

Diedrich Diederichsen
Audio Poverty

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e-flux journal #16 — may 2010 [Diedrich Diederichsen](#)
Audio Poverty

I.

Music has no value. That is both the problem as well as the foundation for a broad stream of observations to follow here on the utopian character of music. The idea that music does not have – or has *ceased* to have – any value may be assessed in different ways; it may be regarded as good or bad. Of course, one may also legitimately object to the idea that music can even drop out of the economy at all, but this depends on whether the economic valuation of music is bound to an object – such as a score or recording – or whether it is not.

A central tenet of Marxist thought is built around the distinction between exchange value and use value, the most well known interpretation of which formulates it as a critique of exchange value's dominance over use value. However, it has been repeatedly pointed out – and with good reason – that such a glorification of pure use value has dreamed itself, ideologically, into a state in which the total immediacy of use assumes a unity that cannot exist in any society characterized by some degree of functional differentiation. Yet even such a romantic conception of use value remains a value nonetheless – a use that is not immediately realized. Value becomes an attribute of a thing that can be stored, reused, or realized sometime in the future, whether through use or exchange. For a thing to have value, it must possess a permanence or iterability with respect to how that value is realized in use or exchange. In the broadest sense, it must be a thing, an object.

There are things that die as they are used, and their description is usually couched in utopian metaphors. A famous example is the life of birds, which – as described in Matthew 6:26 and recalled to us by an old drunkard in the Hitchcock film *The Birds* – “neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and yet are fed.” The same is true of the land of milk and honey, where things appear on the table, as they are needed, without any labor of storage or preparation. Yet even in all these examples of ideal conditions, these free and effortless processes of consumption remain dependent on a providential nature and a natural form of production. It is not we ourselves who produce all these things for our immediate use and consumption in response to our slightest wishes and whims, but other instances and authorities of an enchanted world: the gods, a magic spell, or nature. Alongside this, music's basic situation becomes even more utopian.

I pick up a musical instrument and produce a sequence of tones. These tones enchant my surroundings and me as I produce them. At some point I grow tired, the tones cease, and the

enchantment passes. My favorite quotation about this phenomenon can be heard on the Radio Hilversum recording of Eric Dolphy's last concert, which took place in 1964, just before he died because no one could treat his particular type of diabetes, one that occurs only in people of African descent. Dolphy said: "When you hear music, after it's over, it's gone in the air; you can never recapture it again." What I produced has vanished without a trace; it created no value – nor, however, did it depend on a providential nature and the miracles of the land of milk and honey. It was me. I myself, using my talents and abilities – that which belongs to me as a human being and sets me apart from the animals – gave expression to something; that is, I lent inner states, which are also exclusively mine, and yet whose form is familiar to all other human beings from their own internal, subjective states, a form that was understandable to others and may thus have been beautiful. I realized myself as a human being in the dialectic between my nature as a unique individual and my nature as a social and collective being, and I did so entirely without economy, without reification, without the creation of value, without storage, costs, or profits, without the calculation of future time and hence without speculation, without interest or the creation of secondary value, and without valorization.

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This is how utterly utopian music is, or rather how utopian it would be if it could exist in this way, as music in itself. And yet this notion, this awareness of music's essential independence and potential solipsism, also plays a role in every realistic, mediated idea of music. But the visual arts have also experienced a utopian dimension, whether in their past, when it lay in the power that art objects had in religious rituals, or in the cult of the original, whose auratic power resides in its indexical relation to the revered artistic genius of its creator and his or her own special connection to nature, or – as in cases like the Virgen de Guadalupe or Veronica's veil – a connection to God Himself or to His Son. Theater too has seen various projects, which, although they are not utopian, nonetheless go beyond aesthetic and edifying functions: whether it be Greek tragedy, which seeks to reconcile the audience to the limits of its life possibilities through catharsis, or the bourgeois theater as an institution of enlightenment.

