

SETH PRICE

*Décor Holes*

Dispersion

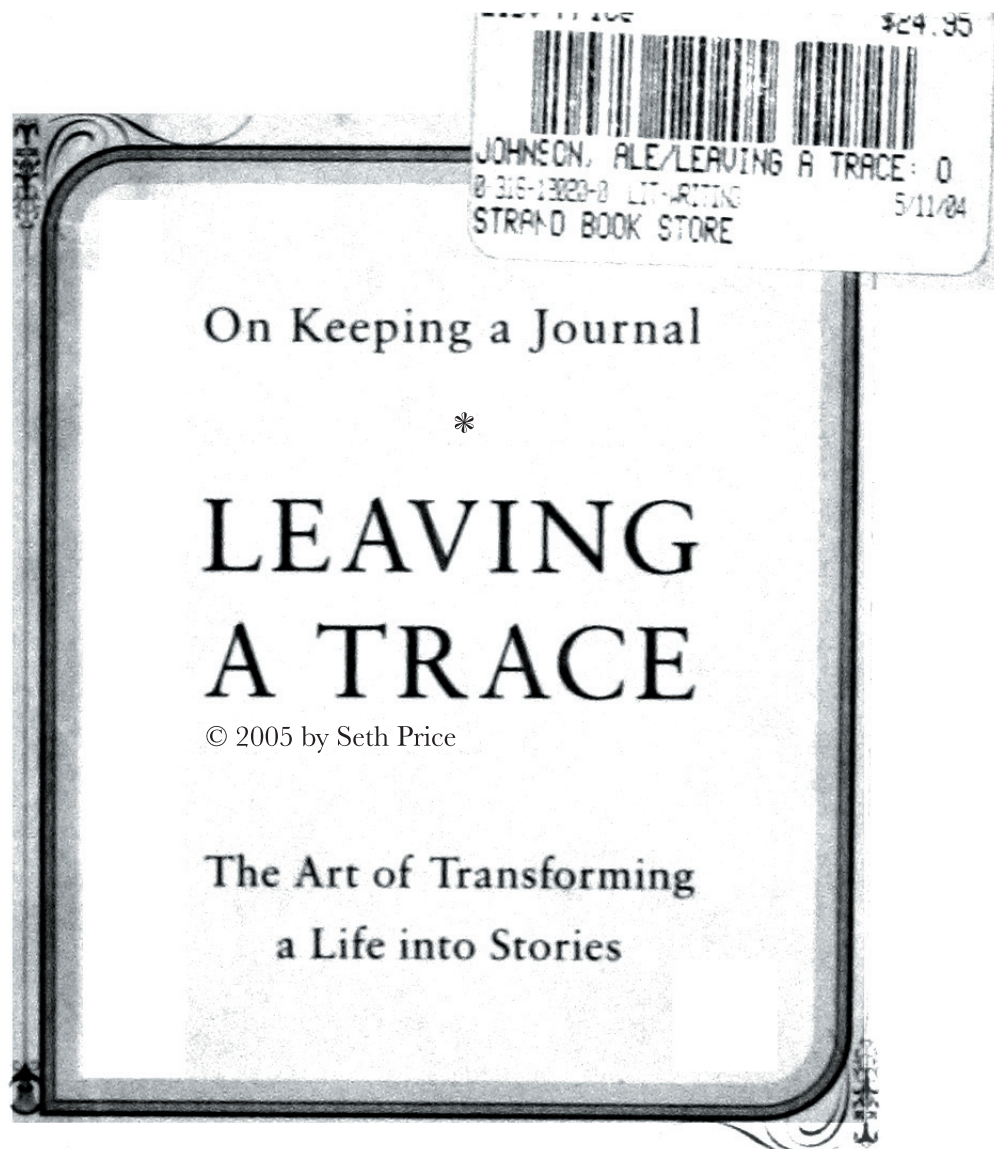


*Unique Source*  
*All Natural Suicide Gang*



Dispersion





On Keeping a Journal

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# LEAVING A TRACE

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The Art of Transforming  
a Life into Stories



Here is an operation. In 1988 the composer Steve Reich, whom at one point was called a minimalist, used the relatively new technology of the sampler to create a work based around the digitized human voice. The work grew out of phrases and sentences, the cadences of which suggested corresponding musical figures. Double strands laid out like objects upon their shadows. The voice writes the music. Listening through this music, specific language emerges: testimonials from Holocaust survivors, overburdened with meaning, unassailable. Well, a thing only really appears when it's turned into a weapon. *Ovens, showers, lampshades, soap*: an innocuous group of words, unless we're told that the context is Germany in the 1940s.

Where to locate the power in this operation? First, let us try to assemble some of its recognizable traits. It is an act of writing that does not hesitate to remove material from its native context, a move often seen as inappropriate or even criminal, at least in the realm of pop culture. According to this logic, an original is somehow violated through the creation of its double, a process seen as one more step in the lamentable cultural slide from representation to repetition.



