

The Pariahs of Sound: On the Post-Duchampian Aesthetics of Electro-acoustic Improv

William L. Ashline

The celebrated tabletop guitarist Keith Rowe has provocatively aligned the new electro-acoustic improvised music with the aesthetics of Duchamp rather than its musical forebears in electro-acoustic music or improvised music in general. However, on examination, this association does not hold. Rowe's reading of Duchamp is rather partial and overlooks the latter's radical intervention into the field of painting. Rowe's version of Duchamp is of an artist who widened the parameters of what might be used to produce an artistic object. Rowe, therefore, attends much more closely to Duchamp's recuperation of the *objet trouvé* rather than the critique of art that Duchamp supplied. Instead, the innovation of electro-acoustic music lies in its privileging of "glitch" aesthetics, the "pariahs of sound," sonic attributes that had been historically purged from musical language and that in a different manner can be seen to exemplify Duchamp's concept of the *infra-thin* – not one of "nomination" but rather aural toleration and acceptability. In the end, in looking at the work of Duchamp scholar Thierry de Duve and recent examples in electro-acoustic improv, we can see that Rowe's ambitious statement is inadequate and a "post-Artaudian" description is more appropriate.

KEYWORDS: Marcel Duchamp, Keith Rowe, electro-acoustic improvisation, musical aesthetics, Antonin Artaud, aesthetic theory

Introduction

In a recent reported conversation, Keith Rowe, renowned tabletop guitarist with the improvisational group AMM and, more recently, in a number of one-off collaborations as well as the ensemble MIMEO, stated: "For the first time since the sixties, improvisers aren't working in a post-Coltrane aesthetic, but rather a post-Duchamp one" (Bivins 2001). It was a suggestive remark, for, in these post-*avant-garde*, post-postmodern times, "cracked, everyday electronics," CDs, records, turntables, minidisk players and other assorted gadgets have become the tools of a new and more radical aesthetic, one that recognizes and departs from electro-acoustics and yet also takes its leave from the free jazz that reigned in the sixties before becoming the well-trod trope inhabiting the "cutting-edge" venue in the present milieu. Nevertheless, in the midst of the new *ad hoc* inventions coupled with the unorthodox and unaccepted use of conventional acoustic instruments, it is the laptop that is the "ready-made" *par excellence*. In the theatre of the performance, the waste matter of technology is on display, granular tones, glitches, disconnections, brief interventions of white noise – and even the bachelorette has stripped her sampler bare, leaving only the sine waves once used only for tuning. In the mayhem of the concert, the laptop coordinates the other ready-mades. It interpolates the acoustic instruments, processing the results, twisting them out of

control or recognition – or leaving them alone. The emerging traffic of the improv borders on chaos. The laptop serves as its conductor, policing and synchronizing – when it participates, that is. This is where one finds MIMEO or Christof Kurzmann, or Marcus Schmickler, or Christian Fennesz, or perhaps even Lawrence Casserley, with his signal-processing instruments.¹

Keith Rowe's interest in Duchamp should hardly be surprising. His other artistic vocation is pop art, with recent CD booklets he designed covering a hot dog, a disembodied thumb, and even Bugs Bunny. But, as Duchamp once wrote to Hans Richter:

This Neo-Dada, which they call New Realism, Pop Art, Assemblage, etc., is an easy way out, and lives on what Dada did. When I discovered ready-mades I thought to discourage aesthetics. In Neo-Dada they have taken my ready-mades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty. (quoted in Lucie-Smith 1984: 11)

In fact, in Rowe's published comments on the post-Duchampian sensibility of electro-acoustic improvisation, his remarks seem to ignore the radical implications of Duchamp's tactical intervention into the art world. Duchamp, for Rowe, was the artist who brought the *objet trouvé* into the arena of art. The effect was then “additive” rather than critical. The field of art is left alone or used to criticize the world outside. Rowe notes that the performance, involving the use of guitar and radio as *objet trouvé*, is “entirely bound up in abstraction, with found objects, and all of that is powered by and influenced by and inspired by Marcel Duchamp” (Rowe 2003a). In another interview, Rowe states:

as an art student the found object was something that I thought extremely appealing. Using the world around you directly, rather than trying to imitate it or reproduce it, made sense. For me it poses the question of exactly where the prepared guitar starts. (Rowe 2003b)