In considering this series of examples, one is struck by the fact that such a utopia of music possesses a radicalism that the other ideal functions of the arts do not. While the other arts formulate maximums or optimums, it is always in relation to emerging or established social rules, and not as the *suspension* of those rules – which would be genuinely utopian. One might, then,



A cane fife, made by the late Othar Turner of Gravel Springs, Mississippi. Turner was (perhaps the last) a master of American fife and drum

argue that a utopia of music formulated in this way – one that could really be derived from a rejection of commodity capitalism – would be a relatively modern description of an original state. And, for good reason, we tend to be a little bit skeptical where modern descriptions of original states are concerned; precisely such utopias, which derive a mission of the arts from an original state, are often thoroughly impractical and romantically idealized. Indeed, we know this to be a decidedly reactionary figure of thought: the attacking of a stage of social differentiation from the standpoint of an archaic notion of unity, an absence of differentiation.

Yet this critique of reactionary utopianism does not fully apply to the utopia of music, and for good reason: in recent times – that is, in the twentieth century and then once again in the opening years of the twenty-first – this utopia has come much closer to being realized than ever before, at least if one is willing to spell out its social character. This utopia also has another dimension: it is, so to speak, always real in cases where one makes music for oneself and the immediate environment, in which the sociable aspect of music can be temporarily established as noneconomic – if not in its forms and formats then at least in its social gestures. “I heard his refrain as the signal changed: he was playing real good for free,” as Joni Mitchell sang of a street musician in 1969 in her song “For Free.” The street was so loud that it was impossible to hear him, but when the light changed and the traffic briefly paused, she could hear his refrain. And it was real good. And it was free.

The social dimension of this seemingly private and hermetic style of musical production, which, in spite of being social, nonetheless seeks to preserve music’s lack of value, can be found in the emergence of forms that help to realize music-making that is not defined by any previous instructions, objects, or protocols – as *ensemble* play, as collective and cooperative production. Thanks to free improvisation and aleatoric modes in a wide range of musical cultures, real practices of this kind were able to become experiential realities in the second half of the twentieth century, as were the barriers and limits of such practices – which sprang up everywhere, especially with attempts to professionalize them. Before this period, however, music that sought to escape reification – if such music even existed – neither had nor could have had any consciousness of itself and its social character, for that would have presupposed a means of storing and valorizing music that, it would seem, had not existed for rural cultures before the rise of the music industry and its technological foundations. It goes without saying that the fiddler at the fair

had no conception of a liberated type of music that defied reification, but rather entered completely into the social function of his music – to impress the girls or to get free drinks.

At the same time, however, this fiddler did not produce a type of music that, in the sense described above, only existed insofar as it was actually performed. He lived in a universe where normative stipulations had even more gravity than they do in a world where conservatories judge what is correct and incorrect in the interpretation of scores. True, there was no existing material – a score or recording – that turned music into an object that could be traded and economically valorized, but another kind of force existed in this pre-economic musical state. For some time now, the American copyright activist Lawrence Lessig has traveled around the world with a lecture that opens on an image from around 1900, showing a father and his sons making music together and singing in front of a rustic dwelling. For Lessig, it depicts a golden age when music was still an activity and not pure consumption, an age he now sees returning in funny YouTube montages and other phenomena he describes as “remix culture” (presumably unaware of the term’s widespread use in the context of musical remixes). Upon further inspection, however, one finds that it is less an image of free music-making than of the dominance of the patriarchal system.

The picture shows an authoritarian father explaining to his sons – perhaps even lovingly (it doesn’t make *that* much difference) – what is correct and incorrect in terms of tradition. This embodied authority – the knowledge of a proper music and the proper means of producing it, imparted in unmarked gestures taken to be commonplace – represents (or at least *might* represent) a much more massive immobilization of music than any reification through a musical object. This reification at least contains its immobility in an external object, and thus represents an advance over its embodiment – however natural the romanticizers of folklore may find that embodiment. To be sure, things become different – but only slightly – when such embodied knowledge belongs to a culture of resistance, an issue I return to below.

So while we see that the notion of an absolutely valueless music – a music free of all value, valorization, or fixation – has often been projected into the past, its actual place would have to be in the present and in the future, and not just because we are speaking about utopia. Except in Arcadia, such a music has never existed as a social practice. On the other hand, it may have existed innumerable times as a mode of communication detached from society, as the song one sings to oneself, the whimsy with which

