

Form's Connection to Political Possibility in Noise Performance

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Abstract: In this article, I examine Margaret Chardiet's performance as Pharmakon at Co-Prosperty Sphere (Chicago) in 2019 to address how a work's form is connected to spectators' political beliefs or commitments. Instead of posing an interpretation of Chardiet's work, I describe how this work's form comes to have meaning. Thinking with Jacques Ranciere's notion of an emancipated spectator alongside Chardiet's performance, I describe how individual understandings of the work are organized into a space and note the emergence of a collective legibility that constitutes the particular way the performance unfolds. I argue that the political possibility of Chardiet's performance is not the way its form renders an ideology available to interpretation, but instead the dynamic exchange of references, expectations, and senses of the work that constitute and reconstitute the legibility of its form. Thus, I pose an alternative way to analyze works of politically motivated performance (particularly those that use moral ambiguity as a critical or ideological strategy), one that approaches the politics of spectatorship by attending to the relationship between individual and collective sense.

Introduction: Interpretation and Political Possibility

Chardiet stands in all black next to a plastic table full of electronics and wires. On her left is a large piece of metal on a keyboard stand. Cables hang and pile on the floor. Behind her is an amplifier sitting against the wall, in front of her are monitor stacks on either side and a tightly packed semi-circle of people. The space is dark but her enclosure between the wall and the semi-circle is bathed in red light. As the performance unfolds, this semi-circle becomes a site of encounter. Within a dense and pulsating sonic space, Chardiet crawls around the semi-circle's edges and engages spectators with violent vocalizations and eye contact. She enters the semi-circle and enters the crowd, engaging those she passes

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with similar actions. She leaves the crowd to enter from another direction. She gradually increases how often she enters and how long she stays. The crowd moves to accommodate her, transforming from impassable rigidity into porous malleability.

The above is my first-hand account of Margaret Chardiet's performance as *Pharmakon* at Co-Prosperity Sphere (Chicago) in October of 2019.¹ Here I analyze Chardiet's performance with attention toward the ways the organization of individual experiences produces the work's collective meaning. I argue that the political possibility of this performance is not the way its form renders an ideology available, but instead the aggregation of relations constituting and reconstituting the legibility of its form. By form, I will be referring to the coincidence of performative, musical, and spectatorial elements in a specific time and place as well as individual elements within that coincidence. Drawing on Rancière's notion of an emancipated spectator, and de Duve's notion of art's critical function, I define political possibility as the ways in which a spectatorial interaction with a work's form motivates a particular political belief or commitment. In de Duve's formulation, this connection is "reflexive and analogical" that is to say, a work changes a spectator's thinking.² Rancière similarly states that spectators "refashion" the work from their other aesthetic and worldly experiences, and he understands this refashioning in settings of performance as already egalitarian.³

Chardiet's performance becomes an opportune site from which to discuss political possibility because it arises within a musical genre (noise and power electronics more specifically) in which similar forms are found in dissimilar communities of political belief. For example, Chardiet's work primarily circulates in leftist artistic communities; in fact, the performance under discussion takes place within an exhibition of activist art, a Standing Rock poster hanging directly to Chardiet's right. On the other hand, works of artists like Brethren, also arising from the power electronics genre, are circulated in far-right extremist commu-

¹ *Pharmakon @ Co-Prosperity Sphere* [YouTube Video] (2019, October 15), Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9DkFgZwCTQ&t=924s> See video for performance documentation.

² Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 447. de Duve writes that art has a critical function when it is involved in a project of emancipation, but that "the critical function of art has to be considered reflexive and analogical rather than transitive and ideological."

³ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009).

nities such as Stormfront.⁴ The circulation of similar works in groups holding dissimilar ideological interpretations troubles the notion that a work's political possibility is found within an individual spectator's interpretation of a work's form. Of course, the form of this work is not tidily bound. It circulates as both performance and music which very quickly expands the structures of legibility through which the work is made meaningful, and troubles the constancy of its form.⁵ Additionally, its circulation outside of dominant cultural institutions illuminates the ways in which interactions between various structures of legibility constitute the work's collective meaning, and points to these structures (including the institution itself) as necessarily part of a work's political possibility, something that might be overlooked when reflecting upon more neatly institutionalized works of performance.

The ideological ambiguity of noise performance is also a considerable preoccupation within its cultural discourses. Historically, works within the genre have used material associated with extremist ideology (imagery, audio, text, behavior, etc. associated with fascism, white supremacy, and gendered violence).⁶ This is often for the purpose of a 'transgressive' aesthetics, that is, an aesthetics intended to subvert cultural norms by shocking a spectator out of habituated modes of

⁴ Brethren's album *Savage Inequalities* was posted on Stormfront for download but has since been taken down.