In fact, sampling is not concerned with repetition. Its purpose is the creation of new, discrete events. Each reproduction is an original and a new beginning. Each, in fact, is the first in a potentially infinite sequence, which is to say an infinite sequence. This is where the gesture's violence is to be found, and why it is attended by cultural anxieties. These concerns are often understood to be copyright related, which is to say money motivated, but it's likely that they stem just as much from misgivings about the implications of instrumentalizing human expression.

In any case, there's no longer such a thing as a copy.

Artists are universally recognized as experts in the field of human expression. Naturally they have been quick to recognize these issues. I wonder... if sampling may be understood as a process of using stolen documents as raw material for form abuse, might this not be true of all advanced art? Luckily it isn't necessary to answer this question, as a thing doesn't have to be true, merely testable. With this task in mind we will turn to the realm of music, a superior place to test artists' reactions to the intrusion of digital techniques, which were introduced to music quite early, relative to other art forms.

The notion of “intellectual property” as regards most written material was codified in Europe in the sixteenth century, a response to the new text-copying technology of print. The old laments about ephemerality, which measured no more than the distance between speaking and sensuality, suddenly fell silent.

It was almost a hundred years before this notion really took hold in the world of music and a composer might actually own his composition. Previously, songs were understood to be common property, and, what’s more, mutable, much in the way computer programs were initially understood as communal efforts to be shared, altered, and re-distributed.

A hundred year lag! Although in this respect music seems to have fallen behind the printed word, it soon leapt ahead. The practice of text copying has aged gracefully since the dawn of intellectual property, and its main exponent remains the printed page, but music has all along been subject to sudden shifts in the controlled reproduction and dissemination of commercial recorded material.

Let us reflect on these changes. To take an example from opera, Toscanini's tenure at La Scala wrought changes that would eventually turn the form into the consummate bourgeois entertainment. Prior to his arrival, the orchestra was seated on the same level as the audience, an audience with none of the docile characteristics of today's opera-goers, rather, a mob of hardy commoners, robust peasant folk, drinking, eating, and jesting: *"Let us meet at the opera and then decide whence we go..."*, *"Well-met, friend, pray share this flagon..."*, *"Scubberdegullion"*, *"lass"*, etc.

This is the lumber of life.



It must be emphasized: Toscanini had the luck of good timing. Architecture is the model in Western metaphysics, and as such is a necessary corollary to ritual. At just this moment the bourgeoisie was working itself into a supreme ecstasy of privacy, decorum, and interiority. Built spaces were spaces of fantasy.

The opera is such a fantasy, a ritualized repetition of aristocratic tradition. A depletion but also a preservation of forms lacking the vitality to proceed under their own power, delivered in the sorts of patrician packaging necessary to fire the bourgeois imagination. The emptying gestures of ritual are a force of preservation, just as death is the romanticizing principle in life.

In this light, the phenomenon of a proper house for opera can be seen as a secret handshake between the middle classes and the aristocracy. For their part, aristocracies dutifully keep alive those endangered pleasures that repel the bourgeoisie.

Now, as then? In our time there is no such thing as a bourgeoisie. Yet... Well, why not? One dreams all day long, just as during the night. It is possible that cultured people are merely the glittering scum that floats upon a deep river of production.

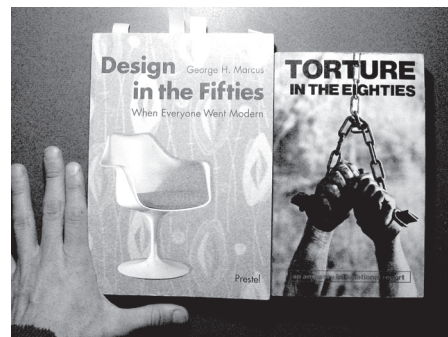
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But what results from this? If architecture is the model in Western metaphysics, we are in some sense the inhabitants of older buildings, and ours is the business of living in a ruined house. It's useful to take a hard look at the word *ruin*, a word that splits. On the one hand, it could refer to the sorts of ancient structures cherished in the early nineteenth century: squalid, overgrown, graffiti-covered, surveyed at sunset for best effect. Yet it might also indicate those same ruins today: sandblasted free of graffiti, restored and conserved, made lucrative, seen only in the full daylight of "open hours".

In the first example, ruin implies benign decay; in the second, active preservation, make-work, and industry<sup>1</sup>. Locating pleasure in benign decay is a perversion, for these structures are useless and wasteful, a spilling of seed, like gay sex, like gay sex.

