

Naked Intimacy: Eroticism, Improvisation, and Gender

Ellen Waterman, University of Guelph

Eroticism is the realm of our most urgent desires that leads to the transgression of boundaries, ecstatic identification with others, and ultimately a confrontation with the self. Creative improvisation is an experimental and collaborative form of musical performance. What do these domains have in common? Both are characterized by an incessant confrontation with *now* that leads to the “naked intimacy” of intense communication.

In this paper, I develop an analytical framework for examining the relationships between eroticism, improvisation, and gender. What I term a “feminist erotics of creative improvisation” is one contribution to the larger project of critical studies in improvisation, **an emerging field that seeks to understand the potential of certain forms of music to decentre, even transform, entrenched social hierarchies and power structures.** My special concern is the contribution of women, who are all too often marginalized both discursively and professionally within improvised music. More generally, I am interested in how improvisational performance communicates its social and aesthetic effects. I begin by articulating three strategies of representation that link creative improvisation to the erotic: discipline and desire (straining against boundaries in order to break through subjectivity), difference (feminine *jouissance* as an assertion of subjectivity), and communication (listening as the condition for intersubjectivity). I then draw on dissonant theories of eroticism by French philosophers Luce Irigaray and Georges Bataille in order to analyse subjectivity, transgression, and communication in the fascinating music and performance practice of violist Charlotte Hug.²

Improvisation, Eroticism, Subjectivity

Music has a long association with the erotic in Western culture because it presents a seemingly irresolvable dilemma: music “presents an occasion of conflict between discipline and desire” (Peraino 11). In *Listening to the Sirens*, an acute analysis that brings the work of Michel Foucault into conversation with the history of sexuality in Western music, Judith Peraino discusses the “ambivalence and anxiety” that characterize the history of Western thought about music:

A musician may discipline voice, fingers, breath, and mind in order to attain control over them in musical performance, but the performance itself may evoke undisciplined, frenzied emotions in those who hear it. Through the medium of a musical performance, then, a discipline “of the self on the self” potentially results in excessive desire (Foucault 282). (Peraino 11)

Succumbing to excessive desire—the tumbling out of (mind) reason into (embodied) emotion—is both music’s danger and its erotic payoff (*jouissance*) and, as Peraino shows, it is this anxiety that historically drives Western narratives on music.³

The tension between discipline and desire in music is encapsulated by Peraino in her analysis of Odysseus’ encounter with the Sirens, enchantresses⁴ who “sing so beautifully that those who hear them become entranced, irrationally and hopelessly drawn to their deaths on the rocky shore” (13).⁵ Forewarned by the sorceress Kirke, Odysseus finds a way to experience the singing without being seduced by it. He stops the ears of his ship’s crew with wax and has them bind him to the mast with ropes, instructing them to add more bonds if he begs to be released. The Sirens sing to Odysseus of his own heroic deeds, and Odysseus thus attains an ecstatic experience of identification with the music. He is “taken body, mind, and soul” (16). The episode provides Peraino with an entry point through which to discuss the sensual nature of sound: “The Sirens’ song exposes the porous nature of mind, body, and humanly determined boundaries, calling into question the desire to remain bound by these” (18). But, as Peraino points out, Odysseus’ encounter with the Sirens is hardly heroic: he prevents his crew from sharing in the ecstatic encounter, while his own musical pleasure is only achieved through bondage. Is there not also something auto-erotic about Odysseus’ experience? He is, after all, brought to ecstasy by songs about his own achievements.

But what of the Sirens themselves; what if we consider them as subjects—as the musical performers they surely are? Such a move displaces the emphasis of the story away from Odysseus’ avid consumption of their music on to the Sirens’ process, their creative stake in risky musicking.⁶ As Peraino suggests, “reflection on the activity of the musical performer must allow for the performer’s own rapturous response to the music, just as the response of the listener may assume the posture of a disciplined activity. So performers and listeners both confront the same musical constitutions of discipline and desire within their own selves” (11). The Sirens set out to seduce Odysseus by improvising a song about him,⁷ and under the conditions of patriarchy their performance represents both desire (for

musical *jouissance*) and danger (this music can destroy you). Could this be an early representation of feminine subjectivity expressed through music? Considered from a feminist point of view, the Sirens may be interpreted as mimicking the very terms of patriarchal discourse to critique its effects.⁸

With the power dynamics of musical eroticism in mind then, let me turn to a specific kind of music, creative improvisation, an inherently experimental musical process that plays freely across style boundaries and often extends the sonic palette into extreme states. Creative improvisation is an umbrella term for a range of contemporary improvisational practices that play across (inside/outside) traditional Western musical techniques (of genre, style, form, pitch, rhythm, timbre, and instrumental technique). It has a deep relationship with, but is not necessarily bound in any one instance by, the histories, styles, and ideologies of post-1960s African American and European forms of jazz and free improvisation. Importantly, it transects the long established divide in Western music between music as rational thought (composition) and music as embodied practice (performance). Creative improvisation must therefore be understood as a musical discourse that is not outside, but in dialogue with, the Western social system known as patriarchy in which we live.

The term “creative improvisation” suggests an intersubjective and dialogic practice in which past histories and future aspirations are conjoined in the immediacy of musical creation. While it is almost impossible to pin down stylistically, creative improvisation by definition demands a reciprocal exchange among all participants, and in part for this reason may be seen as a set of “liberatory cultural practices that also radically resituate history” (Fischlin and Heble 2). However, improvisation’s potential to model new social relations is dependent on the degree to which it disrupts discourse while remaining fluid and unfixed. In my view, critical studies in improvisation should not look to establish new “truths,” but rather to articulate new strategies of representation. As Elizabeth Grosz reminds us, “unlike truth, whose value is eternal, strategy remains provisional; its relevance and value depend on what it is able to achieve, on its utility in organizing means towards ends” (110-111).

Feminist Strategies of Representation

However collaborative and experimental it might be, creative improvisation is nevertheless a field dominated by men, and in this sense it resembles the most regulated of Western musical practices. Arguably, the professional field of creative improvisation has often served to replicate, not critique, patriarchy, a condition that has extended to academic discourse.⁹ If improvisation is complicit with patriarchy, how can it possibly represent difference? Where are we to locate its *jouissance*? *Jouissance* is the term used by Lacanian psychoanalysis¹⁰ to signify “the condition of bliss, arrival, merging with the other, which can be associated with orgasm but also the obtention of any particularly desired object or condition” (Clark). But for Lacan, the obtention of *jouissance* is understood solely in relation to the phallus, so that woman’s sexual pleasure can only be conceived as either an imitation (the clitoris as little phallus) or a lack (the hole that provides a sheath for the phallus) (Grosz, Schor, Whitford). Is improvisation a phallogocentric discourse? I am forcibly reminded of Krin Gabbard’s interesting analysis of Louis Armstrong’s (and other jazz trumpeters’) “phallic authority” (105), which Gabbard compares to a new generation of mellower “post-phallic” trumpeters (including both male and female players).

The philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray¹¹ critiques phallogocentrism through “an exposure of the violent logic of the one, a Platonic monologic that reduces the other to a pale copy or deficient version of the same” (Cheah and Grosz, “Of Being” 6). Irigaray argues that because woman is considered as either a castrated version of, or a complement to, man there is no room in patriarchy for her to exist as a subject. Women therefore need to claim an “imaginary and symbolic home of their own” (Whitford 74), a language drawn from woman’s morphological difference from man, symbolized by her distinctive experience of the erotic, a specifically feminine *jouissance*. As Elizabeth Grosz explains,

For Irigaray, feminine pleasure is not singular, unified, hierarchically subordinated to a single organ, definable or locatable according to the logic of identity. . . . Her image stresses the multiplicity, ambiguity, fluidity, and excessiveness of female sexuality; it evokes a remainder or residue of *jouissance* left unrepresented in a phallic libidinal economy. (115)

Irigaray argues that it is necessary for women to become “speaking subjects in their own right” (Schor 127) through positive representations of the feminine, especially the maternal. Irigaray states,

We must also find, find anew, invent the words, the sentences that speak the most archaic and most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, with our bodies. . . . We have to discover a language [*langage*] which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language [*langue*] attempts to do, but

which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal. ("Bodily Encounter" 43)

There is a crucial difference here between biological determinism and Irigaray's morphology of difference. Irigaray's "concepts of the body and corporeality refer only to a body that is structured, inscribed, constituted and given meaning *socially* and *historically*—a body that exists as such only through its socio-linguistic construction" (Grosz 111). The bodies of both men and women are already coded by the social: phallogocentric discourse *produces* the masculine body and its feminine "other." Irigaray is not suggesting that women create an entirely new means of communicating, but that they appropriate and subvert language (the only tool at our disposal at present) to get at the "blind spots" (110) of phallogocentric discourses, and thus to clear a space for representations of feminine subjectivity. "Irigaray's project can be interpreted as a contestation of patriarchal representations at the level of cultural representation itself" (116). It therefore seems reasonable to extend her concept of *parler-femme* beyond language to other forms of discourse such as the plastic and performing arts, where feminine subjectivity may be expressed through Irigarayan strategies of representation including the use of maternal symbols and mimesis.¹² I'll return to these terms in my analysis of Charlotte Hug's work below.

First, it is necessary to determine whether improvisation may be understood in terms of feminine *jouissance*. Because of its roots in deconstructing Western musical codes, Julie Smith argues that free improvisation¹³ (located at the fringe of Western music, its "abject"¹⁴) has particular potential for disrupting patriarchal discourse: "Just as the Sirens' song proved deadly to its listeners, music that defies representation is not only dangerous but beyond the symbolic range of hearing. [...] As the Sirens' song that escapes the sign [that is, logos], music is the sonic abject that reinstates semiotic noise" (101). Music, of course, is most often regulated, both by rules (of style, genre, composition etc.), and by the systems that govern its production and consumption. Noise in Western culture is the rebellious, dirty, excess of music—that which is undesirable because uncodifiable, but also undoubtedly audible. Smith connects free improvisation to noise as feminine *jouissance*, citing its "uncanny materiality, uncontrollable fluidity, [and] the capacity to disrupt and confound" (72).

Listening to creative improvisation as feminine *jouissance* is important for two reasons. First, it allows the possibility of a performance practice that emerges specifically from feminine *jouissance*: woman speaking as woman (*parler-femme*) becomes a prime technique for asserting her subjectivity.¹⁵ Second, insisting on difference allows Irigaray to articulate an ethics in which the voices of both men and women would become audible. Some feminist scholars suggest that Irigaray's radical reconception of subjectivity opens the door to respecting other forms of difference. Naomi Schor believes that Irigaray is "ultimately less concerned with theorizing feminine specificity than with debunking the oppressive fiction of a universal subject" (127).¹⁶ If this is the case, then hearing improvisation as feminine *jouissance* becomes a technique for listening to other musical expressions of difference (for example of sexuality, race, or class). Such an ethical communication moves us from the "monologic" subject (who, like Odysseus, expends his energy trying to break through subjectivity in search of transcendence), and even beyond difference (between feminine and masculine subjectivity), to an ethics of intersubjectivity.

Irigaray's project, no less than critical studies in improvisation, has a distinctly utopian quality: both seek to transform society by presenting new and more ethical models for human relations. The condition for both is *listening*, a strategy that Hilary Robinson suggests is crucial to adapting Irigaray for an analysis of aesthetics. In her 1996 book *I Love to You*, Irigaray devotes a chapter to the "reciprocal activity of listening" (Robinson 85). It is worth quoting Robinson's analysis along with Irigaray's comments on listening, because both could easily be talking about creative improvisation. Robinson states that Irigaray understands listening

as a highly exacting practice of concentration, attentiveness and silence: an emptying of the ego in order to offer the other subject "the possibility of existing, of expressing your intention, your intentionality, without your calling out for it and even without asking, without overcoming, without annulling, without killing" ("I Love" 118). The situation she is assuming here is one of discussion between two subjects: "one with the other in the serenity and the occasion of being with, respecting difference" ("I Love" 118). (Robinson 85)

This is surely both the aesthetic and the social condition to which critical studies in improvisation aspires.

However, if the relationship between music *tout court* and the erotic is fraught with "ambivalence and anxiety," a comparison of creative improvisation and feminine *jouissance* is no less so. Julie Smith relates the position of improvisation within music to that of women within patriarchy: both are "abjected," but by that very token they are also "slippery" and "uncontainable" (72-78). We may thus see creative improvisation as rebellious, unbound by musical laws, and therefore full of potential to express new relations of sounding and listening.¹⁷ The idea of a specifically feminine *jouissance* recognizes difference and allows for new ways of speaking—it makes the voices of

improvisation's "others" audible—but in doing so does it not risk essentializing the feminine (albeit strategically)? As Sherrie Tucker cautions: "while 'improvising woman' is, for some musicians, a project worthy of their creative energies, many 'improvising women' are tired of having to 'improvise woman' every time they play" (263).

Here I want to pause for a moment and be very clear: I am not arguing for a feminist aesthetic of improvisation. Any attempt to codify a "feminine style" of creative improvisation would fail from the outset; women and men improvisers employ a vast range of musical styles from serene minimalism to furious virtuosity and everything in between. Rather, I want to employ a feminist erotics to analyse the complex and sometimes contradictory processes by which improvisation communicates its effects. If *jouissance* is "the condition of bliss" that we may hear in music, then eroticism may be considered the quest for *jouissance*: a performative process, a sonic desiring. Musical eroticism is not only closely tied to subjectivity but also to the occasion of performance: the production, transmission, and reception of sound by and among musician, instrument, space, and listener that does not presume a unified response, but rather participates in a continuous circulation of power. In the occasion of performance creative improvisation is always a *negotiation* of musical ideas and identities. Creative improvisation therefore has potential to "reconfigure the subject and the process of subjectivity, as well as the interrelation of self to other. It is a space of risk and excess, a space of creativity" (Smith, Julie 6).