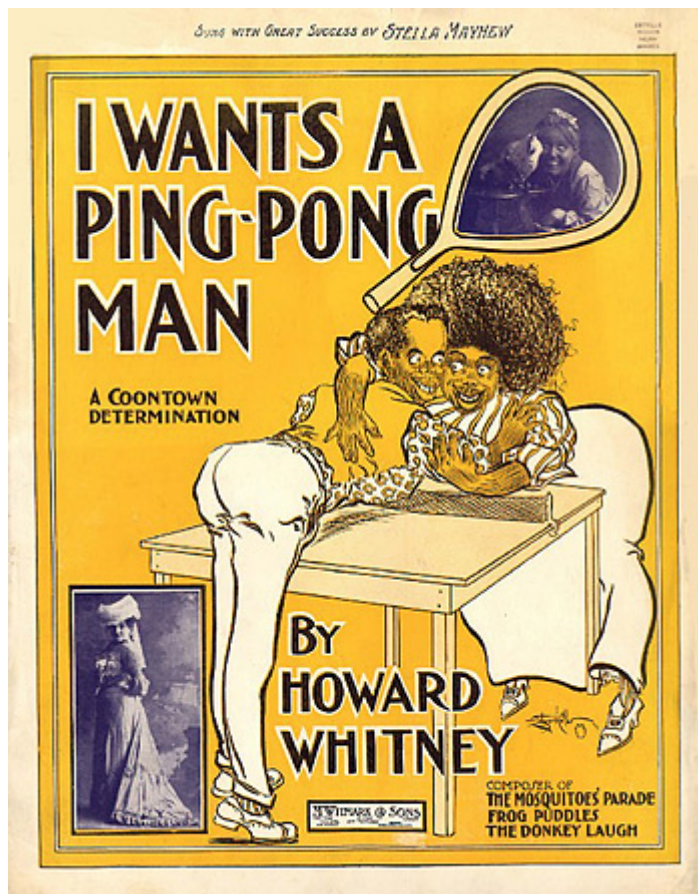
one rhythmically structures one's steps, the drone that one produces with one's own body as a resonating chamber. And out of those countless individual moments that never solidified into objects, when individuals or little groups had musical experiences that had nothing to do with musical objects or any social purpose, music and music-like behavior have gained the reputation of being able to touch one's most intimate subjectivity. This pure, often solipsistic musical experience that comes prior to aesthetic experience always involves objects and external things, but does not yet belong to the order of the arts (and I say this without judgment). However, it may be regarded as the precondition for the possibility of an aesthetic experience of music.

In this way, something else emerged that might also be described as a value: a profusion of individual and collective musical experiences nourished by moments of agreement between signifiers and signifieds, moments in which one feels that one understands oneself, or feels understood by others. This is valuable in an entirely different sense, not because it is exchangeable and/or available for future realization, but rather because it has some weight on a scale of values that are only partially economic and object-like – values such as health, love, and justice. In order to be valuable in the first sense, music must always refer to its own experiences of value in the second sense: it must simulate them, touch on them, perhaps even actually make them available. But this noneconomic value must be distinguished from music's utopian absence of value. Though the two can support each other, it would also be possible to experience music's noneconomic value without the category of a valueless music that I alluded to earlier. It can be experienced with musical objects and musical commodities; and indeed one can only have aesthetic experiences as such – in which, by definition, a public dimension merges with a subjectivity – with objects in the broadest sense.

The ideology of bourgeois society, however, insists that great value in the second sense must not have any economic value in the first. And yet this same society has developed a discourse for legitimating economic value through precisely this priceless and unpurchasable character: through objects that – despite having value in the first sense – command a special price for their value in the second, noneconomic sense. This problem has been described frequently. Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out that a specific form of uselessness is also produced within the aesthetic domain to distinguish these goods from every conceivable utility, from every value in the first sense.¹ And yet the bourgeoisie pays for this noneconomic value in every economic sense.

The goods are afforded an exchange value, just no use value. It is here that the utopian goods with no value meet the exchange value of that which bourgeois ideology regards as priceless and invaluable: neither has any use value, though one can in fact be bought – for a very high price. And to the extent that it can be bought, it also ceases to have no value.

There is nothing that bourgeois culture values more highly than the break with its own economic principles, provided that it is capable of valuing this break economically. This has nonetheless led to great freedoms; in particular, it has given rise to the ethic of a freedom as devoid as possible of anything that can be valued economically. While this ethic has always been ideologically contaminated, it was still extremely productive – as the avant-gardes of the twentieth century witnessed. Nevertheless, the most massive conceivable shock to this ideology and its practice has come, as it were, from the other end of the world.