⁵ Chardiet's work circulates both as music and performance art. She has performed in music venues, DIY spaces, as well as art institutions such as MOMA PS1. Relatedly, David Novak, a scholar that works on noise music, acknowledges that "multisited struggle[s] against cultural identification makes Noise extremely difficult to place," and cites various historical developments from British Industrial music, Experimental Rock, free jazz, and European postwar electronic and tape music. He also describes noise as a generic category that collected music that did not fit into other generic categories, as well as noise functioning as anti-music to some performers (seen in project names like Merzbow, which references Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau*). David Novak, *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 10-16, 194. Despite this difficulty in generic categorization, Chardiet does describe her own work as noise. I am referring to these practices as noise performance both because I am approaching the work's performance as a serious part of its form and also as a way to acknowledge that many working within these generic conventions do not aspire to have their work considered as music or art.

⁶ For example, Throbbing Gristle's single "Zyklon B Zombie" with cover depicting someone showering superimposed with an image of Zyklon B canisters, Whitehouse's album *New Britain* (1982) with the use of a recording of Hitler speaking, distorted and transformed into an electro-naturalistic landscape with water and bird sounds amongst others.

understanding.⁷ However, these materials are not always used as critique, but also used by those who hold the ideologies to which they refer. Consequently, noise performance is surrounded by a cultural discourse tasked with delineating political intent. To summarize the bounds of this exchange in a series of questions: is this artist making work to push boundaries, is this artist making work because they believe in ideologies associated with the materials they are using, or most contentiously is the artist passing off genuine extremist ideology as 'mere' transgressive aesthetics.⁸ Undertaking the distinction between critique and extremist ideology in this cultural discourse often turns to an excavation of the artist's political affiliations. For example, in *The Quietus*, (an online cultural magazine), Dylan Miller discusses American noise artist Non's association with extremist political groups: his affiliations with the leader of White Aryan Resistance, the founder of American Front, and other influencers for America's new right movement.⁹ Similar strategies of comparing the work to interpersonal and political associations were employed by the Finnish Anti-Fascist network Varis to outline the Finnish National Socialist music scene in 2019.¹⁰ In Chicago in 2017, there was a conversation at a live performance between members of South Side Anti-Racist Action and power electronics artist Bloodyminded about past use of themes associated with white supremacy, which resulted in a public explanation of critical intent.¹¹

⁷ Dylan Miller, "Why We're Investigating Extreme Politics in Underground Music," *The Quietus*, (November 2018); Andrew Whelan, "'Extreme' Music and Graphic Representation Online." *IEE International Symposium on Technology and Society* (June 1, 2010); Andrew Whelan, "Power Electronics and Conventionally Transgressive Assembly Work," in *Music at the Extremes: Essays on Sounds Outside the Mainstream*, ed. Scott A. Wilson (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2015), 59–84; Brian Cogan, "Last Report: Throbbing Gristle and Audio Extremes," in *Hardcore, Punk, and Other Junk: Aggressive Sounds in Contemporary Music*, ed. Eric James Abbey and Colin Helb (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014): 91–106.

<https://thequietus.com/articles/25682-fascism-underground-music-racism-industrial-black-metal-noise>

⁸ For an example of this cultural discourse, see appendix 1 for a meme describing the use of materials associated with Nazism in power electronics (PE).

⁹ Miller, "Why We're Investigating Extreme Politics in Underground Music."

¹⁰ "The Influencers of the Finnish NS Music Scene Part 3: Mikko Aspa of Northern Heritage, Clandestine Blaze, Vapaudenristi & Sarvilevyt," Varis, March 19, 2019, <https://varisverkosto.com/2019/03/the-influencers-of-the-finnish-ns-music-scene-part-3-mikko-aspa-of-northern-heritage-clandestine-blaze-vapaudenristi-sarvilevyt/>.

¹¹ Mark Solotroff, "Statement," *BloodLust!* (blog), March 9, 2017,

Though scholarship does not replicate this kind of social mapping, it is nonetheless preoccupied with noise music's interpretation. For example, Andrew Whelan, a scholar of power electronics, has proposed that the works' move from peer-to-peer tape trading to the internet causes "interpretive problems," that is, because a spectator lacks a work's "context of use" they are unable to ascertain its criticality.¹² This formulation mirrors the aforementioned cultural discourse in that it implicitly upholds the work's status as a critique. However, thinking about these works exclusively as critique minimizes the ethical concerns also operating within the cultural discourse (e.g., the growing recognition of the ineffectiveness of these materials to pose a social or political critique, the growing unacceptability of using these materials in leftist micro-cultural spaces, and relatedly the reemergence of the non-critical use of these materials within the genre).

Similarly, art historians dealing with morally ambiguous works of performance often foreground the work's merit as social or political critique. For example, when discussing the work of Laibach, Alexei Monroe largely argues that its ideological ambiguity creates a more acutely discomforting critique.¹³ Similarly, Claire Bishop describes the force of Schlingensiefel's work, *Please Love Austria* as relying on its ideological ambiguity, that is, its ability to "draw attention to the contradictions of political discourse."¹⁴ She goes on to explain that in Schlingensiefel's case, "an *artistic* representation of detention had more power to attract dissensus than an *actual* institution of detention."¹⁵ Bishop's differentiation between artistic representation of detention and actual detention points to the desire to see these works as a means to make visible ideological contradictions outside of the work. Importantly, this operation presupposes reflexive analogy as the mechanism for a work's force and the primary site of a work's political possibility. Noise performance complicates this understanding. By instead analyzing Chard-iet's performance through the various structures that make her work legible, that is, the way her work comes to have meaning, I argue that the interactions between these structures of legibility are constitutive of her work's political possibility.

