Reclaiming Cultural Excess: The Anatomy of Unessentialism

By *Dimitri Nasrallah*

In 1970, a twenty-nine year-old sound conceptualist named Alvin Lucier walked into a room containing only a chair and a microphone. He sat down and, for the next forty minutes, proceeded to dictate a single paragraph into the microphone over and over, until he had repeated it 32 times. The paragraph in question dealt with sitting in a room and repeatedly reading the same paragraph into a microphone. As Lucier conducted these repetitions, his recorded voice was continuously played back into the room, feeding into the recording itself, until the room frequencies had been magnified to such a degree that they corrupted the copy of the copy of the copy. By the end, only a single tonal band remained. The piece was aptly titled "I'm Sitting In a Room".

This curious endeavor in the mechanics of sound production was described thirty years later in the liner notes of German producer Stephan Mathieu's *Wurmloch Variationen* (released on Ritornell), which literally translates to "wormhole variations." The text points toward a kindred link between the world of sound installationists and a recent wave of electronic composers, who have begun to incorporate the former group's high-concept principles into their own work ethos. In Mathieu's recording, which he arranged and played himself, an eleven-minute piano piece undergoes a total of twenty-six copies, until the generational hisses and crackles once buried in near-silence rise to a point where they threaten to overtake their original source.

I use these examples as two aspects of an approach to "music-making" that has remained chronically under-documented in a music industry that considers it too conceptual. Too conceptual, perhaps, because its participants deconstruct the definition of "music-making" into its most elementary parts (sound, patterns, variances) before getting to work; hence, the musical narrative that emerges proves to be about the actual process of "music-making." Regarding this under-documentation, microsound composer Richard Chartier has said: "No narrative is present in these patterns—except that implied by the composition's existence in time, and the levels and plateaus serving as events within that temporal space. A rhythm is created. Repetition takes over as the predominating compositional quality of the work. Knowable cycles slowly develop, but in that discernment of pattern comes variances in the perception of the listeners. In experiencing a stretched out and slowed down serial composition that requires auditory focus, expectation of the next sound's arrival dramatically increases the significance of the faintest change in rhythm or the introduction of alternate events—as well as the spaces in between."

Artistic self-reflexivity merits a keen interest in the exploration of microscopic sounds, such as in the use of regenerational cycles as a means of construction and, conversely, deconstruction. And it is the cornerstone of what has been referred to as unessentialism, a movement that has recently seen a resurgence. In this latest development, artists as diverse as Carsten Nicolai, SND, Thomas Brinkmann, Stephan Mathieu, Taylor Deupree, and Richard Chartier have come to revitalize unessentialist elements using contemporary means.

But what exactly *is* unessentialism?

The term "unessentialism" has been used most often to describe a musical direction in which the undesirable output of machinery (clicks, glitches, atonalities, microscopic sounds)—usually those sounds eliminated from the finished product—is instead recycled back into the mix where it is made central. But before further exploring the term's musical value, we should start by looking at the word itself.

Unessentialism is best viewed as an offshoot of the philosophical doctrine of modern essentialism, which is most commonly understood as a belief in the real and true essence of things, in other words, the invariable and fixed properties that define the "whatness" of a given entity. The definition of this "whatness" is a construction. It is a complex system of cultural, social, psychical, and historical differences that position and constitute the subject. Anti-essentialism questions the effect of this complex system on the "whatness." And while unessentialism does not deny the effect of a system, it does question what the properties of this central "whatness" intend to hold in place.

This distinction is important, in that it affects the framework in two ways. Firstly, without a centralized essence to imbue meaning on a system, all that remains is a rhizomatic framework of mechanics. In other words, the system loses its identity and becomes another machine. Secondly, without its center the parameters of a system are invariably affected, and it is at this point that we can begin to redefine the utility of what was at first considered systematic excess.

Every system, just as every machine, invariably produces excess. This excess, this undesirable output, is a negation of what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari would refer to as the necessary progression of any desiring machine. Historically, this notion of excess has not only been associated with post-war capitalism, but also with its ideological opposite:

the inherently self-conscious nature of post-war artistic creation. But creativity operates within a paradox; it must occur outside a framework, while also reflecting upon the structure that excludes it.

Musical unessentialism has, to an extent, always highlighted its creative self-consciousness and, in attempting to place itself outside a structure that necessarily includes its participants, has made a virtue of its paradoxical existence. It thereby constitutes a reactionary and indirectly politicized movement. Whereas the dominant structure of capitalism espouses progression, unessentialism values regeneration or, at its best, cyclical stasis. Furthermore, it presents artists with aesthetic tools they can use to manipulate sound. But the definition of what constitutes an excessive or unessential sound transforms along with the dominant market-driven model. In our digital age, cultural excess is the excess of our digitality—the microscopic sounds and white noise of our dominant machines.

Although unessentialism is distinguished from minimalism by its politicized intentions regarding cultural waste, there still remain common bonds that cannot be ignored. It is by no means accidental that elements of John Cage's theories on musical silence bear influence on microsound proponents such as Taylor Deupree, Bernard Guenter, and Richard Chartier, or that the minimalist notion of repetition weighs heavily on the early works of SND and Thomas Brinkmann.