All that which is not made useful and which serves no profitable function is seen as the unrecuperable waste of a society. This material may be understood as a force that crystallizes society's blockages, making visible a sort of cast of its bowels. The Boston Museum of Science features a display of "petrified lightning", which is merely a lumpy brown rod of sand fused at the instant of extreme heat. The exhibit stands for the operation by which a scientific process is mystified, replaced by a ruin

under glass, making a fetish of waste. My anecdotal mention of this exhibit itself belongs to a certain class of artistic vitrine, and one could treat cultural detritus the same way, wringing art from suburban architecture or exurban wasteland.



It is here that our strands come together, for it is in music that one may now locate such fetishes and vitrines. In the era of the picturesquely crumbling abbey or castle, poetry was king of the arts, and it was this form that drew all the radical young dudes. A century later, on the other side of Modernism, in an age when any ancient scrap heap is carefully made over in the image of safety and security, music is the art toward which all the others aspire. It's here you'll find the young romantics. What accounts for this change? As with the adoption of ideas of intellectual property, the schematic shifts in music lag behind those of the written word.

This is the lake of our feeling.

It was not until the affront of the sampler that music really went to work anxiously mapping and itemizing the husks of metropolises constructed by earlier settlers. Seeking a new Classicism. With all the hedonism that follows a period of calamity<sup>2</sup>.



The Classical style (if one may be so vain as to label something that exists beyond time) is often said to stretch from Haydn to Beethoven. It might be best understood as a single unbroken lineage in which Brahms writes with Beethoven looking over his shoulder, a carefully organized sequence of events, preserved on paper and embodied in the concert hall. The twentieth century, however, put an end to this careful sequence, substituting a wildly metastasizing growth based on the duplicable recorded signal. The arrival of the digital copy crystallizes this development neatly, almost allegorically, almost too neatly. One might think that music is in dissolution, heading away from form, increasingly resistant to the physical, and so also to structures of ritual<sup>3</sup>, but this may not, in fact, be the case.

Come what may, everything is reused. Artists rummage through the toolkits of past artists for approaches they may make use of. The task is to take these instruments and fashion new tools. You want a fine art approach, you borrow the tool from commodity culture. Look for the use, not the meaning! And if it's done wrong, no problem, there is produced a nostalgia for the done-right way. For these reasons, the modern idea of a renovated ruin may be more relevant for art than the nineteenth century model of picturesque decay.