<https://bloodlust.blogspot.com/2017/03/mark-solotroff-statement.html>.

¹² Whelan, "'Extreme' Music and Graphic Representation Online," 466.

¹³ Alexei Monroe, *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso Books, 2012) 279-283.

¹⁵ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 279-283.

Reconstituting Form's Legibility

Chardiet begins the performance by interacting with the table of electronics and the sounds start with a mid-frequency pulse at extraordinarily high volume. She grabs a microphone in one hand and the cable in the other and violently vocalizes into it while running towards the semi-circle of people. She stops abruptly at the edge of the semi-circle, stands inches away from one audience member and vocalizes into the microphone while making eye contact. She moves to another part of the semi-circle and does the same to another person, and then another next to them, vocalizing and making eye contact with each new audience member for a few seconds each. Her voice wavers at the ends of phrases by way of electronic distortion. Bits of language are decipherable, but it is difficult to make out textual meaning. The other sonic material is gradually built one piece at a time, composed of electronic sounds that span a wide frequency range: crashes that feedback and extend into high-pitched pulsations, low-frequency throbbing that cuts up other sounds in the space (like a helicopter or speaking into a fan), and pitched sounds that recur. Many of these sounds have their own arrhythmic pulse that move in and out of time with each other and with Chardiet's own pulsing vocalizations. These sounds are gradually layered to a point of extreme volume and vibrating excess. This excess either breaks down completely only for another to be gradually built, or it morphs from one into another with the addition of new sounds and the subtraction of old. This compositional movement repeats over the course of the forty-minute performance. Because of the extreme volume, these compositional movements are felt vibrationally throughout the body. This repetitive compositional process gradually transforms the sound's forceful discomfort into a deep corporeal ambience.

Though this work is deeply entangled with individual somatic and sensory experience, the legibility of those experiences coheres around particular elements of the work's form.¹⁶ Feedback is one such element. In both Chardiet's

¹⁶ Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art* (New York: Continuum, 2009): xvii; Here I am drawing upon Kim-Cohen's distinction between sound in itself (what he refers to as looking at the window) and sound as representation (looking through the window). He proposes looking "about the window" which allows "for sound's interactions with linguistic, ontological, epistemological, social, and political signification." In "looking about the window" I aim to describe how form becomes legible within a particular context, and how its reiteration within each distinct context reconstitutes its legibility.

work, and preceding work in the genre, feedback is associated with an agential relationship to a disordered system. In *Japanoise*, a genre of works preceding Chardiet's, feedback becomes legible within the context allowing its possibility. In his ethnography on *Japanoise*, David Novak describes that for one fan, *Japanoise* was a means of aestheticizing the sonic landscape associated with his labor as a machine operator. That fan recounts the sheer volume and physically violent nature of the sound of an iron screw going into a flour milling machine.¹⁷ Novak also describes how the materials used to create feedback, guitar pedals, and consumer musical electronics were associated with Japan's place in the world market. He outlines the way in which those materials were used to create feedback systems—at odds with their consumer purposes, and often destroyed in the process.¹⁸

In his ethnography, Novak reproduces a drawing that depicts one such feedback system used by the noise artist Filth the Sleep. The drawing shows a pick-up (a kind of microphone) attached to what is labeled "metal junk" and then plugged into a string of nine guitar pedals and an amplifier.¹⁹ In this feedback system, the pick-up would 'pick up' the sound of the artist striking or otherwise manipulating the metal. This signal would move through the nine pedals, while the artist adjusted their parameters. The signal would be audible through the amplifier and then picked up again by the pick-up, creating an extremely loud and sonically unpredictable oscillator. This process was often carried out in an explicitly embodied or aggressive fashion. For example, in a performance by noise project Government Alpha, the artist strapped the feedback system to his body, swallowed the pick-up, and rolled or otherwise thrashed around on the floor to create and manipulate the signal until ultimately pulling out the pick-up and throwing up.²⁰

Novak describes the artist creating and then contending with this unpredictable feedback system as allegorical to a subject's agency in society. Specifically, he describes the enactment of a fantastical subject that is able to transcend and obstruct societal systems. He writes:

[the work's] transcendent antistructural subject [is] one that could jam the gears of the system through its unassimilated agency... Within their destructive performances of collapse and overload lies a romantic dream of pure

¹⁷ Novak, *Japanoise* 182.

¹⁸ Novak, *Japanoise* 173-174.

¹⁹ Novak, *Japanoise* 149.

²⁰ Jason Hoffman in conversation with the author, 2018.

experience and the promise of an original self, somewhere beneath the rubble—even if this dream is a dream-despite-all, in which people can exceed their own control over the technologies that surround them.²¹

In other words, Novak outlines a fantasy of subjectivity in which an original self can exist outside of a system and destroy that system through perpetual technological and personal failure. Importantly, the materials used to create these feedback systems, guitar pedals, and consumer musical electronics, are technologies associated with Japan's relationship to the global market. The performatively, sonically, and technologically destructive use of these materials is therefore associated with disrupting that particular system. In other words, feedback systems as performative or musical form and the legibility of that form are simultaneously produced.