Phallocentric Strategies of Representation

Since Irigaray understands strategies of feminine subjectivity as existing in a "combatative" (Grosz 110) relationship to phallocentric discourse, it is important to interrogate the utility of a phallocentric view of eroticism for a feminist erotics of creative improvisation. Holding these dissonant strains in a productive tension is one way of acknowledging that "improvising women" may have multiple (and not necessarily political or even explicit) agendas.

For the French philosopher and author of violent erotica, Georges Bataille,¹⁸ the erotic drive constitutes "a kind of wedge driven between the opposing demands of animality and humanity. [. . .] By dint of existing between nature and culture, erotic energy [. . .] represents the area of transgression available to each individual subject within the structures of society" (Smith, Paul 234). The power of the erotic lies in the act of transgression that illuminates (and thus potentially critiques) the laws it transgresses.

Human eroticism is distinct from sexual reproduction, but is also defined by it. Bataille argues that we are all biologically "discontinuous" beings: "Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity" (*Death and Sensuality* 12). In the sex act we yearn towards continuity—a merging with the other that is always transitory (and perhaps most often a fantasy). As soon as climax has been achieved we revert to our discontinuity, alone and apart once again. This "deep gulf" between humans is "death in one sense, and death is vertiginous, death is hypnotizing" (13). Furthermore, Bataille understands the erotic as exceeding the physical; it is also emotional and religious. He states,

We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. [. . .] Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with continuity linking us with everything that is. [. . .] this nostalgia is responsible for the three forms of eroticism in man. (*Death and Sensuality* 15)

Because eroticism is conceived as a violent wrenching out of subjectivity, it is inherently transgressive, if also paradoxical. The (masculine) subject yearns for (a temporary) loss of subjectivity in order to affirm (his) existence.

Eroticism as a form of "inner experience" is linked both to taboos and to their transgression. Inevitably, transgression functions to reinforce the taboo precisely because it reminds us of its force: "Unless the taboo is observed with fear it lacks the counterpoise of desire which gives its deepest significance" (37). Hence, eroticism involves the willingness to risk all in the search for ecstatic experience, "eroticism . . . is assenting to life up to the point of death" (11).¹⁹ Kristeva argues that Bataille's analysis of eroticism sheds light on the power structures that drive Western society: "Power, in our society, is constituted by repressing the desire which is its 'counterpart'." To bring desire to light once again is not an end in itself, but from Bataille's perspective, serves to closely examine the foundations of this power" (Kristeva 242). Since taboos are cultural constructions it follows that eroticism is conditioned by particular historical moments and cultural conditions.

Significantly, eroticism is tied in Bataille's thought to transgression and taboos in which the abjection of women becomes a significant factor. In Bataille's theory:

Taboo is the refusal of nature, and the establishing of nature as something to be refused, controlled and so on (*Eroticism* 61-2). Included in this is the distancing of women and the feminine, via the taboos on menstruation (53-4). All that is rejected or distanced is part of the sacred, and can be recalled, at moments, through processes that parallel sacrifice—essentially [. . .] uncontrolled eroticism. This recall takes the form of transgression, which is absolutely part of taboo, as it “suspends a taboo without suppressing it” (36). (Hegarty 108-109)

While the positioning of women is by no means uncomplicated in Bataille’s literary and philosophical work, it is clear that men have more access to subjectivity, and that in some conditions at least (for example prostitution), women “put themselves forward as objects for the aggressive desire of men” (*Eroticism* 131). For Bataille, although both men and women may be, in theory, desiring subjects, “In the process of dissolution, the male partner has generally an active role, while the female partner is passive. The passive, female side is essentially the one that is dissolved as a separate entity” (*Death and Sensuality* 17). Bataille’s conception of the erotic is exciting for its articulation of desire and transgression; however, as Direk notes with dry understatement, “he does not sufficiently account for sexual oppression” (108).

Given the evident misogyny in Bataille’s work,²⁰ can his conception of the erotic be useful for a feminist analysis of the erotic in improvisation? In an analysis inspired by Irigaray’s philosophy of sexual difference, Zeynep Direk, while not discounting its misogynistic aspects, persuasively argues that like Irigaray, Bataille’s theory of eroticism constitutes a “radical thinking of subjectivity in its most fundamental dimension” (96). For both philosophers, “neither virility nor femininity can be objects of knowledge, for they are contingent, miraculous differences impossible to know or to predict in the immanent experience of communication” (Direk 104).²¹ She locates an ethics in Bataille’s understanding of erotic experience to the extent that it constitutes a sharing with, rather than a domination over.²² Bataille is “interested in our subjective capacity to take the step in an erotic encounter to renounce generously and luxuriously all struggle for power and to refuse being restricted by our own personal history” (109). Understood this way, the loss of subjectivity becomes the condition of “true communication” (109), because “I do not distinguish the other from myself anymore” (112).

It seems obvious that in order to have the “luxury” of renouncing subjectivity one must first *be* a subject: one must be able to express, and act on, desire. Bataille’s understanding of eroticism is based on the human desire to overcome difference (discontinuity) in order to obtain the bliss of continuity: it is an ontological condition. But Irigaray insists that woman cannot be a subject under patriarchy since it refuses to recognize her difference (*her* ontology!). The “true communication” expressed by Bataillean eroticism is only possible if those doing the communicating are desiring subjects in the first instance. The desiring subject must therefore *exercise* the power to speak, an idea that recalls feminine *jouissance* as both a language of desire and the noise that exceeds the symbolic. If Irigaray points to the utopian imperative of critical studies in improvisation, Bataille’s insistence on the transgression that proves the taboo is also a cautionary tale for the marginalization of women (and other “Others”) within the patriarchal world of improvisational music making.

What strategies may we draw from Bataille for a feminist erotics of creative improvisation? Direk’s discussion of Bataille’s particular use of the term “inner experience” resonates strongly with the immediacy that characterizes improvisational performance:

Inner experience [in Bataille’s specific understanding of the term] is a relation of communication with the other, and it is for the other. Bataille insists that its temporality is of the present. We can further elaborate that temporality by taking the erotic experience as exemplary of inner experience: erotic experience breaks the ordinary time of the world submitted to the primacy of the future and productivity, thereby reinstating the absolute value of the present moment. (98)

Creative improvisation may be understood as a performative mode that brings the musician into an erotic encounter with the present moment (an ecstatic communication with and through the self, others, instrument, environment). To improvise is to give oneself up entirely (luxuriously, generously) to the *now* over and over again. Similarly, creative improvisation involves the “free giving of trust by taking the risk of the other’s betrayal” (109), a vibration that produces much of the excitement I experience in improvisational performance.

As an improvising musician, I admit that I am at least partially seduced by Bataille’s extravagant conception of the erotic. It accounts for the musician’s obsessive and agonistic relationship with her instrument, her drive towards perfection, her yearning for the “loss of subjectivity” that musicians often describe as “flow” where she is no longer

aware of her own body's pain or limitations in the experience of continuity with the music. I understand Bataille at the level of submitting myself to that feeling of being in the moment. And I have experienced the return to consciousness, discontinuity, the coming down from performance that is followed by the yearning to experience the sensation of musical plenitude once again.