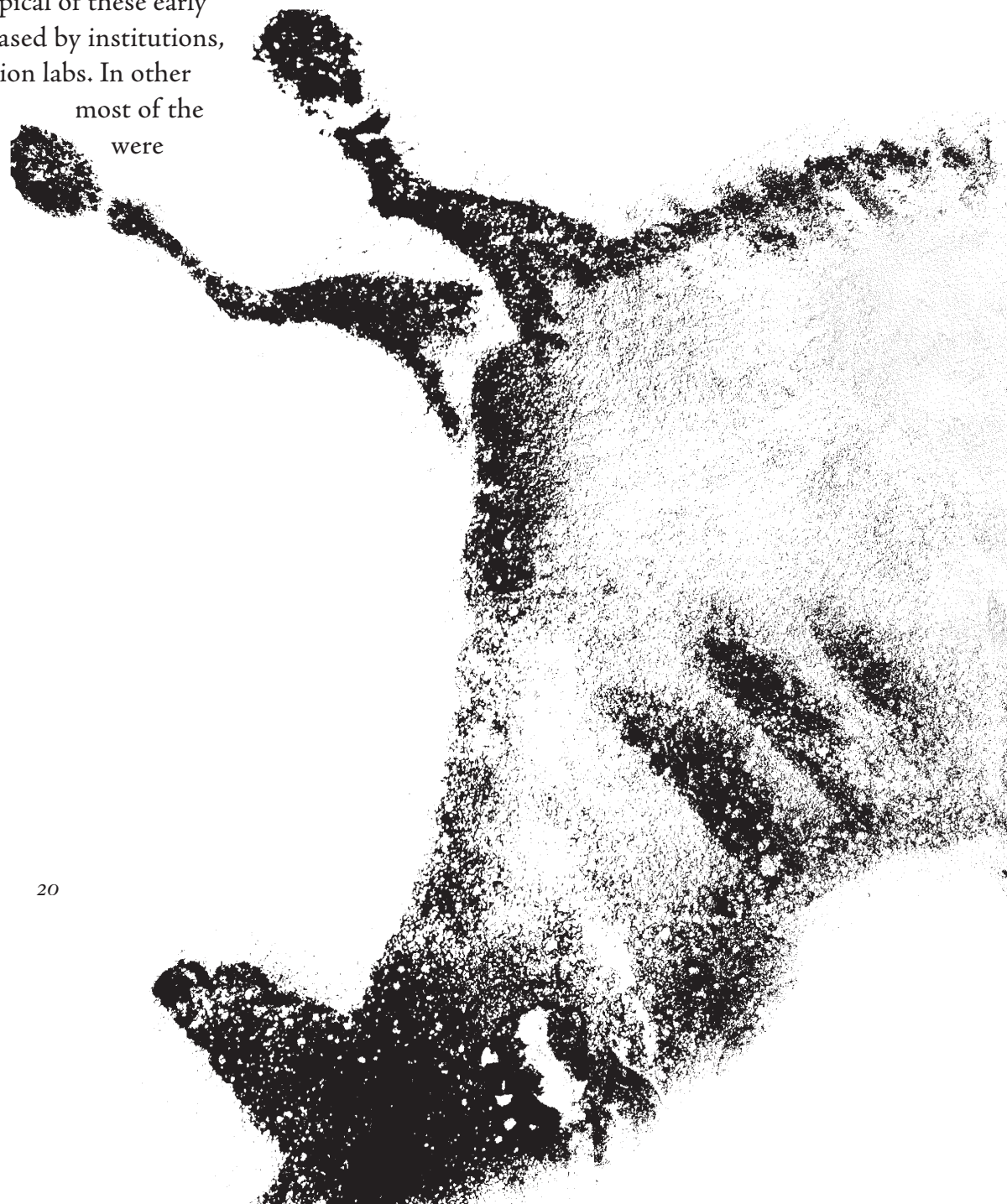
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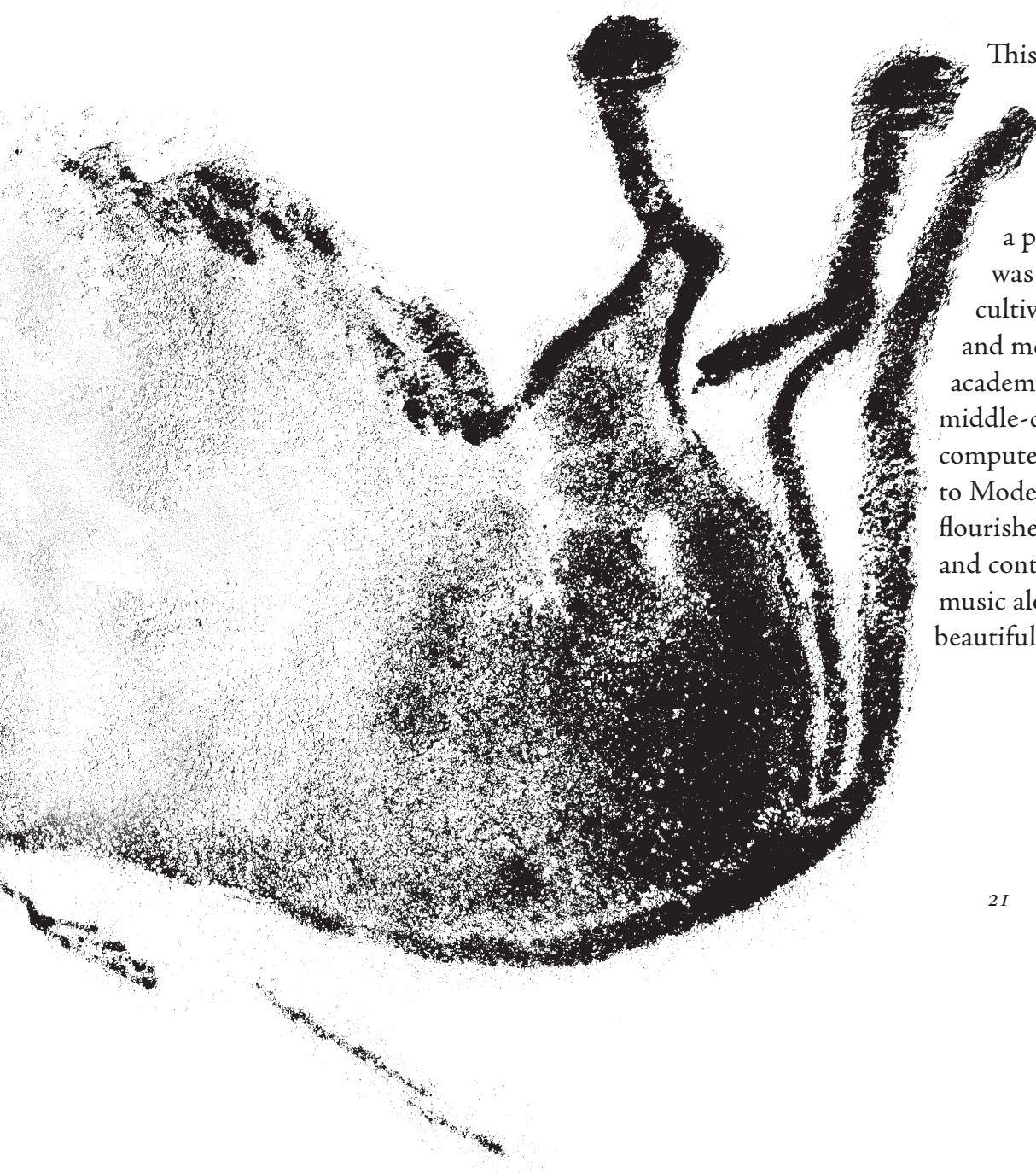