In Chardiet's work, the legibility of feedback is reconstituted through its reiteration in a distinct context. Chardiet's performance is also associated with an agential relationship to a system, but feedback is no longer legible as "jamming the gears." Feedback instead becomes legible as systemic violence against particular members of society. In her artist statement Chardiet outlines a detailed formulation of society and the agency of the subjects within it. She writes:

In our cells, our minds, our politics and our species, humans are self-destructing. But this behavior does not happen in a vacuum. It is an instinctive inward response to a world of increasing outward violence, greed, and oppression. Turning these wounds toward ourselves can be seen as an attempt at "balancing feedback", within a never-ending positive feedback loop of cause and effect... This album is dedicated to all who were lost to their own demise, all who have been institutionalized; whether in prison, psychiatric facilities, or drug rehabilitation. It is for all those ostracized by and isolated from a totality which chews them up alive in a self-cannibalizing caste system.²²

In Chardiet's formulation, society is overrun with greed and violence, necessitating certain members of that society to turn violence toward themselves. She describes the increasing greed and violence as positive feedback (which also describes the audible feedback in her work) and she describes the self-destruction

²¹ Novak, *Japanoise*, 196-197.

²² Margaret Chardiet, "Artist Statement," Pharmakon, accessed August 30, 2019, <https://pharmakon.bandcamp.com/>. See Appendix 2 for full statement.

needed to balance this increasing violence as negative feedback.²³ The performance follows her formulation. Chardiet creates positive feedback with various audio signals, disrupting or distorting their recognizability and clarity. At the end of her performance, she gradually feeds back her own vocalizations, transforming them into pulsing electro-vocal utterances. The composition then unravels as the pulsing slows and dematerializes. In this compositional movement, feedback represents societal violence, and its dematerialization of her voice represents a subject turning that violence inward.

Although Chardiet manipulates audio as she is producing it with some of the same materials used in *Japanoise* performance, the sonic elements of the performance are composed. That is, instead of creating a feedback system that exceeds her control, Chardiet composes moments of excess, breakdown, and suspension.²⁴ The work's composition reiterates the chaos of a feedback system to represent a society going through repeated cycles of chaos and order. Feedback in Chardiet's work does not control the work's composition but signifies violence against the subject within a formulation of society: feedback overtakes the subject (voice) and represents the self-cannibalization outlined in Chardiet's statement. Because of this, she is also able to include others in the system's rendered sensorium. In her statement Chardiet identifies an 'us,' writing that the work is for "all those ostracized by and isolated from a totality which chews them up alive in a self-cannibalizing caste system. Here, where martyrs, slaves, and pharmakos are not eradicated, but simply called by another name."²⁵ In her formulation, self-cannibalization is pushed onto particular members of society (pharmakos) a group that includes herself.

The legibility of feedback in Chardiet's work requires its prior iteration within *Japanoise* because the sensorium rendered by Chardiet does not imitate that of the systems she describes. While industrial sounds and consumer musical equipment were part of *Japanoise*'s sensorium, these sounds and materials mean but don't sound like the institutions Chardiet outlines in her statement: prisons, psychiatric facilities, and castes. Instead, Chardiet's iteration of feedback takes with it the legibility of feedback in *Japanoise* and reconstitutes it in a distinct

²³ Negative feedback in electronic sound would not be audible. Chardiet is using positive feedback as an audible material but representing negative feedback by using positive feedback to disrupt her voice.

²⁴ Margaret Chardiet, "Pharmakon Interview," posted December 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCPBnEa3QY0/>.

²⁵ Chardiet, "Artist Statement."

context—one in which subjects contend with a system that is no longer associated with literal machines but with new materials, sounds, and subject relations. As a result, feedback's association with agency in a system is further engrained but feedback is no longer legible as "jamming the gears." Instead, feedback becomes legible as violence toward the self, forced by a violent and precarious society.²⁶ Feedback as a musical or performative form and its legibility are reconstituted in each distinct iteration.

Individual Refashioning

The work's legibility is likewise reiterated by each individual spectator. Much like Rancière's emancipated spectator, spectators refashion the work with respect to their individual collection of references. In Rancière's words:

She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way—by drawing back, for example, from the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to make it a pure image and associate this image with a story she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented. They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them.²⁷

Though Rancière is concerned with the egalitarianism of each individual's activity, there is a way in which those refashionings constellate around elements of the work's form that have been reiterated. For example, colloquial responses to Chardiet's work often deal with violence in the hands of a powerful system or other. One response both describes this kind of violence, while also reflecting the work's composition (Chardiet's reiteration of a feedback system). Below is a

²⁶ Though Chardiet's work does not use materials associated with extremist ideology, those materials would function similarly. Whelan writes that using these materials to shock relies on their stable abhorrent meaning, thus undermining genuine claims to moral ambiguity, but their use and consumption by those who hold extremist beliefs shows the instability of the materials' abhorrence. Instead, the materials become legible as shocking (outrageous, disgusting, etc.) or validating (exciting, motivating, etc.) as they appear within different contexts.