The above description points to another fault-line in creating a feminist erotics of improvisation. By virtue of the fact that Western audiences are physically and symbolically separated from performers, they are situated as voyeurs who observe the ecstatic performative act. Indeed, they have usually paid for the phallogocentric pleasure of "the gaze."²³ As my reception research in experimental music performance shows, listening/observing musical performance is a complex interplay of desire (for excellence, novelty, transcendence) and discipline (attention, comprehension, evaluation).²⁴ Individual performers and audience members may feel quite removed from one another in this situation, even while they are participating in the same space/time/event. To further complicate analysis, both are subject to power dynamics: performers must please the audience in order to get more work (but their professional focus is on their artistry); audiences desire to be adequate to the demands of the performance (emotionally, intellectually), but they also have expectations of performers (quality, respect, preparation). What kind of performance conditions would facilitate a truly intersubjective communication? Music scholarship is badly in need of comprehensive reception studies, and my theorizing here necessarily emphasizes the performing subject over the listener.

Mobilizing a Feminist Erotics of Improvised Music

Drawing on both Irigaray and Bataille, I can now suggest some guidelines for a feminist erotics of creative improvisation. First, a feminist analysis of improvisation as *eros* accommodates an ethics of subjectivity that is committed to accounting for difference. Such an analysis takes the work of improvising women seriously and listens deeply for feminine *jouissance*, but it does not assume a single intention or politics in their work. Nor does it assume that gender is the only salient form of difference, but given the marginalization of women within improvised music it may choose strategically to foreground feminine subjectivity. Second, a feminist erotics of creative improvisation is a strategy of reading, not truth telling, and it is primarily concerned with representation. It asks the question, how does improvisation, as a discourse, produce meaning within a particular context? Third, a feminist erotics of creative improvisation explores ways in which performance transgresses aesthetic and social boundaries, addressing both the potential and limitations for critique and transformation. Finally, it explores the full range and implications of the emotional, social, and musical processes of communication operating in creative improvised music. What follows is my reading, according to this analytical frame, of Charlotte Hug's inspiring work. A feminist erotics provides one means by which to investigate subjectivity, transgression, and communication in creative improvised music.

Charlotte Hug

To describe the Swiss musician Charlotte Hug as a violist is to provide only a limited idea of her range of artistic activities. For example, she has studied both classical music and scenic design, and sonic and visual elements are mutually constitutive in her work. Hug has explored the relationship between acoustic and electronic music in her viola playing, but also in sound installations and through research on ambisonic recording. She has also developed an array of bowing and vocal techniques that allow her to transcend the need for electronics in her viola performance (Hug, Interview). Crossing freely between processes of improvisation and composition, Hug's work has a strongly performative dimension. She has collaborated with dancers, writers, actors, artists, and technicians as well as musicians, but she has also made a deep exploration of sonic and visual space in several solo projects.²⁵

The following analysis is a focussed exploration of the relationship between four kinds of sounding "bodies"—musician, instrument, space, and listener—through which I will read a feminist erotics of improvisation. I will consider Charlotte Hug's music and performance practice; her self-representation through her artist statement, photographs, and liner notes; specific performances; a reception study; and my interview with the artist.²⁶ Following the framework discussed above, I will organize my analysis according to three themes: subjectivity, transgression, and communication.

Subjectivity

Hug exemplifies Pedro Rebelo's understanding of the erotic relationship between musician and instrument. Drawing on Bataille's concept of eroticism as the desire for continuity between two discontinuous beings, Rebelo argues that the instrument (which speaks in response to the musician's touch and in turn disciplines the musician's body) becomes something more than an object. It obtains the status of an "entity" formed by its "cultural context." Musician and instrument are articulated in an intimate relationship based on difference (they are discontinuous beings), and the

musical performance becomes the intangible state of desire that emerges from this difference (its excess) (Rebelo 28-31). Contrary to traditional representations of musicianship, the player does not seek mastery over the instrument; their relationship, "is not about control but about participation" (31).

Paraphrasing Irigaray's "I love to you," one might also say Hug plays to the viola. In her artist statement, Hug states,

My work exists on the interface between the body, its sensitivities, and sound. The viola has its own sensitivities. It reacts to touch, to tension, to the release of tension. I work with a variety of string tunings, what is known as *scordatura*. When they are relaxed, the strings call for a different touch and manner of playing than when they are under high tension. I pit my own corporeality against that of the viola, and I let the interaction take me where it will. In this way I develop new techniques; I listen my way into my instrument, all the way into its micro-tones. ("Artistic Statements")

Hug here acknowledges the mutual influence between two sounding bodies, a relationship characterized by the performer's careful attention to the viola's demands ("the strings call for a different touch"). "Interface," "interaction," and "sensitivities" drive the relationship, which on a Batailleian reading, compels the performer to open herself up completely both to a struggle between two bodies ("I pit my own corporeality against that of the viola") and in submission ("I let the interaction take me where it will"). Yet, the last line of the statement may be read as a sensuous expression of feminine *jouissance*: "I listen my way into my instrument, all the way into its micro-tones." Listening is, after all, the musician's primary way of experiencing musical pleasure. Hug's active listening echoes Irigaray's: "I am listening to you: I encourage something unexpected to emerge, some becoming, some growth, some new dawn, perhaps" (*I Love to You* 117).

Many aspects of Hug's viola technique recall the idea of feminine *jouissance* as sonic excess, for she has developed a very particular musical vocabulary far removed from the instrument's classical technique (and her own original training). Hers is a realm of complex textures and multiple sonorities: sonic cries, screeches, moans and sighs. In order to research these sounds Hug has created a range of interventions on her bows, several of which hang from a rack like fetish objects at each performance. The "softbow" involves completely releasing the tension on the bow hairs and then inserting the viola between the hairs and the wood of the bow.



Hug has developed exquisite control over the softbow such that she can produce between four and eight "voices" at once ("Artistic Statements"). She also plays with the "twistbow" (on which the hair is twisted) and the "wetbow" (which she soaks in a pan of water on stage). To facilitate this latter technique, the vulnerable spot on the viola's wooden body has been protected by an acrylic coating (for some string players, a controversial intervention onto a valuable 18th century instrument).

Hug has often taken her viola into inhospitable environments (very cold, very wet, or very dry), but she is quick to state that she cherishes her instrument and feels deeply connected to it (Interview). For example, Hug has undergone classical voice training in order to strengthen her vocal instrument for use with her viola improvisations, but it is the viola's range of eerie high-pitched sounds that she seeks to emulate. As she told me, "I do the imitation of the viola and I just love this very high sound, and if I try I can do this with my voice as well. So the viola is actually my singing teacher. [. . .] This is such a liberated language, and the singing is like the wild non-educated voice of me" (Interview).



Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss fully, Hug's visual art offers another illustration of her delight in juxtaposing highly disciplined and freely expressive elements. On entering a prospective performance environment, Hug will often improvise and then create drawings made with four pencils, two in each hand: "the right hand which is very trained and the left hand which is the wild one" (Interview). These drawings, themselves responses to improvisation, become the scores for further improvisations. All the drawings are reserved and layered up into aggregate scores. *Son-Icon* generates sound in a continuous encounter with space and time.²⁷

Using every resource at her disposal, Hug performs a complex musical exploration of subjectivity recalling both Irigaray's and Bataille's conceptions of the erotic. Hug is a fearless innovator who has developed a highly personal (abstract, noisy, and excessive) musical voice that recalls Julie Smith's analysis of feminine *jouissance* in free improvisation as "the sonic object that reinstates semiotic noise" (101). At the same time, Hug has a highly disciplined and rigorous technique, the product of intensive sonic explorations and interventions on the viola. As she explained to me, "In my solo work there is no compromise, there is just 'I have a musical idea, a musical/acoustic vision'" (Interview). She has, moreover, parlayed this aesthetic into a very successful career, effectively exercising her power to speak. In a field that is overwhelmingly dominated by men, Hug's distinctive musicianship may well be heard as an assertion of feminine subjectivity, but the pleasures to be found in her work are (audibly and visibly) transgressive.

Transgression

The erotic drive in Hug's work is above all performative. Her compositions are derived from Hug's repeated confrontations with extreme performance environments. I read a very Bataillean notion of the power of desire here, a discipline on the body that is "avid for nonsatisfaction" (McKendrick 107) in the sense that it requires repeated submission to the sometimes painful demands of the performance situation in order to achieve its pleasures. However, as a reading of Hug's *MauerrauM WandrauM* shows, we may at the same time find in her work one of Irigaray's most useful techniques for criticising phallogentrism: mimesis. For Irigaray, a woman might play with mimesis in order

to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the "perceptible," of "matter"—to "ideas," in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. (*This Sex* 76)

Hilary Robinson takes up Irigaray's phrase "to make visible" in order to suggest that mimesis is a strategy for the artist as "witnessing woman," "an active witnessing of the construct 'woman,' and the performative mode of a woman bearing witness" (42). I need hardly add that witnessing is an oral/aural technique as well.

Hug tellingly describes her unusual choice of performance venues as "sites of transgression" ("Artistic Statements") that are chosen for their emotional and social as well as their acoustic resonance. *MauerrauM WandrauM* (1995-1999, the title is a German play on words that refers to different kinds of walls/space) is a project for viola solo, electronics, and video installations that is perhaps best understood as a close encounter with four extreme environments: "the icy cavern of the Rhône Glacier, the basement of the former Steinfels soap factory in Switzerland, the viaduct on the railway route to the Gotthard, and the soundproof torture chamber of an S&M bordello in Zurich's red light district" (Olonetzky). The fifth and final piece of the work, "Aggregat," combines elements of the other four pieces to create an "imaginary space" that changes with each performance. With this move, Hug retains a space for

improvising, inviting listeners to interact with the work on their own imaginative terms.²⁸ Here, I'll focus on two contrasting sections of *MauerrauM WandrauM*.

Nadine Olenetzky has written poetically about the fusion of space, performer, and instrument in this project, stating that "The room, the colours, the shapes, the scents, temperatures and the music penetrate Charlotte Hug through and through. The notes are compounded within her, converted, combined and find their exit through the instrument, enriched, intensified" (Olenetzky). Here space is figured as an active agent that conditions the musical result. Indeed, while performing in the Rhône glacier, Hug was "slowly but surely paralysed by the cold" but continued playing until she could "scarcely move any longer" a circumstance that Hug describes as producing "unexpected but musical" results ("Artistic Statements"). Here we can read Bataille eroticism in the musician who submits her all in order to obtain ecstasy in the experience of her art. Hug penetrated deeply into the blue dusk of the Rhône ice cavern where the walls expand with the cold and crack, creating "a living sound box" (Olenetzky). As presented on her CD of *MauerrauM WandrauM*, the resulting composition "Rhône" is formed from thick multiphonic drones, sweeping glissandi and tremoli, tiny cracklings, and loud scraping fissures in the silence: it is music that breathes, endlessly expanding and contracting.



To listen to an audio sample from "Rhône" [click here for mp3](#) or [here for wav](#).

"Rhône" presents us with fascinating contradictions. Hug penetrates (space) and is penetrated (by cold). The resulting work is a performance made both by the ice cavern and in spite of it (she freezes, and at some point can play no more). Hug has made frequent use of womb-like enclosed spaces in her work, as we see in all four of her choices of sites in *MauerrauM WandrauM*. This maternal metaphor suggests that we may read "Rhône" as an example of mimesis. Irigaray argues that woman's power has historically been consigned to a repressed maternity where her energies find release only in control over the child through either overfeeding or neglect. "Rhône" may be interpreted as a visceral representation of the mother who "risks choking or smothering the child with an excess that fills it to the point of freezing," as Elizabeth Grosz explains Irigaray's view (121).²⁹ Yet Hug embraces and transforms this difficult environment: she listens and creates music in response to it, a productive relationship that results in a composition, a recording, and a video.

In contrast to "Rhône's" expansiveness, "Sado," created in response to improvising in a soundproof sadomasochism torture chamber, is conditioned by "trapped acoustic events" (Olenetzky). The first half of this five-minute work is tightly confined in register: frantic scrablblings of sound are cut through by sharp strokes of the bow. Halfway through there is a short silence, and the second and contrasting part of the piece is plaintive, moaning, subsiding into a silence that is broken by one last brief attempt at resistance. In still photos from "Sado," Hug appears naked in the torture cage, bathed in red, her viola bound in chains. With such evocative imagery, musical affect becomes inseparable from visual spectacle.³⁰



To listen to an audio sample from “Sado” [click here for mp3](#) or [click here for wav](#).

Julie Smith has framed “making a spectacle of oneself” as “a crucial performance of agency” in her analysis of the Feminist Improvising Group—whose members chose “to make spectacles of themselves by sounding body, sexuality, knowledge, difference, freedom, and experience” in their ground-breaking 1970s performances (“Playing Like a Girl” 226). Even though Hug does not explicitly state a politics (feminist or otherwise), in my view her choices of location and the pieces she creates in them constitute an implicit form of social commentary. There is nothing campy or parodic about “Sado”: for example, Hug doesn’t appear in stereotypical dominatrix gear. Nor do I read the work as a political statement against sexual violence, for Hug’s self-presentation and her music are consistently sensuous. There is nothing about “Sado” that bars us from taking our pleasure in it, and I think that Hug’s performance may productively be read as a mimetic meditation on eroticism, power and gender.