Consequently, Rowe's investment in the *objet trouvé*, and moreover in Duchamp, is purely an aesthetic one. The radio is his primary “ready-made” with other ready-mades – toys and various objects used to “play” the tabletop guitar – serving to enhance the variety of sounds. Clearly, this sort of rhetoric is far from the radical innovations of Dada and Duchamp. Rowe's project preserves the musical art world as such, all the while using the techniques of the *objet trouvé* to extend the musical “object” and perhaps interrogate, in a somewhat Cagean fashion, the world of sound in general and the way sound infiltrates daily life.² Accordingly, Rowe is very much within a tradition of the *avant garde* purged of Duchamp's most radical insights all the while opposing an improvisational approach very much rooted in modernism – and all of this takes place as Rowe manages to package his music in a very divergent set of images that manage to replicate the gestures and monochromatic palette of pop art.

Needless to say, Rowe's reading of Duchamp is not the most compelling nor is his appropriation of the ready-made as *objet trouvé* the most sophisticated interpretation one might desire. Thierry de Duve, perhaps the foremost scholar on Duchamp's work, has written two books on the artist and edited a third. Carefully scrutinizing a number of Duchamp's remarks, de Duve locates his ready-mades within the tradition of painting all the while describing their production as emanating from Duchamp's “abandonment” of painting. This abandonment was co-extensive with other forms of abandonment, including Manet's leaving behind

of chiaroscuro, Cezanne's departure from perspective, and Malevich's rejection of figuration, according to de Duve (1991: 151). However, in this account, the movement toward the ready-made as a kind of "abnormal painting" is more than simply another abandonment (de Duve 1996: 162). This line of flight is very much a reaction to industrialism, mirroring it, drawing attention to the fact that paint itself, after the nineteenth century, was always already ready made. As Duchamp stated:

Let's say you use a tube of paint: you didn't make it. You bought it and used it as a readymade. Even if you mix two vermilions together, it's still a mixing of two readymades. So man can never expect to start from scratch; he must start from ready-made things like even his own mother and father. . . . Since the tubes of paint used by the artists are manufactured and ready-made products we must conclude that all paintings in the world are "readymades aided" and also works of assemblage. (de Duve 1996: 162–163)

Duchamp's insight, then, was to draw attention to how ready-made paints had changed painting by foregrounding the tube of paint as an industrial product, but he could only do so by way of analogy – the creation of the ready-made as an "unaided" painting (de Duve 1996: 164). Industrialism marked the foreclosure of the painter mixing his own paints. In noting the etymology of art as "making", Duchamp drew attention to the fact that when an artist paints, he "chooses". But this choosing had now become one of tubes of paint, no longer pigments to be mixed. As de Duve (1996: 166) notes, "thus, the readymade is art about painting even before it is art about art". However, such an intervention marks an absolute change in painting thereafter.

From Duchamp on, to be born a painter simultaneously means to declare the death of painting. . . . How can the painter be born into his name of *painter*? First of all, he must destroy painting, break the pact and expulse the name, provoke disagreement. (de Duve 1991: 94–95)

De Duve concludes, "to paint after Duchamp means to paint in the hostile conditions set up by industrialization. Duchamp cannot be made responsible for those conditions; he simply showed them, and herein lies his genius" (de Duve 1996: 167). Nevertheless, while "painting" continues only in "name" after Duchamp's devastating intervention, the sense of closure, of impossibility, remains. The tube of paint remains sealed. De Duve continues,

The impossibility of painting is merely a feeling, the subjective signal accompanying the awareness of its objective uselessness in a society where the production of images has been mechanized and from which painting has withdrawn, like a relic from an obsolete artisanal past. (de Duve 1996: 171)