"I Wants A Ping Pong Man" Lyrics and Music by-Howard Whitney
Copyright 1903 by M. Witmark & Sons.

II.

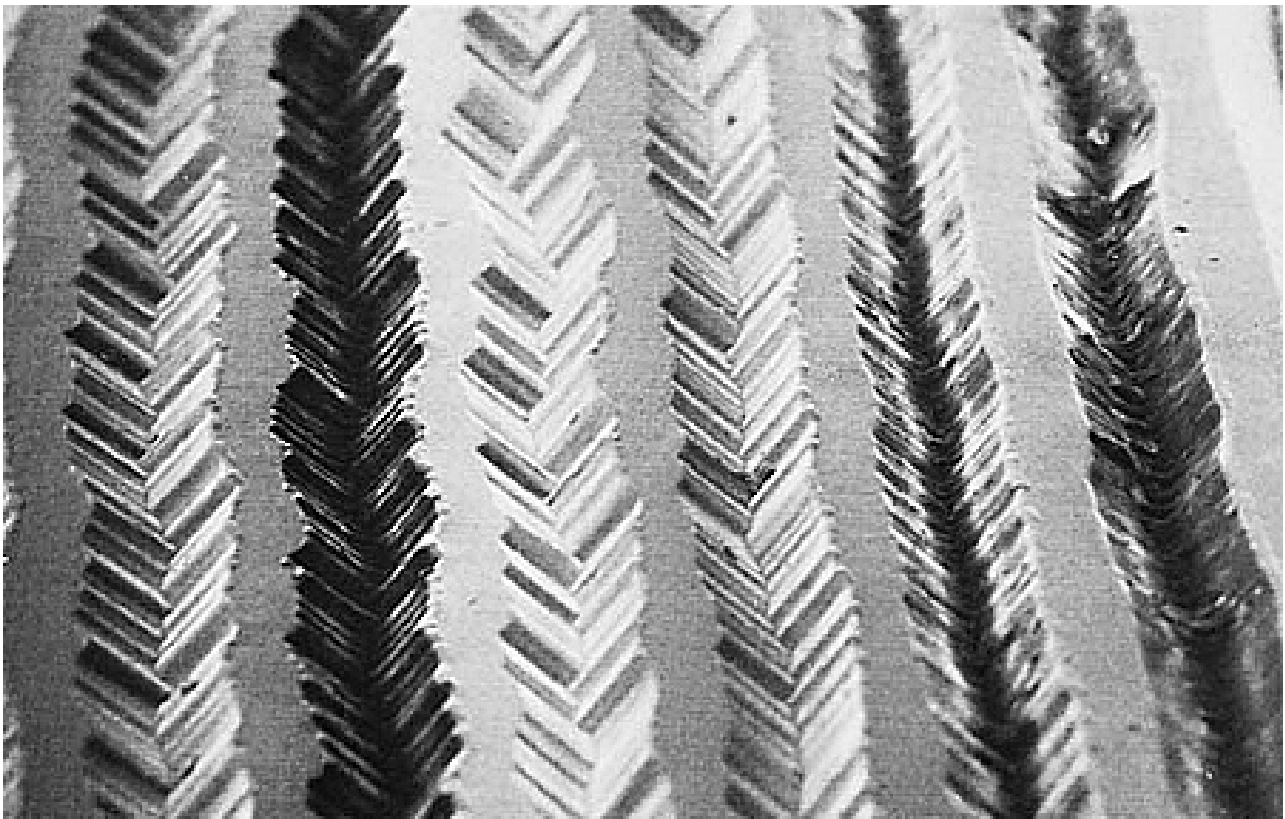
Pop music as a form of industrially – as well as sub-industrially – produced music first emerged in the 1950s as something that could be described neither as folklore, nor as a purely

cultural-industrial commodity, nor as art. It often finds its means through discrete, individual effects that are closer to the logo – the context-independent sign of advertising – than through classical notions of music. Its musical elements are simple, and they are for the most part borrowed from local or socially and politically segregated, excluded musical styles, but these styles are not performed with local, context-specific gestures – rather, they are most often torn from those contexts with a certain economic violence. To break from contexts offering only local – and therefore very limited – validity and value and perform the music in a nonlocal manner is to risk sacrificing a loss of value in the noneconomic sense with only a modest increase in the economic sense; it is to make a gain – in global, universalist terms – that often cannot be realized economically, but ends up forming communities in a “deviation” (to borrow a concept from Heinz Klaus Metzger) from the original economic intention of the music. Pop music begins by employing the simplest possible means, which therefore tend to be inexpensive and empty – that is, hollowed out by frequent use – without concern for their traditional meanings and ritual values in an original context. While these inexpensive means are not *entirely*

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without economic value, they are, for all intents and purposes, completely without value from the standpoint of artistic judgment. Their economic promise concerns the modest profit that always materializes when one produces cheaply, and without the burden of lasting effects or historical evaluation.

