEC compositional activities and improvised performances.

My second (and final) historical case is that of the Feminist Improvising Group, an experimental and occasional all-women performing ensemble founded in London in 1977 in which I played cello and bass guitar. FIG was known, like the AEC, for its extraordinary and eccentric performance style; along with musical and sonic improvisations, it often entailed the anarchic and uneven use of visual, theatrical and performance elements which dramatized and parodied aspects of 'women's experience' as mothers, girlfriends, daughters, carers or office workers, with a focus on the subversive and/or hilarious enactment of mundane activities like domestic labour, childcare, dancing or dressing up. But the group also parodied and played with the normative roles of jazz and rock groups, particularly the singers' roles as chicks and divas and others' roles as 'backing musicians'. FIG's performances therefore reflexively engaged with and remixed— often through hamming it up and slapstick—the socialities both of performance and of women's everyday lives.

As is plain, informing the microsocialities of FIG performances were feminist politics, in as much as these politics unified we FIG improvisers as women subject to common gendered experiences of subordination, inequality and injustice. That is to say: the first plane microsocialities of performance were taken, consciously and experimentally, to refract and be refracted by the third plane: evolving but enduring social relations of gender in the world at large. But the 'double ontological status' of the microsocialities of performance as they refracted the wider plane of gendered social relations was more complex, since we FIGgers had been subject to gendered social relations not only as women but as musicians and improvisers. Indeed, one originating affective drive that fuelled FIG came from conversations in which we shared our experiences of performing and playing with otherwise all- or mainly-male bands and improvising ensembles. For we discovered that in these bands and ensembles, in different ways and to variable degrees, we found ourselves in situations implicitly saturated with gender dynamics—

tiny instants or sustained passages of interactive sonic domination in which our musical 'voice' was rendered somehow inappropriate, or was overwhelmed and could not emerge or be heard, or in which the dynamics of turn-taking seemed to be strenuously competitive or masculinized and to exclude other modes of musical mutuality, relation or being. These were relatively inchoate, extralinguistic and embodied experiences for us as individual women musicians, but that these bands and improvising ensembles instanciated gendered musical socialities on occasion was a perception we shared. In this sense our common experience both paralleled and embodied the gendering of the musical canon and of the processes of evaluation, legitimation and canonization that over time, performatively, make it up (Citron); just as our experience also embodied the way that, as Patrick Valiquet puts it, the making and 'marking of musical genre can be just as powerful for what and whom it excludes and delegitimises as for what and whom it enshrines' (Valiquet 228). It is out of these common experiences of delegitimation and exclusion that the supposition originated—one of several inventive qualities of FIG's founding—that our musical interactions might be different in FIG: that we might evade or transcend these prior, gendered musical socialities or otherwise empractise improvisational socialities differently. And while in some ways this was undoubtedly how we experienced working in FIG, the uncomfortable (anti-essentialist) truth is that even when all performers were women, and all were informed by feminist and, often, lesbian feminist politics, the creation of hierarchical, competitive or exclusionary musical socialities in performance could still occur and could sometimes even be pronounced. Nothing was ideal, then, about the microsocialities of FIG performance. In retrospect this is quite humorous; at the time, it troubled any complacent essentialism.

FIG tended to polarize audiences and critics, as perhaps befits such an insecure and risk-taking entity. And in as much as FIG reached out affectively, mobilizing its followers and audiences into a (second plane) musically imagined community, this tended to be a fuzzy operation under the sign of the feminisms and lesbianisms of the time. The group did not seem so affectively powerful at a 'purely musical' level. Indeed for our critics, our musical proficiency was questionable and we clearly did not know what we were doing: our ambiguous, possibly feigned, 'incompetencies' and apparent lack of technical virtuosity were felt by such critics to be intolerable to witness. Here, gendered projections, manifest perhaps in gendered listening and audiencing, compounded our sometimes already wobbly experimental practices. In terms of the fourth plane, FIG was typical of the marginal and self-managed organizational forms adopted by many improvising ensembles in the late 1970s and 1980s, when the DIY ethic of punk, and that of the small-scale, 'alternative' venue, label and distribution networks of groups like Henry Cow and the free jazz scene, had become models. We scraped a living as freelancers working across a spectrum of activities, producing a cassette of FIG performances and getting by on the modest fees for our often publicly-subsidized gigs.