Clearly, then, the ready-made is much more (and much less) than Rowe's *objet trouvé* of the transistor radio, but how might the ready-made account for music in general and electro-acoustic improv in particular? Duchamp's explanations draw attention to the industrialization of materials and serve to widen the concept far beyond the manufactured products he would put in the museum. Certainly, in electro-acoustic improv, the laptop is perhaps the central ready-made, offering ready-made synthesizers, ready-made portable music studios, the ready-made mastering laboratory, etc. Technological facility is conjoined with motility. In the case of Otomo Yoshihide's Portable Orchestra, the ready-mades encompass a radio, mobile phone, shaver, watch, camera, Gameboy, hair remover, an electric drill and a food mixer – industrial objects appropriated away from their household

utility in order to prioritize their sonic attributes, although perhaps less than successfully in musical terms (Various Artists 2002).³ In this sense, perhaps, Otomo is closer to the spirit of Duchamp than Rowe, who would only include the radio and a few electrical gadgets as part of his larger musical entourage circumscribed around the tabletop guitar.⁴ With Otomo's project, household objects are completely re-appropriated as musical instruments. Similarly, the early electro-acoustic work of Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry is probably closer to Duchamp than Rowe simply on the basis of their use of tape of other sounds, including other music – ready-made music. Rowe's radio, on the other hand, is employed as much for its static frequencies, additive glitches, as its pilfered airwave programs, and they are all governed by chance.

None of these reflections on the ready-made in music, of course, gets us any closer to the heart of Duchamp's implicit critique of industrialism and of art in general. Unfortunately, de Duve is not much help on this relationship to music either. In a nod to Cage, de Duve states that although musicians might "prefer to call their work 'sound' rather than 'music', no musician would claim that what he or she is doing is 'art' and nothing but 'art'. The readymades, by contrast, are 'art' and nothing but 'art'" (de Duve 1996: 153). This is a strange comment for de Duve to make since most musicians claim that they are making art. In a recent interview, Toshimaru Nakamura, the master of the no-input mixing board, said as much.⁵ While Otomo's pastiche of ready-made household objects in his Portable Orchestra serves to widen the field of possibility in terms of what can count as a "musical" instrument, his aim is still the production of a "musical" object – his symbolic investment is still in art, but one of a more radical inclusiveness. Rowe is probably even more invested in the word, as his pastiche of the concerto performed by an all-electronic orchestra in concert with pianist John Tilbury, called *The Hands of Caravaggio* in honor of and reference to *The Taking of Christ*, recently discovered in Dublin in 1990, would attest.⁶ For Rowe, art works validate the musical object; just as musical performances align themselves with paintings, whether pop art or more traditional ones. For Rowe, the word "Duchamp" becomes the "*infra-thin* space of pure nomination" (de Duve 1991: 94), in the manner in which "painting" served this function for Duchamp. Similarly, "Caravaggio" and the reference to the painting that had been lost but suddenly found nearly four hundred years after its production became yet further terms of validation. Rowe embraces the "image" of Duchampian difference rather than difference itself. Duchamp's insight was in noting the currency of art as symbolic and linguistic, but Rowe returns this currency to the transcendent musical object,⁷ even if it might be an object composed through trash electronics and consisting of the "pariahs of sound", the sonic waste matter of technology and unconventional musicianship. The name "Duchamp" is for Rowe, in his would-be post-Duchampian aesthetic, just another symbolic currency that will have to be overcome.

What is left for an electro-acoustic improv that can never truly be post-Duchampian in a manner aligned with Duchamp's "pictorial nominalism" but rather only another re-appropriation of his tactical maneuvering? For de Duve, "the *infra-thin* space of pure nomination" marks the location where the ready-made should be called a painting and yet cannot be called a painting. This is a point that cannot be decided. Thus, there is a "profound affinity between the *infra-thin* and aesthetic judgment" in Duchamp (de Duve 1991: 159). Might the same problem of undecidable difference apply to music, especially electro-acoustic

improvisation? Does an assemblage comprised of the “pariahs of sound” lead the audience to the same dilemma of “is it or is it not music?” Or has this “music”, a particular example of the *infra-thin* perhaps, arrived far too belatedly to partake of the question? Was it already “settled” with Cage, Stockhausen, Xenakis, *musique concrète* and the early electro-acoustic innovators who brought their own ready-mades into the studio and performance space? Is electro-acoustic improv only a continuation of the dilemma rather than its resolution? De Duve (1991: 162) writes: “We call ourselves postmodernists, that is the new fashion, but we do not know what we are really saying. This post – is it a link or a break with our immediate past?” In Rowe’s case, it can only be a link, nothing more than one of repetition. The tools may appear to be the same, but the symbolic register is still far too aligned with the institutions of art.