Most of pop music is thus comprised of “worn-out” musical elements – harmonic and melodic effects that have been utilized so often that they have become completely empty. *Musique concrète* and noises from the outside world are included as sonic logos; a physical, rhythmic insistence and a performative emphasis on the physical aspects of playing, once again with an eye to recognizability and immediate effect, are characteristic. In addition, more than any technically recorded and reproduced music before it, this inexpensive music relies on effects associated with technical reproduction; indeed, it is inconceivable without the existence of sound recording and storage media; the “studio version” is its central musical object – unlike the recording in jazz that documents a session or the recording in classical music that reconstructs a concert (and whose central musical object remains the score), and unlike the ethnographic field recording that



Detail of vinyl record incisions

points to a distant or vanished world. Nevertheless, the central act of pop music remains the moment when a real performer becomes recognizable as the representative of a studio recording – the musical object – and “liquefies” it. This liquefaction marks a critical point in the production of musical value.

The progress of musical development in the bourgeois era led to the continuous refinement of the musical object, which influenced the business of music well before the introduction of the phonograph record, but also violated notions of a musical Arcadia in a twofold sense – in addition to defining music, it also opened it up to valuation and made it possible to buy and sell copyrights. While compositions were initially commissioned works, that changed with the rise of Tin Pan Alley and the production of scores for a market. In the period following the Civil War, twenty-five thousand pianos were sold in the United States each year, and it is estimated that more than half a million young people learned to play the piano. This represented a move away from the traditional embodied authority of the father toward the authority of the musical object – in this case sheet music – which was booming on a mass scale, accompanied by the expansion of the music publishing industry. Beginning in about 1885, people began to talk about Tin Pan Alley, by which they meant 28th Street in Manhattan, where the most important music publishers had their offices. The result was not only higher print runs but also the invention of a standardized, Taylorized, Fordist method of composition based in a division of labor. Composers were essentially paid by the song: sitting in their publishers’ buildings, they hammered out one danceable thirty-two-bar number after another, among them the masterpieces that are canonized today as the Great American Songbook. Already on a purely musical level, these songs were comprised of standard phrases and clichés – filled with immediate economic value and devoid of any contact whatsoever with inwardness, with the concept of a musicality that develops out of itself. They reflect an urban lifestyle, and they have a typical and interchangeable quality about them stemming from the fact that they were produced specifically in order to be exchanged.

Production standards sink even further when they cease to relate to the production of notes and begin to relate instead to the production of records, a shift that occurred after the Second World War at the latest. Records began to be marketed primarily on the radio, and then on television, and the jingles, logos, and sonic signatures that were the raw material of pop music became the sonic junk of advertising – the cheapest attention-getting noise that

money can buy, the vocabulary of pop’s environment, the language that it has no choice but to speak. The resulting functional music seems to have achieved the maximum possible degree of interchangeability; fleeting remnants of emotion, which come and go like leaves in the wind, seem to cling to it only temporarily.

Here, then, we would seem to have something like the nadir promised above. The economic value is small but not insignificant. The musical objects must simply be produced in sufficient quantity in order for their production to be profitable. They only have to mean a little bit to as many people as possible, but not too much to any one person. And their noneconomic value must be modest as well. Precisely this music, which is, in every sense, without value, now sparks the greatest enthusiasm, the most tremendous ecstasies that secular Western music has ever unleashed. How is this possible?