²⁷ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 13.

comment made on Bandcamp in response to Chardiet's album *Devour*, associated with the performance under discussion.²⁸ The commentator writes:

*Rows of never ending, rusty teeth consume me over and over again. Unbearable pain, unimaginable torment. Nerves stripped raw. Forced through the bowels of hellish machinery. Excreted and then endlessly reconstituted on the other side. Why won't this end? There is nothing left to give. Please stop. Burning, blackened hands reach for me, lift my limp form up and push me back into the mouth of hell, teetering over a chasm of madness. She just looks at me and laughs. It begins again.*²⁹

This narrative loosely outlines a fantasy of torture: the body of the commentator is painfully consumed by machines, put back together and painfully consumed again. It first describes a situation of endless repetition: rows of teeth consume the commentator's body *over and over again*, the commentator is pushed *back* into the machines, and states *it begins again*. The comment also describes a situation of torturous duration: the rows are *never ending*, the commentator is *endlessly* consumed and then reconstituted, the commentator asks, "why won't this end?" Rhetorically, the narrative itself is repetitive and implies continuation. Words are repeated: "*over and over again*." Phrases are alliterative and parallel: "*Rows of never ending, rusty teeth consume me over and over again. Unbearable pain, unimaginable torment. Nerves stripped raw.*" The sentence length and structure build an acceleratory movement toward the comment's end. A short sentence is followed by the comment's longest sentence, a medium length sentence, and a short sentence again.³⁰ This acceleratory structure in combination with the content of the last sentence, "It begins again," primes the reader to start reading the text again from the beginning.

²⁸ The sonic elements of the performance appear in the album. They are compositionally the same, but the full performance is broken into distinct tracks. The album of course lacks the performative elements and, in all likelihood, would not be listened to at as high a volume as a live performance. I am working from the assumption that the commentator has also participated in a live performance.

²⁹ Chardiet, "Artist Statement."

³⁰ Medium. Medium. *Short.* / Medium. Medium. Medium? Medium. *Short.* / Long. Medium. *Short.*

Rows of never ending, rusty teeth consume me over and over again. Unbearable pain, unimaginable torment. *Nerves stripped raw.* Forced through the bowels of hellish machinery. Excreted and then endlessly reconstituted on the other side. Why won't this end? There is nothing left to give. *Please stop.* Burning, blackened hands reach for me, lift my limp form up and push me back into the mouth of hell, teetering over a chasm of madness. She just looks at me and laughs. *It begins again.*

Chardiet's composition is similarly repetitive, cyclical, and durational. She builds the sonic space gradually, one repeating sound at a time, until it is saturated to a point of extreme volume and pulsating density. Once this point of density is reached, Chardiet deconstructs the sonic space and begins anew. As the performance continues, Chardiet no longer deconstructs the sonic space completely, but transforms one construction into another by adding or removing sonic material. The commentator's narrative descriptively follows this movement. The commentator is forced through machinery and reconstituted on the other side, only to be forced through again: the dense sonic landscape built from repeated sounds (machines consuming the commentator), the deconstruction or transformation of that landscape (the commentator's reconstitution), the new landscape (the commentator being fed through the machines again). In this formulation, sonic excess corresponds to machines tearing apart the commentator's body, and the breakdown or suspension of that excess corresponds to the commentator's reconstitution. Like the narrative's rhetorical invitation to read again from the beginning, Chardiet goes through this compositional process multiple times over the course of approximately forty minutes.

The commentator's narrative also collects around and extends from the particularities of the sounds themselves; specifically, their industrial or machine-like character. Most obviously the commentator's narrative describes being fed through machines and the sonic materials in Chardiet's work sound machine-like both in their composition and character. The commentator describes the machines in the narrative as "rusty" and "hellish." The hands of the person controlling the machines are described as "burning" and "blackened." The commentator fills out the narrative with sonic particularities from the work's characteristics. The machines the commentator describes are old and rusty, and Chardiet's sonic material is 'noisy:' distorted by feedback, lacking clarity and rhythmic consistency. Similarly, the commentator's narrative of being devoured by machines can be mapped to the continual electronic disruption of Chardiet's voice. Early in the performance, Chardiet plays overlapping cut-up bits and beginnings of whispered vocal material. As the performance progresses, Chardiet electronically distorts her own emphatic vocalizations, resulting in electro-vocal exclamations that extend and waver. Toward the end of the performance, her vocalizations are cut up by the increasing volume and density of arrhythmic pulsing in the stereophonic space.

Because Chardiet's performance is deeply entangled with individual sensory and somatic experience, it is also made legible through a spectator's distinct

somatic references.³¹ These references no doubt differ for each individual but again extend from core formal material. The extreme volume of sound in the performance drives the sound's presence as vibration in the bodies of the spectators. Thus, the commentator's descriptions of "Nerves stripped raw" can be mapped to the sharp vibrational presence of high-frequencies at high volume. The narrative of machines consuming the body can also be mapped to the sonic material's vibrational presence. Many of the sounds are out of phase: they pulse back and forth in the stereophonic space. At high volume, this back-and-forth pulse is felt within the body's open spaces.³² These somatic experiences and references differ for each individual. When comparing the commentator's narrative to my own early description of Chardiet's performance, one can see the flexibility of the work's legibility with respect to these somatic references.