The notion that electro-acoustic improv is post-Duchampian is perhaps far too ambitious. Another thesis is in order, one with fewer of these problems of symbolic investment. Continuing the theme of borrowing from the other arts, I would propose that the music is “post-Cruelty,” or rather “post-Artaudian”, once again a “post” in the sense of a “link” rather than a “break”, and thus still very much aligned with a particular form of art world, and not one of “theatricality” even though the narrative and episodic quality of electro-acoustic improv recalls the theatre in a sense. In de Duve’s account, Artaud and Brecht are still clearly aligned with the theatre; whereas, it is in performance art where one finds a cleavage similar to Duchamp’s intervention (de Duve 1996: 153). In his first manifesto on the theatre of cruelty, Artaud writes:

Also, the need to act directly and profoundly upon the sensibility through the organs invites research, from the point of view of sound, into qualities and vibrations of absolutely new sounds, qualities which present-day musical instruments do not possess and which require the revival of ancient and forgotten instruments or the invention of new ones. Research is also required, apart from music, into instruments and appliances which, based upon special combinations or new alloys of metal, can attain a new range and compass, producing sounds or noises that are unbearably piercing. (Artaud 1958: 95)

Here, Artaud might well be calling for Sachiko M’s sine wave performances or perhaps the duo recordings on the Erstwhile label of Marcus Schmickler and Thomas Lehn,⁸ whose freneticism would seem to cover some of the terrain of research desired in the passage. In a similar manner to Artaud’s call, the soprano saxophonist Bhab Rainey, part of the duo of Nmperign with trumpeter Greg Kelley, has described his innovative techniques on acoustic instruments not as “new” but in fact quite old – perhaps even antediluvian. Artaud’s aesthetic is of the inferno; it is transgressive. He writes: “If there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames.” (Artaud 1958: 13). He ridicules those who would have too much respect for the past, who would adore the “masterpieces” of artistic tradition rather than invent something more immediate (Artaud 1958: 74).⁹ As with de Duve’s reading of Duchamp, Artaud would also call for the “self-analytic moment” where the “creative breakthrough, the ‘moment’ of significant newness in which it locates the truth-function of the artwork” would be privileged (de Duve 1991: 60). In calling for a theatre that “wakes us up: nerves and heart”, Artaud could just as easily have been writing about a music or a sound, one that communicates precisely in the fact that it does not communicate, an *infra-thin* of aural comprehension (Artaud 1958: 84). What

does Artaud mean by “cruelty”? He states the word must be taken in its broad, etymological sense in order to “get the iron collar” off the neck of language. It has nothing to do with tortured flesh but rather “signifies rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination” (Artaud 1958: 101). Cruelty refers to “an appetite for life, a cosmic rigor and implacable necessity, in the gnostic sense of a living whirlwind that devours the darkness, in the sense of that pain apart from whose ineluctable necessity life could not continue” (Artaud 1958: 102), and thus the reference to a sound that would for Artaud be unbearable or at least unacceptable. Anyone who has endured high-frequency sine waves, either recorded or live, might have some idea of what this sonic cruelty might be. However, any “glitch”, any “noise” is itself a cruelty in Artaud’s sonic sense – an unpalatable, refused sound, and sometimes, in fact, quite painful – a sonic transformation of sense, in short, a “pariah”.

In electro-acoustic improv, however, the pre-eminent manifestation of Artaud’s notion of cruelty is most apparent in live electronic manipulation, where the felicitous motility of the laptop computer and the easy availability of programs, like Max/MSP have allowed musicians to process the sounds of collaborators in real time, sometimes distorting them beyond recognition.¹⁰ The laptop as processor of sound has also rendered the ontological specificity of each sonic production undecidable. When one listens to a performance involving live or improvised processing, whose musicianship should be credited more? The acoustic or electronic instrument of origin or the one that processes the sounds? Artists like Curtis Bahn, who uses his acoustic bass to trigger Max/MSP to process his own sounds, complicate this problem.¹¹ The space between the processing instrument and the original instruments that produce the raw material for processing constitute another level of the *infra-thin* with regard to electro-acoustic improv, and it is here where both Artaud and Duchamp can be seen to merge, not on a symbolic register but a tangible, practical one. Some recent cases are worth examining.