In her highly nuanced analysis of s/m, Karmen McKendrick describes a diverse set of sexual practices (characterized as play) in which role playing, fetishization, and the search for extreme embodied states are paramount. S/M is also consensual and highly technical, requiring a great deal of preparation and training. (It strikes me that this is also not a bad definition of professional musicianship.) The surface dynamics of power are misleading: it would appear that the sadist (top) wields power in order to subjugate the masochist (bottom). However, tops are relatively less common than bottoms, and McKendrick (who characterizes her own experience as “bottom heavy”) is clear that there is a real fulfillment of power in being a bottom. For example, she cites the power experienced by going past one’s physical limits, resulting in a Batailleian breaking through subjectivity. S/M has been theorized both negatively and positively within feminist and queer theory. The destabilizing of identity and the resulting breakdown of gender barriers in s/m may suggest positive political effects, but s/m is seen by some as replicating the conditions of violence found in patriarchy (McKendrick 89-100).³¹

In “Sado,” Hug presents us with the image of the musician and her instrument both “trapped” in the cage. The bow is represented alongside the chain as a means of disciplining the viola, and Hug herself might reasonably be seen as the “top” in this situation (the piece is called “Sado” not “Maso”). She appears, however, naked and vulnerable creating a sense of ambiguity about the roles at play. For Bataille, “stripping naked is the decisive action. Nakedness

offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence. [. . .] It is a state of communication revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self" ("Eroticism" 17). By performing naked, Hug exposes the intimacy of musical engagement as a form of expression that "speaks the corporeal" (Irigaray 43), but it may also be read as symbolic of the abject position of women in our society where representations of female nudity are always vulnerable to objectification.³²

The work's affective force lies in the sound world that this erotically charged performance space draws forth from Hug via her instrument. We are confronted both with the struggle to break through one's own creative limitations and the importance of struggle itself. It is significant that Hug does not create "sets" around which to construct her performances. Instead, she invests considerable time and trouble in exploring carefully chosen (and often difficult) environments whose emotional, social, and acoustic resonance inspire her creativity. The short composition "Sado" must be considered a distillation, a fragment representing hours of challenging improvisational encounters with a soundproof space that acoustically speaking does real violence to musical sound by trapping and suppressing it. "Sado" symbolizes the nexus of discipline and desire in which the pleasure and pain of artistic creation are comingled.

Performative dimensions aside, Charlotte Hug's texturally and timbrally organized music, which not only eschews tonality but barely references "tones" at all and rarely displays a regular rhythmic pulse, pushes way beyond the sonic boundaries of mainstream music. Her sonic vocabulary and bowing techniques certainly transgress the tenets of classical viola playing and, indeed, she goes much further than most contemporary string players who use "extended techniques."³³ However, in the world of creative improvised music, Hug may be considered well within an (admittedly broad) aesthetic range that embraces noise as a legitimate musical expression. Creative improvisation's erotic effects (characterized by Direk as "true communication") must also be considered within the intersubjective context of listening.

Communication

In 2000, Charlotte Hug spent three months improvising in the dank, dark tunnels and cells of London's House of Detention, a former underground prison first built in the 16th century. Hug describes this "archetypal" space as both a "prison" and a "shelter" (Interview), echoing the ambivalence between entrapment and protection found in *Maueraum Wandraum*. The result of this sustained improvisational process is a multipart performance piece entitled *Neuland* (2000-2003). Hug sees *Neuland* as a constantly evolving work since each performance is a response to a new space and audience (Interview).³⁴ Indeed, she describes the work not as a traditional composition, but rather as a "genealogical tree": an audio-visual and intellectual dialogue that has been developed over many years (Personal communication).

At the 2006 Sound Symposium in St. John's, Newfoundland, I documented Hug's performance of *Neuland* in the gothic atmosphere of the 19th century Newman wine vaults. Hug was an incandescent presence in performance, her viola, bows, arms, and body kinetic. Like a dancer, she used her body to activate the performance environment, one moment playing high in the air, then against a wall or crouched low to the ground, her back to the audience in a corporeal invocation of spatial acoustics. Hug's presentation was dramatic but efficacious, every movement serving to draw forth sound, helping us to "see" it.

To watch a video clip of *Neuland* [click here](#).

Following the concert, I conducted a participant intercept study: a set of anonymous short "on-the-spot" interviews with audience members who were attending a post-concert reception. I set out to discover "how people experienced" Charlotte Hug's performance rather than "what they thought of it."³⁵ To that end, I asked people to describe their aural, visual, imaginative, and emotional impressions.

The vast majority of comments express a combination of discipline and desire. For example, almost every respondent began by acknowledging Hug's "mastery" over her instrument, noting her "intensity" and expressing fascination with her particular bow and vocal techniques. Several people spoke about being swept away by the performance: "I'm still a little dazed" (W3); "When it's working for me I'm not aware of myself" (M2); "For me it's more of an in-the-moment sort of thing" (W2). Perhaps most tellingly, one respondent said, "I look for an experience and being told something, and I want to be taken somewhere, and I'm not very discriminative in terms of where, as long as there is a sense of mastery" (W1). On the other hand, people also gained obvious pleasure (and information) from watching and analysing, noting Hug's ecstatic performance but distancing themselves in a voyeuristic fashion. Consider the following three comments:

I always watch. It's all about how her whole body moves, how she acts as much as the music. [. . .] [I'm] trying to sort out the performance-based kind of stuff from the moments where she disappears into what she's doing [. . .] there's a shift in body movements and noises that are produced. (M2)

I was trying to analyze it more than enjoy. (M3)

I wanted to close my eyes and listen, but she was doing some neat stuff and I thought, gee if I don't listen to it [. . .] if I don't watch, then I don't know how she actually created those sounds. (W4)

Although it's clearly unwise to generalize from such a small sample, these audience members may be interpreted as describing both the sense of discontinuity (observing from a distance) and the desire for continuity (submitting to the experience) that Bataille finds operative in the erotic.

One audience member, however, described her listening experience in a manner more suggestive of Irigaray's ethics of intersubjective listening:

I let my brain be very busy and I thought about how she did it. I'm a viola player. I thought about how strong she was, and about how courageous she was to try this, and then after a while I shut my eyes and thought about what it would have been [like] underground when she was playing there, so I could really experience that. [. . .] She seems to really love her instrument. I thought about that a lot. [. . .] She has to have worked with it for hours and hours and hours, and you wouldn't do it unless you loved it. Her fingers are so strong. (W5)

Rather than seeking escape in the music, this listener retained control over the listening experience ("I let my brain be very busy") while also recognizing Hug's efforts: her strength, her work, her courage, her love. Closing her eyes, this listener tried to listen her way into the space that produced Hug's music. Of course, we could also interpret this empathetic listener as identifying with (and perhaps even projecting her own experience onto) Hug, since the listener is also a violist and a woman. But she does seem to me to be trying to meet Hug on her own terms. Irigaray writes that respectful listening between two subjects is about more than the search for information (useful though that might be): "I am listening to you is to listen to your words as something unique, irreducible, especially to my own, as something new, as yet unknown" ("I Love to You" 116).

It appears that eroticism's "true communication" (as Direk would have it) operates on two quite different levels: 1) it occurs in the *jouissance* found through an ecstatic identification with the other; 2) it occurs in the loving caress between two subjects where there is no "other." Bataille's conception of communication is essentially pessimistic; the continuity we desire may be blissful, but it is impossible to sustain. Irigaray's conception is utopian: under patriarchy woman cannot be a subject, but she must nevertheless work towards creating a space for subjecthood. Irigaray insists that the progress towards a sexuate culture that recognizes and honours difference "needs a language. Not just the language of information [. . .] but the language of communication, too" ("I Love to You" 113).