During the performance, I can feel this movement as vibrational movement within my body. As the sonic mass is gradually established, my body adjusts to it in a physical way, and the breakdown or suspension of it is also felt physically. My embodied response to the breakdown of stasis is often affectual, a physical discomfort as the vibrations my body expects start to change, a corporeal sort of anticipation that I feel as a type of fear or awe. When the stasis does not break down completely but suspends and morphs into a new sonic mass, I find myself falling more deeply into the next stasis

³¹ D. R. DeChaine, "Affect and Embodied Understanding in Musical Experience," *Text and Performance Quarterly* (2002); Lawrence Zbikowski, *Foundations of Musical Grammar* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017); Carrie Noland, "Gestural Meaning: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Bill Viola, and the Primacy of Movement," in *Agency and Embodiment* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009); Jeremy Gilbert, and Ewan Pearson, "Music Meaning and Pleasure from Plato to Disco," in *Discographies: Dance, Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound* (London: Routledge, 2002). Gilbert and Pearson write that, "No form of discourse is wholly physical or wholly mental, but we might say that music, which is registered throughout the body and not only in the brain, is on an important level a more physical type of discourse than others. We might therefore hypothesize that our experience of music is related to the physico-discursive experience of our bodies on some particularly profound level." Here I am drawing upon a broad notion of the physico-discursive to discuss how the sonic elements of Chardiet's performance are made sense of through somatic reference and analogy.

³² Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2010), 10. Goodman describes the ability of sound to cause physiological damage and physical pain. The closeness of the commentator's analogy to a body in pain is likely related to actual physiological discomfort in response to the threat of hearing damage. Because of this threat, many spectators wear earplugs, which further privileges the embodied vibrational experience over the experience of listening.

point. The performance proceeds in this fashion. The stasis that is established breaks down and a new one is built. Eventually, they stop fully breaking down and instead suspend and morph. Each time the suspension falls into a new mass, I am more deeply attached to the new point of stability. As this progresses I am more and more immersed in the performance through my own sensation and movement and less and less aware of internal dialogue and the passing of time.³³

The commentator and I both describe compositional suspension somatically and ascribe similar affective content to it (anticipation, awe, fear). The commentator ascribes that fear to being fed through machines again (the next point of sonic excess), and I ascribe that fear to destabilization (the breakdown or suspension of a particular stasis) and anticipate the next point of stability.

This flexibility is also apparent with respect to a spectator's distinct relational references. In the narrative, the commentator explores helplessness in the hands of a cruel and cold controlling force. The commentator is *forced* through the bowels of hellish machinery, says "Please stop," is lifted and *pushed* back into the machines, and then *she laughs* before beginning the torture again. The commentator's exploration of powerlessness requires the selection of particular elements of the work that allow for that relational identification while also filtering out others. For example, the commentator's narrative assigns multiple relational roles to Chardiet. The commentator describes being cut up by machines, represented by Chardiet's convulsive vocalizations, and identifies the torturer as feminine: "she just looks at me and laughs. It begins again." In other words, the commentator identifies with Chardiet when she represents a body being tortured and identifies also as the one being tortured by her. Of course, these identifications need not organize themselves in this way in particular. In an interview with Chardiet, the interviewer, Steph Kretowicz, writes that Chardiet's work gives expression to her

³³ Joanna Demers, *Listening Through the Noise: The Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010): 99. Demers discusses static music (techno, drone, and noise) as solidifying sounds into inert material, "promising no future growth or evolution." She writes that these works avoid linear development and use repetition over long periods of time to create stasis. In Chardiet's work the sound is built gradually into a stasis (inert material through repetition) and then broken down or transformed into a different stasis. The movement from stasis into destabilization into another stasis is the primary compositional movement of the work.

rage.³⁴ This statement describes the potentiality of identifying with Chardiet's performance of aggression instead of her performance of being aggressed.

Collective Meaning

The performance begins with a clear and impenetrable semi-circle of people surrounding Chardiet. She begins by crouching and crawling around its edge. About ten minutes into the performance, she gathers up the microphone cable and enters the crowd. The first entrance has some resistance, she pauses and people step to the side. She moves through the audience engaging people like she engaged those at the edge and then moves back to the area with the table. She eventually enters the crowd from another direction with similar resistance. She gradually increases the amount of time she spends in the audience. They move to make space around her, forming new circles separate from the semi-circle delineating the stage. In these circles, she makes eye contact while vocalizing. She leans or hangs on people, forcing them to prop her up. She moves to the floor, crawling or contorting her body and touching shoes or ankles. She moves in the crowd and a new circle forms around her and the other collapses, reorganizing spectators' physical locations. This in combination with the experience of the sound's enveloping vibrational presence in the body, makes both a personal corporeal malleability as well as a collective malleability as an audience-body.