British soprano saxophonist, Evan Parker, recorded a live compact disc with Noel Akchoté on amplified guitar, Lawrence Casserley on signal processing instruments and Joel Ryan on computer (Parker *et al.* 1998). This was one of the first instances of the new electro-acoustic improv to use this marriage of electronic processing and acoustic instruments. The first of the six tracks involves an improvisation between Parker and Ryan. Parker creates a flowing, looping soprano line, which is initially repeated and looped by Ryan. In the initial stages of the piece, the listener has some difficulty in distinguishing which part of the recording is Parker’s live production and which is Ryan’s intervention. It gradually becomes more clear as the piece progresses and Parker’s “voice” loses its specificity – ground up, reverberated, distorted, stretched and pulled so that there is no question that Ryan is now in control of the improvisation. Other combinations fill out the rest of the six tracks. The second involves Casserley’s processing of Akchoté’s guitar, whereas the fourth, with Casserley, Akchoté, and Ryan, eventually turns into a sheet of white noise. Finally, all four musicians come together on the final track. Parker states in the accompanying notes that the manipulations are quite varied, including delays and repetition and even manipulation of the acoustic space, which is apparent on a number of tracks in the form of heavy reverberation.

Erstwhile Records’ seventh release features Polwechsel tenor and soprano saxophonist John Butcher, whose playing receives live electronic manipulation

and modular feedback from violinist Phil Durrant, who eschews his normal acoustic instrument for this recording (Butcher and Durrant 2000). The notes to this recording explicitly state that no sampling is employed, and yet the same indeterminacy that marks the Evan Parker recording is even more explicit on this one, and the results are arguably less predictable. In the publicity for the recording, the musicians note that the electronic manipulation adds new dimensions beyond normal acoustic playing, stating: "Some of the most violent, dense music might arise when the saxophone is actually playing quite simply and cleanly" (Abbey 2003). On the other hand, the richly varied emotional languages of multi-phonics can be lost in manipulation. The result is highly risky since neither musician fully controls the output. The seventh track on the recording, "Prusik Loop", is where Butcher's source material becomes virtually unrecognizable as the electronics of Durrant move completely into the center in a piece that foreshadows the later, more experimental ambient releases of the label.

Laptop improviser Kaffe Matthews is one of most recent entries in the field of live manipulation.¹² Her trio with Andrea Neumann on inside piano and Sachiko M on sine wave sampler and contact microphones of three untitled tracks, recorded live in Shinjuku, involved real-time live sampling and processing of the sounds of all three musicians. The first track is twenty spare minutes of Neumann and Sachiko M followed by sixteen minutes of Matthews solo, manipulating the cracks and pops of Sachiko M's contact microphones and sine waves and Neumann's plucks and scrapes of the piano strings. Matthews also adds her own interpretations with loops of glitches and pointillist microsounds intervening in the manipulation of the samples. Neumann returns to improvise with Matthews in a duo in tracks 3 and 4, with Matthews continuing to work with the source material from the first two tracks and also restating and reiterating some of the at times quite abrasive remarks of Neumann. But once again, as would be the case to some extent with witnessing the live event, the question of origins remains. Who is producing which sound? At times, making the determination is easy. Matthews throbbing bass undergirds Neumann's waves of tone. However, for much of the time, the issue is undecidable. At moments, the two musicians tentatively explore territory, and at others, the fourth track in particular, some dense, loud, pulsating crescendos are achieved. Sachiko M returns for the final two tracks, joining the other two musicians in a full trio. The cracks and snaps of the contact mikes are sampled immediately into Matthews' computer and then reiterated as a loop. Sine waves wash over the top of this mid-range activity. Then Neumann joins in with varied scrapes of the bow against the piano strings and later with rapid, gorgeous, harp-like tones and more scrapes that are supported by high-frequency electronic beeps and chirps. *In Case of Fire Take the Stairs* is a stunning recording and an exemplary instance of the *infra-thin* in the sense of indeterminate musicianship or sonic multiplicity. The fact that Matthews supposedly enters every performance with a *tabula rasa*, only sampling and manipulating the sounds of others, reinforces this interpretation.