Hug's own comments about the audience and listening are also illuminating. At Sound Symposium, *Neuland* was one of two concerts she performed, the other an improvised set with Quebecoise laptop musician and composer Chantale Laplante.³⁶ Comparing the two concerts, Hug told me that

I felt the audience much more in the solo [*Neuland*] because I know the music [so well]. I have listened to the sounds so many times that I have really integrated this music. It's composed music, but I still have windows where I can improvise so I can communicate with the audience. I have a great sense of the space and of the audience. When I play with Chantale, I'm really focused on music making right now, together, so I'm communicating with her. And I feel the big support [. . .] of an audience, and I play for the audience of course, but the communication is with Chantale first. That's the strongest and most direct conversation. (Interview)

Improvisation served as the conduit for communication in both concerts. Hug characterizes communication as a function of focussing on the moment, but also as a communication that may grow deeper with time and experience. It was her intimate relationship with *Neuland* that gave Hug the freedom to direct her senses towards the space and the audience. Hug described the "velocity and lightness" engendered by so many performances of the work interacting with diverse environments over time as "like making love and you know each other so well that you can really feel the

nuances [. . .] and maybe fulfill the inner wish of your lover” (Personal communication). Further, she suggests that in the duo improvisation, the spontaneity of musical dialogue with a partner creates a situation where she has to make major decisions from one second to another. This “quality of inventiveness and the risk of the moment in an interaction with another person [is] supported by the energy of the audience,” even though they are not direct participants in the conversation (Personal communication).

As my analysis of Charlotte Hug’s work shows, a musical performance may encompass a number of relationships of power, discipline, and desire – some of our most potent listening pleasures (whether as players or audience members) come through the restraints imposed by those very bonds. Creative improvisation makes high demands on the listener to “go with” the performers, who themselves may understandably be more focused on their own interactions as musicians. When examining the effects of communication within creative improvisation, it is worth remembering that the Sirens were mistresses of audience manipulation and that Odysseus’ ecstasy came from his “disciplined” experience of listening. We need to do more work in critical studies in improvisation to account for difference in the experiences of listening subjects before we can really understand improvisation as a model for intersubjective communication.

Naked Intimacy

A feminist erotics of improvisation explores subjectivity, transgression, and communication at the very boundaries of expression in which musical *jouissance* may best be found. In common with eroticism, creative improvisation fosters naked intimacy. As represented by Charlotte Hug’s beguiling performance practice, creative improvisation is characterized by a lust for heightened experiences—aural, spatial, physical, emotional—in which we may explore our subjectivity. A feminist erotics of improvisation is invested in transgressing, and therefore calls critical attention to taboos of representation, musical codes and techniques, performance practice, and social relations. Not all creative improvised music necessarily operates on an erotic register, but the potential for (feminine) *jouissance* latent in musical performance in the “occasion of conflict between discipline and desire” (Peraino 11) may be present in a heightened way in the continuous confrontation with *now* that defines creative improvisation. Irigaray offers a rich reimagining of human relations that resonates strongly with the utopian social aims of critical studies in improvisation. She charges us to practice an ethics of intersubjectivity exemplified by attentive listening. However, as Bataille cautions, eroticism is itself defined by the near impossibility of achieving its aims. As soon as desire is fulfilled, it ceases to be, and we are isolated beings once again. Eroticism serves to illuminate power in the moment of transgression, and this provides an equally important function in the critical project of analysing improvisation for its transformative social potential.

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Notes

¹ See the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice research project at www.criticalimprov.com.

² French critical theory has provided rich inspiration for diverse analyses of music and the erotic, including Echard (Deleuze), Peraino (Foucault), Rebelo (Bataille), Julie Dawn Smith (Kristeva), and Szekely (Barthes). One useful departure from this trend may be found in Mockus who draws connections between the music of Pauline Oliveros and Audre Lorde’s classic feminist essay, “The Uses of the Erotic as Power.”

³ Peraino provides numerous examples, some of which I offer here. In ancient Greek myths, music is variously figured as “an instrument of Dionysian catharsis, of Apollonian control, [and of] sexual Pan(ic)” (19). In Plato’s thought, music’s function is not for “irrational pleasure,” but to “serve as an ally in the fight to bring order to any orbit in our souls that has become unharmonized” (*Timaeus* 47d qtd. in Peraino 32). Plato believed that the musical education of young citizens needed to be heavily regulated to avoid music that would have an unhealthy psychic effect (33). The fourth century *Confessions* of Augustine extends the idea of the need for musical regulation to “an internalized space of moral scrutiny, such that performing and listening always require surveillance. [. . .] While the mind wants to go toward the spirit and away from the flesh, the body is subject to appetites that disrupt an ideal, prelapsarian unity of body and soul” (39).

⁴ Gresseth details the many interpretations of the Sirens’ identity by scholars of Greek mythology, who have variously interpreted them as “soul birds” and “otherworldly enchantresses” (203); however, he makes a convincing argument for the female designation of “enchantress.”

⁵ Peraino draws on the 1993 translation of Homer’s *Odyssey* by R.D. Dawe for her discussion of the Siren episode. She notes the myth’s function in the work of critical theorists including Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Louis Althusser (1-3). See Chapter One (11-67) for a highly nuanced discussion of the Sirens across Greek mythology. Her project is to work out from the Homeric Sirens in order to analyze techniques of queer subjectivity in music. “The Sirens’ song, then, has the power to call each and every listener to a critical focus on the past and future self, on the self in relation to society, to ideology. Its mythical power was far from neutralized with Odysseus’s survival. Indeed, his survival has made us all wonder what he heard” (2).

⁶ For a fascinating analysis of the Sirens’ song in terms of improvised music and *jouissance*, drawing on Kristeva’s feminist psychoanalytic theories, see Julie Dawn Smith (96-104).

⁷ I’m indebted to Eric Lewis for pointing out the improvisational nature of the Sirens.

⁸ A large body of critical musicological scholarship now exists that examines gender coding across a wide range of musics. Lorraine offers a useful overview and bibliography of this work. For recent scholarship on gender coding and improvised music, see Gabbard, Rustin and Tucker (including contributions by Julie Dawn Smith, Tracy McMullen, and Ingrid Monson), Porter, Julie Dawn Smith, and Tucker.

⁹ “Chronicles of free improvisation and free jazz from a variety of sources—including Derek Bailey’s *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, John Litweiler’s classic book on free jazz, *The Freedom Principle: Jazz after 1958*; the more recent work of Kevin Whitehead in *New Dutch Swing*, documenting the scene in Holland; as well as John Corbett’s provocative article ‘Ephemera Underscored: Writing Around Free Improvisation’ pay little or no attention to the music’s female constituents” (Smith, Julie, “Playing Like a Girl” 229).

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist whose ideas had a profound effect on post-structural theories developed in the 1960s and 70s. Many feminist scholars have variously adapted (Kristeva) and rejected (Irigaray) Lacanian ideas.

¹¹ Luce Irigaray is highly influential in French feminist thought. While she taught in Lacan’s École Freudienne de Paris in the early 1970s, her 1974 book *Speculum of the Other Woman* constitutes a critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis (Whitford 5-7). Irigaray’s philosophical contributions to feminism are complex and traverse four decades; I will only attempt to draw on a few key concepts and strategies in this paper.

¹² See, for example, Robinson for a brilliant examination of Irigaray and feminist art criticism.