*\* This face, for example.*

It still eludes me... what is so particular about the sampler? Take a close look at the economic and technological particulars of this tool. In 1979, the first commercial sampler was put on the market for around \$25,000. The *Fairlight*. What a name! Ha, ha, ha. The steep price was typical of these early machines, which were consequently purchased by institutions, primarily well-funded university composition labs. In other words, this was a brief period when most of the people exploring sample-based music were classically trained academic composers, who recognized in the computer a spectacular means of testing their high-flying propositions.<sup>4</sup>





This moment is emblematic of music's Modernist style, which all along had a tendency, as with the abstruse proposals of Schoenberg or Webern, to make advanced theoretical training a prerequisite for participation. Now it was expected of students that they not only cultivate a familiarity with the usual histories and methodologies, but also rely entirely on the academy for production tools. After all, many middle-class homes featured a piano, but none a computer workstation. It was a natural endpoint to Modernist music's evolutionary chain, which flourished on a delicate diet of technology, money, and control. Hardly characteristic of Modernist music alone, it is true, but this moment so beautifully illustrates it.

But this moment was fleeting. The sampler's arrival upset the balance, and, as often happens with young technologies, the market seeped in, all the strictures slipped, old model of the pyramid, new model of the pancake. Ten years after the introduction of the Fairlight, any composer could buy a decent sampler for under one thousand dollars, adding a newly available personal computer to yield a versatile home studio. The same was true of any teenager producing dance music or rap music<sup>5</sup>. All this headlong change left a wake of wreckage and trauma, and, in academic computer music, a unique and peculiar musical period, a curiosity, the equivalent of a geographically isolated evolutionary zone where unique life forms go largely undiscovered. Actions of concealing belong to violence. A bruised music, which seems still to have no name, unsure whether it was the start or the end of something.



Around the same time sampling was introduced, the music industry developed MIDI, a kind of universal machine language that allows electronics to synchronize and exchange information. Packets of information, commands in fact, are relayed from one piece of gear to the next, allowing a synthesizer of one manufacture to get in line with a drum machine of another. These silent commands, such as *start note* and *end note*, are known as *events*. Arguably a language, and certainly a system of control, destined to be the new coin of the realm, a currency of loins and coins. Because it was intended for swift, industry-wide adoption, the concept had to be widely familiar, rather than intelligible only to technicians, engineers, and programmers. That meant attaching a friendly front-end to the code. The public happens to be most comfortable with the piano, and this became electronic music's user interface. This is why the *events* lurking behind most of the music you hear on the radio actually preserve the slight, barely perceptible movement of a fingertip somewhere striking a key.

Strike the key and trigger an event, which is immediately sequenced in a series of other events. A chain of control achieved through a simple depression. When I am depressed, there is power at work somewhere.

Many are interested in the idiom of a form, few in the grammar. Personal computers, for example, were originally made so as to be programmable by their owners, but when consumers eventually rejected this aspect it was removed or hidden. Similarly, while the combination of sampled sounds, MIDI, and digital manipulation promised all sorts of possibilities, it turns out that most people don't want to build sounds that have never been heard. They want sounds corresponding to existing phenomena, invocations of reality at the touch of a finger, like paint straight from the tube: brass, woodwinds, car accidents, shrieks, breaking glass. The machine recalls events and dispatches them in a digital relay that is by design simply on or off, making obsolete the weak signal, the half-understood communication. A zero-sum spell.

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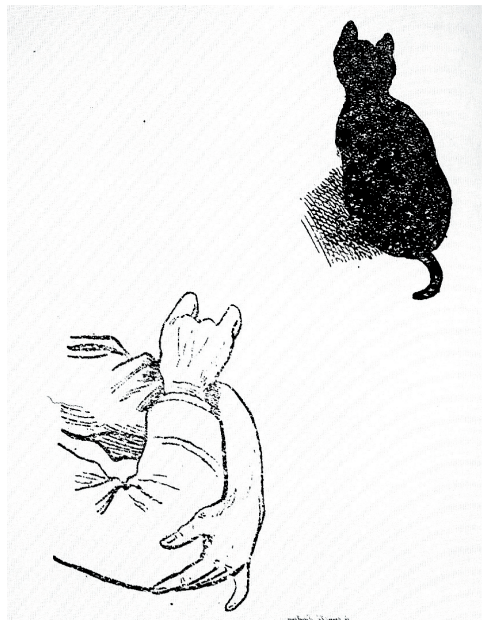


*Try to forget.*

So, you found the sampler's perfect expression early on, when you hit on the idea of employing sampled human voice as a re-pitchable synthesizer sound. An electronic keyboard simulates a piano, often noting even the force with which the keys are struck: it wants you to believe that it is a percussion instrument. The voice-sample technique, then, is the process of generating limitless copies of a unique and resonant human utterance, refashioned as a sprawling kit of silicon-calibrated fake drums. The voice becomes a structural element under total control, it is made useful, as opposed to evocative or expressive. That which reliably promises communication becomes pure instrumentality, a move based on the notion that instruments give us what we want—predictability, security, control—rather than the confirmation of an accurate representation of the real. It goes to show you that when your desires become reality, you don't need fantasy any longer, nor art.