Though the relative flexibility of each individual's understanding of the work seems to support an egalitarian distribution of sense-making, their organization produces a collective legibility that fixes the performance's unfolding in a particular direction. Novak describes that the extreme volume of noise performance is said to collapse a collective space into individuals encountering their own threshold of sensation.³⁵ Though this seems like a flattening of legibility to that of distinct individuals, it nonetheless organizes those individuals into a relational space: one in which those who are able to withstand more volume stand at the front and those who are able to withstand less volume stand around the space's edge.³⁶ As described, spectators will make individual sense of those positions within their own collections of references and expectations, but there becomes a collective

³⁴ Margaret Chardiet, "Pharmakon Interview," interview by Steph Kretowicz, *Dummy Mag*, August 20, 2013, <https://www.dummymag.com/features/pharmakon-interview/>.

³⁵ Novak, *Japanoise*, 39, 43.

³⁶ Novak, *Japanoise*, 43.

relational legibility in their interaction: the exchange between steady endurance of difficulty (standing in the front) and movability by force (standing around the edges).

The performance's unfolding is dependent on and constituted by the creation of this collective legibility. In Chardiet's performance, the spectators encounter her aggressive behavior: they are run toward, screamed at, and their physical positions in the space are disrupted. The crowd, although hesitant at Chardiet's first entrance, allows her to pass through. Although this seems inevitable, consider the hesitation. Those making up the edge of the semi-circle are at first unsure of how to respond. The first spectator that moves aside leads those near them to do the same, and each instance in which a spectator moves aside builds a collective sense in which moving aside is the expected response. The responses to her close eye contact and vocalization function similarly, but Chardiet more directly participates in building this collective legibility. At the beginning of the performance, the crowd is unsure of how to respond, some spectators look away uncomfortably and some meet her eye contact with self-assurance. Chardiet lingers in places where she gets the response she wants and moves on quickly from others. As the performance progresses, spectators expect to hold her gaze and endure her vocalizations with solidness. In both instances, Chardiet intensifies her interactions once this collective legibility is established, as she can reasonably expect spectators to respond in a particular way. After the performance has gone on for some time, she enters the crowd and circles open for her, she leaves and the circles close again, easily displacing and replacing individuals' locations in the space. She leans on spectators and allows them to prop her up, she crawls on the floor in the middle of the crowd touching shoes and ankles.

The way this performance unfolds is certainly not inevitable. It is contingent upon the individual and collective references of those participating as well as their potential organization. Though Chardiet can control the space's collective legibility to some extent, as she does by lingering on the responses that she desires, her influence is not total. Moving aside and meeting her gaze are not the only possible responses to Chardiet's actions. For example, one could respond with more deference, or one could respond with an escalation of aggression. If the first few spectators respond to her with increased aggression, the crowd might maintain its stiff semi-circle in which case the site of interaction would stay between Chardiet and the barrier of spectators. The collective meaning of the work then would not be fixed toward the malleability of a collective but toward an antagonistic confrontation. On the other hand, if the first few spectators responded with more

deference the collective meaning of the work might be fixed toward the domination of a collective by a single subject.³⁷

Conclusion: Form's Relationality

Analyzing the way Chardiet's work comes to have a particular collective meaning is necessary because the work's form is at no point devoid of references. Although the performance described could unfold in an aggressive manner if one or multiple spectators responded to Chardiet with increased aggression, more likely Chardiet and spectators would avoid the person or persons responding aggressively. Perhaps people would roll their eyes, leave extra space around them, tell them to knock it off, or even escort them out of the space. This is because of a number of factors seemingly external to the work: the expectations embedded in the space in which the performance is taking place, the knowledge of Chardiet's work by those who have seen it before, the social expectations and knowledge passed from peer to peer outside of this instance of performance, etc. All of these sets of relations constitute the way Chardiet's performance unfolds. In other words, the work's form is necessarily entangled with things seemingly outside of it: spectators' other aesthetic and worldly experiences, the spaces the work takes place, the context in which the form was made possible, and the sedimentation of meanings and expectations.

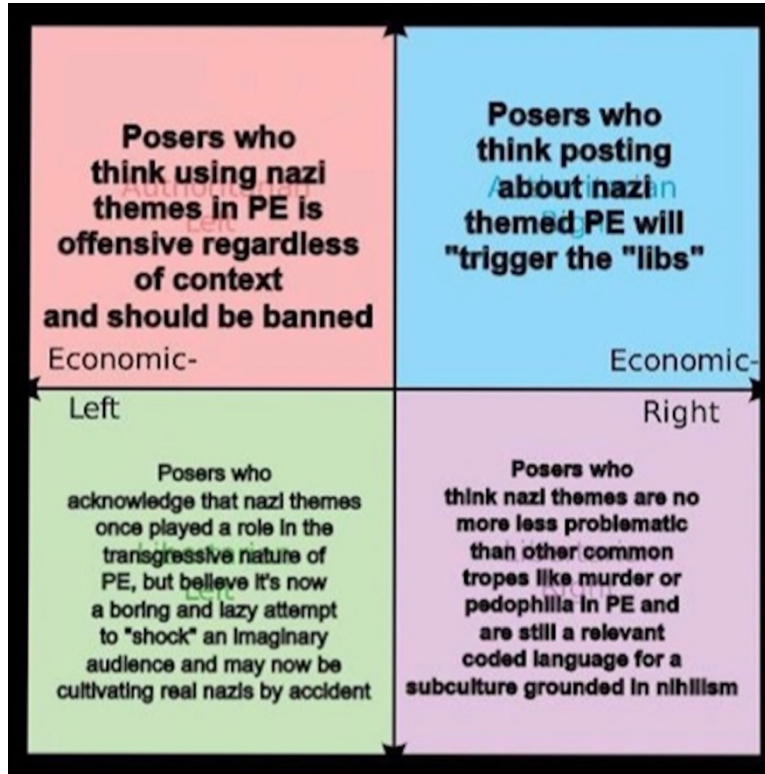
This work's political possibility is not a spectator's interpretation or misinterpretation of its form nor is it the way Chardiet renders an ideology available. In Chardiet's performance, both the artist and the spectators are limited by each other. The spectators are limited by engrained structures of legibility attached to the work's form, and the artist is limited by the spectators' collections of references and expectations. Spectators are additionally limited by each other. The responses