The case of FIG therefore shows, like that of the AEC, how the social aesthetics of performance can only be grasped through an analysis of both the autonomy and the entanglement of the four planes of social mediation. But through FIG I want also to point to the dangers of teleological histories of practice that smooth out differences and conflicts, and that render unevenness even. Of course, I write auto-ethnographically, with the attendant risks of that subjective project. By analogy with the AACM's response to a racist environment, the founding of FIG responded to the exclusions and denigrations experienced routinely by women classical, jazz, rock and punk musicians and improvisers. Like the Scratch Orchestra, a principle of FIG's membership was to be inclusive of women musicians with regard to level of skill and experience and musical style,

although from the start FIG's core consisted of highly experienced performers from improvised music, jazz, avant-garde rock and performance art: Lindsay Cooper, Maggie Nicols, Irène Schweizer and Sally Potter. In addition, the majority—but not all—of FIG's members were lesbian. There was an amusing aspect to this situation in that myself, Cathy Williams and a few others would sometimes find ourselves 'the only heterosexual(s)' at the feast – particularly in the lesbian feminist 'women's festivals' in which we often performed during the 1980s. Perhaps it was FIG's happy 'inversion' of norms of gender and sexuality that engendered the strenuously irreverent humour, risk-taking and pathos that characterised FIG performances, in which little was planned and ingenious use was made of the performance site, social situation and any other immediate resources (e.g. props, linguistic challenges) to hand.

But to take this analysis further, and to understand FIG performances, necessitates entering into the politics informing and crossing between our lives and our musical work at the time. The late 1970s and early 80s were the height of European second wave feminism's discussion of political lesbianism in Europe and the UK. This was manifest in issues of the leading socialist-feminist journal *Feminist Review*, as well as political meetings called by the journal, and several of we British FIGgers participated in these debates.[v] One of the key questions at stake, which fiercely (but productively) divided feminist opinion, was whether, or the extent to which, being lesbian was an involuntary result of genetic programming – one was, in this sense, born rather than made a lesbian – or whether it was (also) a response to a gendered and heterosexist environment. A closely related question was therefore whether being a lesbian was first and foremost an issue of involuntary sexual identity and only as a result an issue of political identity; or whether adopting a lesbian identity should be understood as primarily a result of political conviction, such that any woman might choose to take up a lesbian subject position for political reasons, with the assumption that her sexuality would, as it were, follow suit. These but also other, Marxist and socialist political challenges animated some of the women who became members of FIG. Several of us had worked, with different levels of energy and conviction, with left-leaning organisations prior to FIG: Lindsay Cooper and myself in Henry Cow, Maggie Nicols and Cathy Williams in other left musical and political groups; indeed, FIG's first performance was at the inaugural 'Music for Socialism' festival held at the Almost Free Theatre in London. FIG's performance style sat astride, and was informed by, this cauldron of unresolved, animated and conflictual political debates. There was no settlement, little unity, no foreordained politics, and there were plenty of undiscussed differences and fractures. Palpable tensions arose due to the coexistence of a willed (and, in our circles, fashionable) adoption by some of political lesbianism, along with others' 'lifelong' lesbianism, and yet others' socialist feminism unyoked to and uninterested in lesbian identities. These political tensions and conflicts mattered, and they got into FIG performances, which were far from a smooth or consensual rendering of a 'queer perspective' emanating from 'queer women'. To depict this situation as an occasion 'for women to foreground their bodies and their sounds for the pleasure of other women' (J. D. Smith 240-1) is a misinterpretation that essentialises and subsumes FIG's practices under an idealised queer politics. It is to project later categories back onto the group and its improvisations, in the process overlooking what remained heterogeneous, contentious, troubling and unresolved – and arguably most productive - in the experimental and politicised social aesthetics set in motion by FIG.