The technique was immediately popular among academic composers and pop producers alike<sup>6</sup>, but soon disappeared from both realms, possibly because it seemed dated, but more likely because sampled and repitched voice is disturbing, a speech terrible and inhuman, an emulation gone bad. The sampled word is the zero degree of the word, as found in the dictionary, or in poetry. Here the communicative imperative, which depends on repetition and difference, was symbolically short-circuited, and, moreover, from within the cloak of language. It is not surprising that the technique fell into disfavor. Man fall from a tree, that tree be felled, man fall in a well, that well be filled.

Samplers continue to offer one entirely new experience, at least on the level of consumption: the recognition, while listening to an unknown piece of music, of the basis for a sample used in a familiar piece. As you look up with bewildered pleasure, the music charges on, diverging from the repetition you expected. You briefly glimpsed a private, inaccessible field between two disparate experiences, a mental correlate to the phantom step at the top of the stairs. Whatever pleasure you can sustain must rely on simultaneous presence and absence.<sup>7</sup>



Digital duplication was one of the twentieth century's few new schemas. Such developments draw the curtain on older powers, and, by the end of the 1980s, around the time Reich completed his sample-based work, the configuration *avant-garde music* was thoroughly depleted, a constellation made cold from forgetfulness.

All forms of depletion are heralded by the degradation of language, and, just as the eclipse of Rome's power was contemporary with the decline of Latin, so the eclipse of avant-garde music was indicated by its wish to transform embodied language into an instrument. A desire to be, rather than to seem.

You could argue that sampling poisoned the well. On the other hand, it is true that in homeopathic medicine, and sometimes in magic, you put a drop of the bad thing, the thing you fight, into water or some other medium. Sampling may be invasive, negating repetition, disordering us, but then that's the wish of every man, to disorder, to mayhem. You must fight something in order to understand it! Voice sampling, possibly all sampling, gives us a text that is critical of reading.

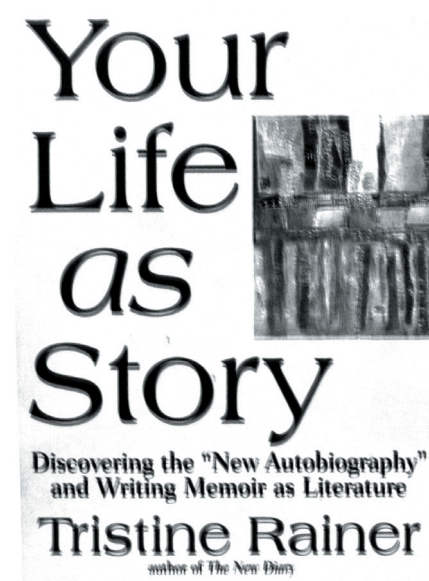
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Graffiti performs a similar operation. The gesture of graffiti must preserve that which it seeks to destroy. Were it to entirely efface its object, its particular critique would vanish. None, after all, is worse shod than the shoemaker's wife.

The work of Broodthaers occasionally follows this logic, most clearly in his piece *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, with its pleasantly incestuous abuse of the Francophone avant-garde. The publication of Mallarmé's poem "Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard", a work distinguished by its typography and disposition of the words upon the page, marked the first time that a poem's conception and meaning was determined through the mechanical printing process. A lyric automation of the design function. In 1969, Broodthaers made a series of pieces that reproduced the exact page layout of Mallarmé's poem, and the layout alone, since he effaced each line of text with a solid black bar. This gesture, while it banished all communicative symbols, retained the striking look and feel of the work<sup>8</sup>. Mallarmé's piece was emptied-out, reduced to seductive packaging. This is a move typical of "appropriation", which may be considered simply an advanced form of packaging.

These depleted forms were engraved onto aluminum plates, as if prepped for mass production, and presented as fine art. Broodthaers claims and then augments Mallarmé's poem to produce a new, third body, a field between the works. The whole is without novelty, save the spacing of ones reading; the blanks, in effect, assume importance. The madness of the "a self-annihilating nothing" prescription. But this was only to be expected, since Broodthaers was an imitation artist. It may be that the supreme triumph of such advanced art is to cast doubt on its own validity, mixing a deep scandalous laughter with the religious spirit. There is a violence in this turn, the same violence that attends graffiti: "don't think, look!"