Manipulation of the sounds of collaborating performers is, of course, not limited to digital electronics, most often facilitated by the ever-motile laptop with Max/MSP (or LiSa, in the case of Matthews) loaded in. Lo-fi and analogue tools have had a longer history in regard to live manipulation. More recently, on the recording *Forlorn Green*, Jason Lescalleet has used analogue reel-to-reel tape to record Greg Kelley's trumpet and transform the results (Kelley and Lescalleet 2001).¹³ In an email, Kelley explained the process:

A variety of means were used for *Forlorn Green*, the basis of which were live recordings where Jason was “sampling” what I was doing onto reel-to-reels and microcassettes and playing them back at different speeds with various amounts of tape decay, feedback, etc. creating a variety of levels and depths for a funhouse mirror version of me. . . All of this was done in real-time. Jason then edited these pieces to some extent or another and then spiced them up when needed with recordings of me, which we made together and separately. (Kelley 2003)

The result is a highly varied version of the Butcher/Durrant recording with a much greater use of analogue tools. On the other hand, the aforementioned *Hands of Caravaggio*, in addition to having the live manipulations of Kaffe Matthews as a member of MIMEO, Cor Fuhler participated as a kind of nemesis to Tilbury’s Feldman-like musings by playing inside the piano using an E-bow and other objects. To this intervention, Tilbury calls himself as soloist in this neo-concerto an “anti-hero” or “victim”. In his contribution to the liner notes, he writes:

Whole areas of the instrument, including traditional keyboard techniques, are rendered inaccessible to the “soloist” by a creative hijacking of the inside of the instrument by a member of the “orchestra” [Fuhler] who, for example, randomly mutes pitches which the soloist has selected. (Tilbury 2001)

Initially, in the midst of all the electronic accoutrements that will join him in the performance, Tilbury worries about his vulnerability and how rapidly the massive electronic orchestra, which includes, among the laptops and other recognizable tools, Rowe’s beloved “amplified metal garbage” “played” by Markus Wettstein, can elide his contribution. For Fuhler, the event marks a moment rich for interpretation.

as always, a handicap has to be used to its full capacity: one of the nicest moments for me was when somebody played a loud clear pitched note and the piano string corresponding in pitch started resonating ferociously: I then placed a metal object on that string. So now that string was played by three people: the Orchestra member, me and John (by holding the sustain-pedal) without any one of us actually touching the piano! Very surreal and magical. Another favorite moment is when the Orchestra becomes quiet and the piano being played with spacey chords (on the keys and inside with a wine bottle as giant bottleneck). (Fuhler 2001)

While Rowe’s appropriation of Duchamp and his vast pronouncements about electro-acoustic improv were all too “ready-made”, considering his neo-Dadaist and pop art investments, we can be thankful that the dark, sonic underbelly of “progress” has finally received its aural due in the sense that Duchamp’s *Fountain* marked a symbolic investment in an object that makes an emblem of the most repugnant human production. And, in gratitude, we can acknowledge Artaud and perhaps Georges Bataille, theorists of the “accursed” and of neural agitation. None the less, it is clear that, unlike de Duve’s Duchamp, Rowe is still far too invested in the object rather than the sign. For him the “infra-thin” is only in the question of what can count as musical instrument in these electronic times. And, in the end, unlike Duchamp’s “infra-thin” regarding the question of whether the ready-made is or is not art, Rowe’s answer must always be affirmative rather than undecidable. Even the assemblage of the “pariahs of sound” in electro-acoustic improv must finally be considered “music” as “art”, which for Rowe is a given. It is only in Rowe’s imaginary where electro-acoustic improv can be thought of as post-Duchampian because that is where one can locate Rowe’s desire. To be post-Duchampian would be, in this instance, to desire a legitimating discourse for art, which would be as far as one could go if one fails to recognize that the ready-made