³⁷ Ross Hagen, "No Fun: Noise Music, Avant-Garde Aggression and Sonic Punishment," in *Hardcore, Punk, and Other Junk: Aggressive Sounds in Contemporary Music*, ed. Eric James Abbey and Colin Helb (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014). One can look to other noise performances to see the possibility of these alternative outcomes. Hagen describes some noise performances as the psychological domination of an audience by the artist through sound and sensation. Though he does not give a description of the collective legibility of the space, it is likely that the barrier between the artist and the spectators stays intact in performances with this particular reading. Additionally, he describes some performances in which violence is encouraged by the performers and rejected by the audience, and some performances in which various degrees of aggressive physical interaction are accommodated.

of some bend the responses of others. Moreover, the space itself and other pre-existing structures of legibility limit both the artist and the spectators: they fix the work's unfolding in a particular direction. To approach this from another direction, consider a hypothetical first performance. There are likely already structures of legibility regarding the appropriate ways to engage with the work. If there are not, there might be precedents of response in similar works. If not, the space itself carries a certain set of expectations. Perhaps that space has a history of presenting works that are danced to, perhaps it is known for its aggressive or violent interactions. To go even further, the work itself comes to be within the artist's own collection of references, her worldly and aesthetic experiences, and continues to be realized through this nexus of connections. It is made sense of within the spectators' collections of references and comes to be within the dynamic exchanges of those references in a time and space.

This dynamic exchange is where a work's political possibility lies. This exchange either alters, creates, or further embeds various collectivities and disunities. The processes unfolding in Chardiet's work draw upon affective identifications that are often at play in interpersonal and group exchanges outside of her work: the way a group is fixed toward collectivity or disunity, malleability, antagonistic confrontation, or immovable barrier. If considering political possibility as rendering and interpreting, one might respond to this work by *reflecting upon its relational analogy*. That is, viewing the work as representing collective malleability in order to pose a critique of capitalism (as one potential reading of Chardiet's work) and using that representation to reconsider the world outside of it. Considering political possibility in the dynamic exchange of structures of legibility instead requires asking *what is enabled and disenabled by this particular collective legibility emerging within form?* In other words, what sets of relations and exchanges are necessary for the emergence of this crowd's malleability, and what might the means be for an alternative collective legibility to emerge. When does the dynamic exchange of references, habituated meanings and expectations erode or rupture engrained structures of legibility and reorganize groups of shared or unshared sense, and when does it embed them further? The analysis undertaken forces these questions: paths of inquiry that would have gone unconsidered if seeking political possibility in this performance's interpretation.

Appendix 1: Power Electronics Meme



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Appendix 2: Artist Statement

“Devour” uses self-cannibalization as allegory for the self-destructive nature of humans; on cellular, individual, societal and species-wide scales. In our cells, our minds, our politics and our species, humans are self-destructing. But this behavior does not happen in a vacuum. It is an instinctive inward response to a world of increasing outward violence, greed, and oppression. Turning these wounds toward ourselves can be seen as an attempt at “balancing feedback”, within a never-ending positive feedback loop of cause and effect. With this view, the blame is placed not within the individual, but with the world they must contend with, and a society that is designed to fail them - to keep them gnashing and wailing, inflicted with an all-devouring hunger that inevitably turns in on the self. Those that pit

them against each other grin from the sidelines, bellies full. Those who see beyond the veil need to obscure the horrid sight by any means necessary, but respite is always brief- nothing can dampen the glare from behind the veil. This album is dedicated to all who were lost to their own demise, all who have been institutionalized; whether in prison, psychiatric facilities, or drug rehabilitation. It is for all those ostracized by and isolated from a totality which chews them up alive in a self-cannibalizing caste system. Here, where martyrs, slaves, and pharmakos are not eradicated, but simply called by another name. "ABOUT THE SHALLOWNESS OF SANITY"... To be well adjusted in this system is to be oblivious and unfeeling. This is for the rest of us, who understand that chaos, madness, pain and even self-destruction are natural and inevitable responses to an unjust and disgusting world of our own making.

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