In regular usage, the word *graffiti* describes an urban decay-threat, akin to mold, understood as pathology. It may be pathological, but not because it's vandalism, rather because it dreams of total saturation through an open-ended sequence of events, each a slight variation on the last. Such total coverage is a futile and perverse premise, an infinite possibility wedded to perpetual disappointment, a pursuit ripe with frustration. Like the poor man who sells his saucepan to buy something to put in it.

Then again, graffiti, like any human expression, is basically a search to find a style and context that makes further expression possible. Graffiti Culture (and why does it take so long for people to map a “culture” on to their violence?) represents the anarchic, expressive territory of those who have subverted painterly representation from the standpoint of cool alienation. A person inscribing a coded sign on the side of a bridge piling enacts a ritual repetition: language is defaced by pictures. Writing that will never have a book. This isn’t the business of living in a ruined house, it’s the business of representing a ruined house, its interior trappings sketched out for all to see. The art object is seen as an object of contemplation, not to be parsed, but to be puzzled over. Its secrets may have to do with art, but with something else as well, which hovers beyond, with no name forthcoming.

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*The*  
**ART**  
*of the*  
**PERSONAL**  
**ESSAY**

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*An Anthology from the  
Classical Era to the Present*

SELECTED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

**PHILLIP LOPATE**

*A Teachers & Writers Collaborative BOOK*

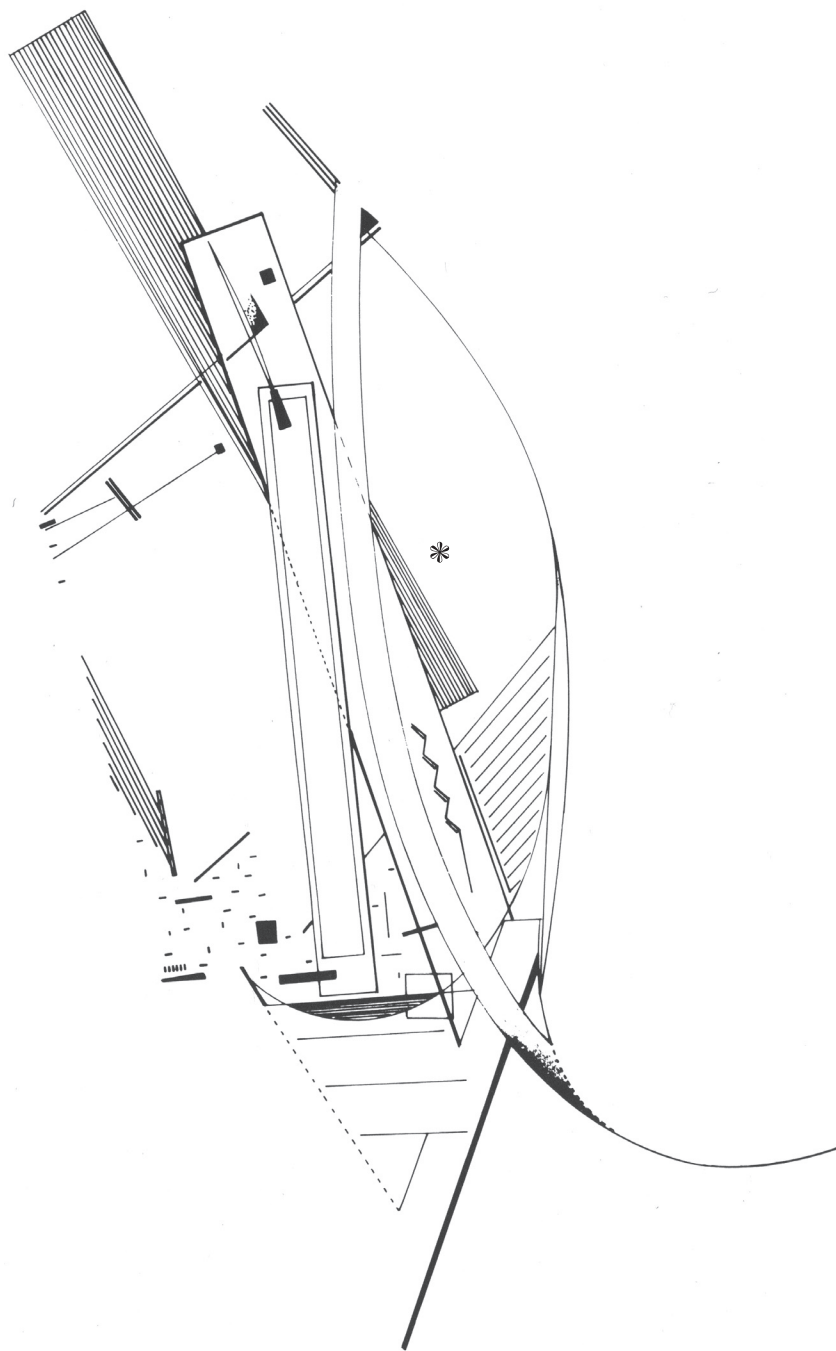
In my view, it's refreshing to watch a form deplete itself:  
"Ah, now it becomes easier to see it as not a belief but  
a historical movement, which is to say a movement of  
thought. Easier now to trace the social shift and extrapolate  
out as far as desired: all design, all art, all packaging."<sup>9</sup>