This extremely simple, yet physically compelling, effect-oriented music created its effects without any of the preconditions of traditional and ritual musical frameworks. It referred to everyday life and could easily be incorporated into it precisely because it contributed nothing to its own explanation, whether through meanings or traditional preconditions. With a crude and interchangeable set of effects, it was possible to do things with it, to use it actively – doo-wop, early rock and roll, and R&B came out of street corner music and the nightlife and club scene, and they retained that connection even when they moved to television, where they began to mean something to masses of teenagers and others on the fringes – or the threshold – of social integration. This moment, this audience, this musical object, and these commodities represent a kind of zero point of art, a zero point of community-building and also of folklore, a zero point too in terms of noneconomic value. But this also forms a basis for the creation of a new kind of noneconomic value.

In his book *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, Simon Frith points out that, like sports fans, users and fans of pop music have constantly produced evaluative discourses – a form of communication consisting entirely of value judgments.² This is liquefaction: value judgments, rankings, listings, and fetishes are instances in which musical objects are actively appropriated and dissolved, becoming musical “agglutinations” of the lowliest kind. Ever-newer masses of semi-integrated young people and minorities with money to spend discover endless opportunities to agglomerate bureaucratic lists and tables, existential and sexual applications, and risky lifestyles. At this point, there normally comes an affirmation of the more romantic forms

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of active reception, of existential forms of “liquefaction,” of risky lives and what is often called liberation, and there is nothing wrong with that. But in 1960 and again in 1980, the bureaucratic energy of reception, which was generally unleashed by unromantic nerds, gave rise to a new knowledge. The fact that it looked bureaucratic was only a problem from the vantage point of a ritualized bourgeois aesthetic expectation: where the rich man stages edification, the poor one establishes a bureaucracy. And who would be so narrow-minded as to give one of these options precedence over the other?

In pop music after 1955, a new logic of attractiveness emerged that surpassed the attraction of the music itself on the basis of its having little economic and no artistic value (and being hence free and open to participation), functioning instead on two new bases: first, an interplay between image and sound that could never have been staged before the advent of television and the teen idol industry, and second, the interplay between indexical, phonographic recordings of actual human beings/stars’ physical traces and the recognition of those stars on actual stages. These two logics of attraction explain a great deal, and the first self-descriptions and myths produced by pop music – in particular, the cult of authenticity – sought, albeit clumsily, to describe precisely these effects: the identity of sound and image, reproduced recording and live performance – the effectuation of identity and reality.

There are still other factors at work. I will not delve into them here, but one of them is particularly important and should be mentioned. In order to introduce it, I must make a slight correction to my concept of noneconomic valuelessness. Even in pop music, there is something that corresponds to inwardness, to the solipsistic pleasure in the pure experience of playing, and playing with, music – to doing as one wishes with sounds. Even in pop music, there are elements with no economic value, but which have a very high value of a different kind – a value that is, in the broadest sense, a political one. Unless it is further qualified, the noneconomic value I introduced above knows only one kind of subject: the subject who is still intact – at least reasonably intact – and authorized to do as he or she pleases. All others, all outsiders, all those who are excluded, but also those who are based in remote communities, know of something else: a dialectic between the feeling of being protected by a given music on the one hand, and, on the other, the feeling of being emboldened – of struggling to one’s feet and beginning to take steps – by that very same music. These are

accumulated, unstable social experiences stored within musical forms, and they include even those forms patched together by the uninitiated and the unauthorized, by music-industry people and other outsiders, to become pop music. And it is in this sense that we have something to learn from Lagos: not the economic practices of the ghetto, not its reality, and not the romantic notion that what is especially unstable is also especially advanced, but rather something concerning the proto-aesthetic content of music and its organization.

In America in 1955, musical elements of folk, blues, and African-American and immigrant music all shared a common feature, and it may be true that post-world music today shares the same feature of an inwardness marked by violent exclusion, as well as a sense of belonging that is often no less violent. It is this commonality – audible time and again in music such as the sorrowful American country song – that I call political, however vastly removed it may be from all that generally tends to be politically instrumentalized or romanticized, such as the kitschy talk of “rebel” culture and formats of “resistance.” These forms of music are absolutely proto-political. Or they are, somewhat more paradoxically, *spiritually* political. And they can be drawn in every conceivable direction when they are politicized. What is important here is that music possesses another, less ahistorical, less ideal type of noneconomic value: political value. And that value remains present in pop music.

III.