¹³ In her dissertation, *Diva-Dogs: Sounding Women Improvising*, Smith interviewed several important women pioneers in the post-1960s free improvisation (sometimes called non-idiomatic improvisation) movement, including Maggie Nichols, Irene Schweizer, and Joëlle Léandre. An important tenet of free improvisation in its historical emergence was the rejection of traditional musical (melodic, harmonic) materials in order to stretch the borders of music. In my analysis of contemporary improvisation practices, I am using the more general term “creative improvisation,” which takes a postmodern and polystylistic approach to improvisation, encompassing both non-idiomatic and more referential materials. That said, it is clear that Charlotte Hug’s highly abstract approach to improvisation owes much to free improvisation as it has developed in Europe.

¹⁴ Smith’s feminist analysis of improvisation draws on her own nuanced reading of Kristeva. While Kristeva and Irigaray both emerged from psychoanalysis and make use of similar terms, there are important differences in their thought. While they are both “interested in articulating the hitherto unexpressed debt that a patriarchal symbolic order [. . .] owes to femininity, and particularly to maternity,” “their positions are extreme poles apart when judged from a feminist point of view” (Grosz 102, 104). A comparison of their complex positions is outside the concerns of this paper, so I will not take up Smith’s Kristevan reading beyond its articulation of a feminine *jouissance*. For a succinct discussion of the abject in Kristeva’s thought, see Felluga. See also note 19.

¹⁵ See Lorraine for an interesting discussion of the possibility of a feminist aesthetic of music based on feminine *jouissance*.

¹⁶ Schor’s position is not uncontested, however. Irigaray’s philosophy has been critiqued by some feminist scholars (for example by Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell) as unintentionally replicating traditional gender roles and heteronormativity. As Cornell commented in an interview, Irigaray’s conception preserved “something of the traditional definitions of the masculine and the feminine, at the same time that they arguably were being deployed for the most utopian kinds of possibilities” (Cheah and Grosz, “Future of Sexual Difference” 21). In her later work, Irigaray articulates a pragmatic feminist politics based on the unit of the couple, which she defines in terms of a man and a woman (a strategy that retains the idea of two different subjectivities). But if her formulation of the ethical communication “I love to you” is based on the primacy of the heterosexual couple, might this not also be seen as exclusionary?

¹⁷ Of course there are limits to the idea of creative improvisation as unbound by musical laws. Over fifty years of practice and recording many different and recognizable systems and ‘schools’ have emerged: think of Eddie Prevost, Steve Coleman, Anthony Braxton, or Butch Morris for example.

¹⁸ Georges Bataille (1897-1962) influenced the thinking of Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, Lacan, and Kristeva among others.

¹⁹ In this sense, eroticism may be considered a subset of abjection. Kristeva (whose thought is influenced by Bataille) describes the abject in terms of a direct encounter with experience: “A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being” (*Powers of Horror* 3).

²⁰ For a useful discussion of feminist critiques of Bataille’s fiction, see Suleiman.

²¹ “This reading of Bataille may sound too positive, given the fact that much of his fiction may be read as misogynistic. A close reading of his literary works may prove that he was not critical enough of his own sexist prejudices that marked his representations of erotic experience. Is not the subject of that experience always masculine or virile? That Bataille writes without hiding his virility is a positive fact, because he does not obliterate sexual difference by hiding himself behind a sexually neutral discourse. [. . .] In the erotic experiences Bataille narrates, the virility of the “I” is put in question as much as the femininity of the specular other. Neither virility nor femininity can be objects of knowledge, for they are

contingent, miraculous differences impossible to know or to predict in the immanent experience of communication" (Direk 104).

²² "What can be taken as ethical in erotic experience in Bataille's sense? The possibility of the ethical lies in the fact that sovereignty lived in erotic experience is not domination over the other and does not imply the constitution of a sameness that will not permit the manifestation of sexual differences. Eroticism is a form of communication with other/s. According to Bataille, we do not come into erotic encounters as self-made, self-coinciding subjects who seek to objectify the other through the master/slave dialectic of the struggle for power. Bataille meets with Irigaray in his insight that the erotic relationship opens a new space for subjectivity. However, what is at stake here for Bataille is what he calls the "profound subjectivity," which I take to be the possibility of the immanence of the divine, the human, and the animal" (Direk 108-09).

²³ See Schafer for a compelling essay on the importance of context to performer/audience relations. I am indebted to the anonymous reader who drew my attention to this fault line.

²⁴ From 2003-2007, I documented performances at 11 festivals/venues of experimental music in a study called "Sounds Provocative: Experimental Music Performance in Canada". Part of the process involved reception surveys, focus groups, and depth interviews with audience members. See www.experimentalperformance.ca. I am just beginning the work of analyzing this fascinating data, but one thing I will never do again is to make assumptions about how "the audience" reacted to a performance.

²⁵ See www.charlottehug.ch

²⁶ My documentation of Hug's work is part of Sounds Provocative: Experimental Music Performance in Canada. See www.experimentalperformance.ca.

²⁷ See Hug's project *Sonorbit*, discussed with photos and text at www.charlottehug.ch.

²⁸ *MauerrauM WandrauM* exists in a number of forms (typical in Hug's work). It may be presented as a concert piece with video and electronics or a concert installation with four video projections, and it is also documented on a CD/CD-Rom that presents a composition for each space along with an aggregate, as well as short videos. I have not been fortunate enough to see a live version of the piece, and my analysis is drawn from the CD and photo documentation of the work.

²⁹ Grosz is referring to Irigaray's essay "Et l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre" ("And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other").

³⁰ Her performance practice places Hug somewhat closer to a performative and political artist like Diamanda Galás than it does to most instrumental improvisers. I should note, however, that Hug does not explicitly state a politics in the extensive discourse about her work (including the photos discussed here) on her website.

³¹ For another analysis of s/m as a signifier of musical transgression and gender instability (this time in the work of Marilyn Manson) see Peraino (239-246). She reminds us that "Foucault believed that sadomasochism represented a practice of resistance to the hegemony of phallocentric sex and sex appeal. [. . .] it potentially loosened the straitjacket of identities based on a fetishizing of genitals by fetishizing instead the performance and signifiers of power relations and non-genitally based erotic interactions" (242-243).

³² Indeed, when I gave an early conference talk on Hug's work, including "Sado," in which I concentrated entirely on her musical use of space, the question session was dominated by the suggestion that in this performance she was making herself vulnerable to being objectified by the male gaze.

³³ The string player who is perhaps closest to Hug's sonic ethos is the violinist, improviser, and composer Malcolm Goldstein.

³⁴ See <http://www.charlottehug.ch/english.html> Projects/Solo/Neuland for photos. *Neuland* is also available on CD.

³⁵ A participant intercept study involves asking for a person's immediate response to an environment, usually with a quick question or two. This kind of study is often conducted in public venues with transient populations, for example shoppers in a mall. In this case, I interviewed nine audience members at the reception following Hug's late night performance of *Neuland* in the Newman wine vaults. Because the study was anonymous I have coded the responses only by gender (W/M) and number (five women and four men).

³⁶ See www.chantalelaplante.com. Hug and Laplante first met in 2001 and have recorded a CD, *Brilliant Days*, together.

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