* * *

I began this chapter by suggesting that we find social aesthetics, in different guises, in

contemporary art practices. I pointed to several such modalities of the social in recent art and aesthetics – three unhelpfully elided in Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, and another identifiable in socially-engaged art. I proposed that Claire Bishop's important rejoinder to Bourriaud – asking: if art is engaged in producing social relations, then the question is 'what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?' – shows the need to develop conceptual tools to disentangle and identify the distinctive forms of sociality produced by art and musical practices, so as to avoid their elision and foster a more acute appreciation both of their singularity and of their mutual refractions. To this end, the analytics of four planes of social mediation developed in the main body of the chapter is offered as a conceptual foundation, and I worked it through with reference to improvised musics, in which the articulation of the four planes is manifest in richly reticulate socialities. Indeed, implicit comparisons were drawn between the varieties of social aesthetics in contemporary art practices and those evident in improvised musics. I have argued that close empirical and historical research is necessary to advance this kind of analysis, without which there is little resistance to the idealisation of the microsocialities of improvised practice, as they are disembedded from the wider social relations and formations which they 'distort' and in which they nest, as well as little resistance to the projection of post hoc interpretations that do violence to historical realities and complexities. In an era in which post-formalist music, art and interdisciplinary practices are exploding our very understanding of 'art', 'music', 'performance' and 'work' (Born and Barry; Born, *Music, Sound and Space*), it is imperative to advance our categories of analysis with regard to how variously the social enters into the aesthetic, so as better to conceptualise the experimental and novel socialities, imagined communities and social and institutional conditions summoned into being by these practices. My hope is that, while I have indicated how this framework can assist in the analysis of improvised musics, it may also fold back and provide a measure of rigour for those concerned with theorising art's multiple social mediations.

Notes

[i] On Deleuze's definition of, and distinction between, molar and minor politics, see Patton 2000, 2008, Thoburn 2003, chapters 1 and 2, and DeLanda 2008. For Delezue, 'the minor is in opposition to the molar or major. Minor and major are expressions that characterize not entities, but processes…. Essentially, major processes are premised on the formation and defence of a constant or a standard that acts as a norm and a basis of judgement. As such, major relations… are relations of identity'. In contrast, minor politics involves 'the process of deviation or deterritorialization of life… against the molar standard'. Minor politics is not 'a process of facilitating and bolstering identity, or "becoming-conscious", but… of innovation, of experimentation, and of the complication of life, in which forms of community, techniques of practice, ethical demeanours, styles, knowledges, and cultural forms are composed' (all Thoburn 2003: 6-8).

[ii] As in the Introduction to this volume, the term 'empractise', meaning a fully embodied-and-social putting into practice, is intended in part to avoid any Cartesian account in which improvisation is understood as entailing cognitive processes that initiate or supervise the bodily and social processes inherent in it. But it is also intended as an alternative to the term 'enactment' introduced by science and technology studies, notably the work of John Law, where it is endowed with an ontological status linked to the performativity of the world. Hence, 'the social sciences have always been embedded in, produced by, and productive of the social…. They *participate in*, *reflect upon*, and *enact* the social' (Law & Urry 392). Where enactment derives from a social theory focused on notions of 'action', then, empractise is practice-centred while carrying no ontological implications.

iii A variant of Small's stance is enunciated by Thomas Turino, who, referencing Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*, states: 'For me, good music making or dancing is a realization of ideal – *possible* – human relationships where the identification with others is so direct and so intense that we feel… as if our selves had merged. It is the sounds we are making… that continually let us know that we have done so or that we are failing to achieve this ideal' (Turino 2008: 19).

iv '25 years from Scratch: ICA Sunday 20th November 1994', Stefan Szczelkun, November 1995: see http://www.stefan-szczelkun.org.uk/PHD-SCRATCH2.htm (accessed 31.1.14).

v Indicating the lively spectrum of feminist politics being debated in this period, issues of *Feminist Review* ranged between socialist feminist internationalism, as in the first issue's (1979) articles on 'Women and revolution in South Yemen' and 'Female sexuality in Fascist ideology', or issue 12's (1982) articles on 'ANC women's struggles' and 'Documents from the Indian women's movement', to the burgeoning challenges from black feminism, as in issue 17's (1984) theme 'Many voices, one chant: Black feminist perspectives', to a focus on sexuality including issue 11's (1982) theme 'Sexuality' and issue 34's (1990) theme 'Perverse politics: lesbian issues'.