Pop music never knows what it is doing. This is true of both its thoroughly economicized mainstream components as well as its niche cultures. And it is worth pointing out that an economy that consists of nothing but niche production would be an entropic horror – one in which there would be no public realm and no aesthetic experience. But pop music constantly rediscovers the conditions of its own emergence, not in well-defined, large-scale historical movements, but in small steps and often cyclical acts of rebellion. Time and again, attempts are made to “inject” economic valuelessness – as a related phenomenon or shot of energy – into forms of pop music that have lost contact with those conditions. When there is no longer any contact with the spiritually political dimension of pop music, improvised rock music suddenly arises – and with something in mind that it tries to reconstruct. Other logics of attraction are reconstructed in this same way: where voices no longer sound as if they could possibly come from actual bodies, hip-hop emerges. That’s just how it works.

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But now we have a real mess on our hands. A form of valuelessness has arisen, very much in the ideal, romantic sense. But rather than allowing itself to be transferred into a higher value, it is moving on from *economic* valuelessness to infect the *noneconomic* kind as well, perhaps in order to demonstrate that no such transcendental value ever actually existed – at least not where music was made for money. Instead of dwelling on the obvious – as critical spoilsports have repeatedly done by asserting that pop music, in the long run, cannot sustain its implicit utopian and oppositional potential before proceeding to organize it industrially and bureaucratically – the logic of pop music itself (or the logic of precisely these latent political elements) has led to its own obsolescence as an economic model. It has served its purpose as a music of distancing, of niche creation, as the dance music of new temporary communities so elegantly states: that the musical object itself has become superfluous – not just technically, through file-sharing, but conceptually and economically as well.

The rave was already an event without an object: people did not go home and begin to collect the records they'd heard that night. One might argue that this was in itself a success. As indeed it was, but as tends to happen with utopian enclaves in a world that is otherwise unchanged, they invert to become their opposite. Freedom creates poverty. In a world in which the object has disappeared as a reference point, other logics take effect – logics of a vastly more liberated form of entrepreneurship: the exploitation of bodies, performance, and “liveness” replaces the exploitation of a labor that had previously produced objects, objects whose conditions of production could be negotiated. The realization of a world without musical objects has assimilated aesthetic experience in a utopian and dialectical sense, but because it has done so only partially and temporarily, it has also brought about a regression to a stage that precedes aesthetic experience altogether.

At the same time, however, the specific forms of active reception associated with pop music – and not its contents or noneconomic values – have become the new standard of its culture and industry. We no longer live in a society of spectacle but in one of participation. Active consumption – by so-called “prosumers” – are the bread and butter of contemporary sociability; the specific stubbornness of the fan, the permeability of the barrier between audience and stage – all essential components of the pop music culture of the last fifty years – are now standard staging formats. They are prescribed, they are hegemonic, they are stressful, and they

drain energy from precisely those forces and forms of empowerment that pop music is normally thought to support. The musical utopia of economic valuelessness and the concept of a greater, noneconomic value then attach themselves to the logic of virtuosity – as Paolo Virno calls it – as a normative model of production, of labor without work.³

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What is to be done? Pop music cannot be rescued; something new must be invented to take its place, and music may or may not have a role to play in whatever that turns out to be. One cannot set out to invent such a thing, just as pop music itself simply emerged, as it were, in places far from the forward march of progress, in a development that was historically necessary, as we know today, but was unpredictable for its contemporaries. It did not arise where enlightened people tried something new, but where others acted quickly and from a sense of spiritual urgency. We must remain open to the possibility of something similar happening again. But pop music was only able to come into being by repeatedly coming into contact with radical artistic forces, as when John Cale and La Monte Young developed The Dream Syndicate from the

spirit of the Everly Brothers, or Tony Conrad suspected that the solipsistic drone might be used as an anticapitalist weapon. So while one can no longer reconstruct pop music in a purposeful and systematic way, one can still move forward with the neo-neo-avant-garde work of utopian practices or their derivatives – perhaps in a more complex and radical manner, while touching on other arts that have similar problems – at the admittedly high price of creating niches, provided that one also remain in contact with the world of cheap and worn-out forms that have preserved something of people's actual lives, however unrecognizable they may have become. These do not necessarily have to be musical forms. What is needed, however – not for economic reasons, but for political and cultural ones – are reference points for everyone. The niche has become neither a utopia nor a permanent state of affairs, but rather the end.

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Translated from the German by James Gussen.

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1

See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

2

See Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

3

Paolo Virno, "Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus" in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 189–212.

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