attempted to flush out the prevailing linguistic currency of the object. This discourse would also serve as a tool to push the musical *avant garde* beyond free jazz, but it would work only by calling on Duchamp belatedly to draw attention to the fact that music is perennially out of date in avant-gardist terms. But in the end, this reading of Duchamp's mode of signification and investment is out of date and old-fashioned. To be truly post-Duchampian, we would have to produce a sound that no one could stand, but that would be sophisticated enough to deserve an audience. Unfortunately, were we capable of such an invention, there would be no occasion for a paper such as this because no audience would stick around long enough to make it worthy of writing. Merzbow perhaps has come closest, but his landscapes of noise are far too lush and gorgeous to be likely to qualify. To his credit, Rowe has acknowledged this necessary invention in his remarks on Cardew, but he has been apparently unwilling to follow through on their implications in his own work. In the end, we are left with an aesthetic transformation with all the same symbolic investments left intact, a difficulty that reflects all too well the familiar problematic of pop art in its fantasy of being post-Duchampian. If there is a modicum of debt to Duchamp in the new electro-acoustic improv, it lies in the notion of the "infra-thin", disclosed initially by the ready-made in art, with its exemplary manifestation in improvised music located in live laptop and other electronic processing rather than in a "musical nominalism" in greater proximity to Duchamp's radical intervention. Like the art world, like the economic order of capital process, the musical *avant garde* has become all too pliable and predictable in its embrace of musical *difference* such that the signifier "Duchamp" has by now lost all radical consequence.

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Notes

1. Facilitated perhaps by the use of Max/MSP, which, as Casserley has written elsewhere, is a "medium for building instruments" (Casserley 2002). He also notes: "Part of the point is that you can build the instrument that the music requires, rather than making the music to fit an existing instrument. Inevitably this produces a multiplicity of types of instrument to suit different musics." So much for the ready made, then, with regard to the concept of an electronic "instrument", i.e. the patch or adapted program. The musician still must "build".

2. Rowe is much more interesting and persuasive in his discussions of how the radio adds to his performance. In one discussion, he mentions that the radio serves to introduce the "vulgar" into the performance (Rowe 2003b). In another, he discusses "harshness". "The use of the word 'harsh' is political; it's about harshness, visible and invisible. Most harshness is invisible; the harshness which went into making our clothes, the poor fucker in Bangladesh who had to make it. Harshness is everywhere; we're supported by harshness. Political harshness, economic harshness, we're all subject to that" (Rowe, quoted in Warburton 2001).

Similarly, in his comments about former collaborator Cornelius Cardew, Rowe states: "If you try to make artifacts which are rejected in the sense that Duchamp wanted them to be, Cardew really achieved that with those later compositions. They are totally rejected, by everyone. Any music lover would reject them. I don't think that's why he did them, but I do think they have that quality. For me speaking personally, that wasn't his forte. I don't like them" (Rowe, quoted in Warburton 2001). It is perhaps on this level where Rowe is conceptually closest to Duchamp – a music that the listener must refuse – most apparent perhaps in the work of Cardew but also perhaps in Rowe's most cacophonous recordings, like his release "Harsh" on Grob.

3. The duo Voice Crack has also employed similar household electronics in their music.
4. At one time, early on in AMM's career, Rowe used "everything from fire alarms, screwdrivers, electric drills, all kinds of guiro objects, scraping objects, steel rods" (Warburton 2001).
5. "Well, to produce a record is an art work, so it's very important" (in Meyer 2003).
6. In an interview that served as part of the program for the Angelica festival for which the Music in Movement Electronic Orchestra performed the *Hands of Caravaggio*, Keith Rowe reiterated his comments about the readymade as *objet trouvé*: "MIMEO marks a departure and a distinction from the 'end point aesthetics' of 'power drummer' based groups, and a move towards the orchestra as a collection of 'objets trouvés,' reflecting recent developments both in technology, synthesizers, computers and the contemporary aesthetics of ambient, plunderphonics and improvisation." In addition, noting, like Duchamp, the significance of "choosing", he states, "MIMEO's music is worked around choice and juxtaposition of materials, a kind of 'post techno Duchampianism'" (Rowe 2001).
7. I am indebted to Paul Trembath for this discussion.
8. See, for example, Lehn and Schmickler (2000), and also their compact disc with Rowe (2003c).
9. Or as de Duve would say, "one cannot go back in time – this would be the first law of the avant-garde . . ." (de Duve 1991: 86).
10. Early electronic performers like Robert Ashley, Pauline Oliveros, Jerry Hunt, Gordon Mumma, and others used signal processing instruments that were small enough to get out of the studio and preceded the laptop. Herb Levy has helped me understand some of the details.
11. I am indebted to Michael Bullock for this information.

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12. Matthews has been known to manipulate the sounds of the room in which she plays, going as far as to plant microphones covertly under the bar and sample the sounds that come thereafter. I am indebted to Mathieu Bélanger for this story.
 13. Lescalleet also employed a computer on this recording, however.