Take vacuum forming, an industrial process that gives us  
the ubiquitous polystyrene packaging of batteries, toys, and  
toothbrushes, as well as of luxury items like boxed candies  
and cosmetics. Casual research into the use of this process  
in the plastic arts suggests that the chief instances, including  
Broodthaers' rectilinear plaques and Öyvind Fahlström's  
Esso/LSD reliefs, take the logic of the commercial sign as  
their model. This is congruent with a sustained twentieth  
century artistic investigation of advertising and display,  
from Rudy Burckhardt or Walter Benjamin's interest in  
the sloughed off detritus of commodity culture, to a more  
recent fascination with corporate monograms. What  
would it mean to employ such a process for the purpose of  
reproducing not the structures of language and capitalist  
syntax, but those of the human form? Making a package for  
conservative statuary and classical figuration, for art itself:  
a violent cough, as when the human voice is "repurposed" as  
an instrument.

What it means is, it shows how far we've come with our packaging. Full circle, the lowest shall be highest. In the evenings, you can stroll out to see how we are coming along with the construction of the temple.

*Facts are, after all, opinions.*

*by Ghandi*



*Or this one*

## Notes



*1. The French have a saying: the consumer has only three basic needs, to be safe, to be loved, to be beautiful. This is the desire of ruins in our time.*

*2. Historically, all new forms attack Classicism; it's a move characteristic not only of Romantic poetry, but also of the Neo-Expressionist painting of the 1980s, for which the darkest place was under the lamp.*

*3. The sudden shift from wired phones to mobile phones. The telephone is introduced as a wire-bound domestic appliance, a singular site, in fact often attached to the wall, and it serves multiple people, whether through the party line, or later the shared "phone in the hall", or, ultimately, the family phone. With the introduction of the mobile phone this model is upended, replaced by a roving non-site at the service of one.*

*4. It's the engineers who strike ground in digital creative arenas. This pattern is apparent not only in early computer music, but also in early computer graphics experiments, and in the earnest, fresh-faced CompSci graduates who are now enabling Hollywood's growing dependence on CGI. Something to do with Leonardo.*

5. *This raises the question of amateur production. As with all strategies of appropriation, sampling cannot be conceived of in terms of amateur or professional roles. This is part of its violence. Collecting and illegally redistributing material has no professional dimension; the person who compiles a mix tape for a friend is not an amateur. A licit practice that approximates this maneuver is that of a corporation that cheaply purchases rights to déclassé cultural material, like by-gone dance music, from those now forced to part with it cheaply, thence to repackage these goods for re-consumption, either under the banner of nostalgia (the low-end approach), or for the archiving fetish of the would-be collector (the high end approach).*

6. *I once recalled someone standing by a keyboard, blurting out “I don’t know what to say!” The phrase belonged to a female character on an early Cosby show, and was spoken into a new sampling keyboard demonstrated by Stevie Wonder, who appeared as himself. With some deft adjustments he multiplied her apparently random words across the span of the keyboard, repitched appropriately, basso profundo to mezzo-soprano, all subject to easy control through key depression. It was in fact Stevie Wonder, in 1981, who purchased the very first of the famous Emulator samplers, fresh off the assembly line. A quaint memory. What a time I chose to be born!*

7. *This experience is utterly different from that of recognizing one composer’s melodic quotation of another’s work, as different as is the scan from the photograph.*

8. *“Look and feel,” a term popularized by the computer industry, is often used to describe the overall aesthetic of a particular operating system. Like the shade of seduction used to paint the information architecture. A well-known example is the Macintosh’s successful graphic user interface, which was subsequently copied throughout the industry. The term gained notoriety through a series of lawsuits—Xerox against Apple, Apple against Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard—brought on the basis of whether or not it was legal to appropriate aesthetic qualities crystallized in code. Look and feel, in its current sense, is a notion that did not really exist prior to the personal computer, but one that now affects all consumer realms based on digital technology.*

9. *Compare emblematic New York graffiti tags of the 1970s, like Zephyr, Futura, or PhaseII, with those of the 1980s such as Sony, Seiko, and Casio, and then with those of the 1990s, by which time the best sense-making letter combinations were used up: Revs, Kuma, Sems, Naers. A graceful arc from poetry to consumer fetish to emptied form. Digital tags such as screen names and internet addresses will not follow this arc, which belongs to the past. Décor Holes.*



*2003-2005*