Additionally, what is often referred to as the first wave of "industrial" music constitutes the second pertinent precursor to modern unessentialism. After all, early industrial music relied heavily on the use of pipes, barrels, and other found objects usually deemed as industrial waste to create a rhythmic foundation. Just as, in the late-seventies, Einstürzende Neubauten and Throbbing Gristle used the excesses of an industrial age for creative ends, this generation of unessentialist experimenters has found inspiration in the excess of a media-driven economic structure. And, as stated early on, we would also be amiss to ignore the profound influence of avant-garde sound installationists like Alvin Lucier and, to a lesser extent, the impact of William Burrough's cut-up tape experiments, which highlighted a lengthy series of tape loops, and voice and sample manipulations.

Yet for all these precursors, today's unessentialism seems to have evolved most directly out of the minimal techno and IDM (Intelligent Dance Music, as developed by artists like Autechre, the Black Dog, and labels like Warp) movements that took form in the mid-nineties. Whereas the former influenced the rhythmic inclinations of the regenerative process, the latter justified electronic music as a form that could exist outside the framework of DJ's, clubs, and twelve-inch records.

Most critics would agree that these precursors first synthesized into a sum larger than their originating parts in 1996, with the release of Oval's *Systemisch* album (initially released through Frankfurt-based label Mille Plateaux and later through Chicago's Thrill Jockey). On this recording, Markus Popp, Sebastian Oschatz, and Frank Metzger's use of the skips in defunct compact discs as the basis for musical composition succinctly mirrored the denouement of an age of cultural mass production in which the dominant technology used to sell music (the CD) fettered away after an average life expectancy of seven years. By magnifying these glitches and teasing syncopated rhythmic tendencies out from the repetitions, Oval opened incredible opportunities in creating a form of music in which the end material product could be incorporated back into the means of production.

Unessentialist criteria to date have worked best when integrated into already existing genres. This adaptability to and absorption of other types of music is what has rendered it a justifiable movement rather than simply an intriguing, but ultimately dead-ended, endeavor.

The onset of a fully virtualized age, in which the white noise of computers, modems, cellular phones, and numerous other machines has superceded more industrial means of production, has also instigated a flurry of unessentialist creative activity. By 1999, Mille Plateaux, the label responsible for the release of the first two Oval albums, was consistently releasing similarly minded works. Other imprints like Raster-Noton, 12k/LINE, Fallt, and Ritornell were quick to follow suit.

Within this network of labels, artists are exchanged, and free to release with any label that suits them. Unlike the traditional label/artist relationship, the defining characteristic behind the labels that propagate unessentialism is the conspicuous absence of propriety, which otherwise formulates the central "whatness" of the music business. Also striking is the subversion of artistic individuality, a characteristic highlighted by the homogenous, standardized packaging used by many of these independent. Despite this, several artists have still emerged to establish names of their own.

With the release of 1999's *makesnd cassette* (Mille Plateaux), duo SND signaled a shift in unessentialist aesthetics toward the incorporation of more genre-specific rhythmic templates. Using contact mics to access microscopic sounds and then delineating this source material through a rigidly linear structure distantly reminiscent of hip hop and R&B, SND provoked many critics to credit them with opening up new possibilities for both electronic music and the then sagging state of "urban" music production.

Also notable is Thomas Brinkmann who, by building a second arm into his turntable, was able to access sounds from vinyl that were never intended for the listener. Innovating on ideas about the creative process first put forth by Oval, the incorporation of these previously hidden sounds into Brinkmann's severely regenerative brand of minimal techno was considered a major advancement at a time when the sound of minimal techno was slightly changing with what seemed to be every fifth release. More so than others in the field, his manipulation of vinyl sets posed the most pertinent question posed by unessentialism squarely before us. What is a finished product? His reworkings of Richie Hawtin's *Concept 1* series (Minus 8) and Mike Ink's *Studio 1* album (Profan) are still considered requisite releases within the genre.

Taylor Deupree and Richard Chartier are perhaps unessentialism's most distinguished contributors to the development of the microscopic sound movement, and they are also North America's most prevalent participants in this otherwise European phenomenon. Known for the advent of late-nineties ultra-minimalism, their releases on 12k and LINE are characterized by high-pitched frequencies, atonalities, and a very subdued assortment of mechanical interruptions and reconfigurations. As curator of the album *Microscopic Sound* (Caipirinha), released in 1999, Deupree showcased a communal entity of a number of otherwise anonymous micro-sound producers.

Also of importance is Carsten Nicolai, whose work as a conceptual artist and as a producer has earned him a following in both galleries and record stores. As co-owner of Germany's Raster-Noton label, he has been responsible for creating a sound that incorporates SND's deconstructed genre templates with the atonal bursts and frequencies of the microsound movement.

Perhaps the greatest propagation of unessentialism, as a verifiable artistic movement, came in the form of *Clicks + Cuts*, a comprehensive, almost encyclopedic, compilation series released by Mille Plateaux. This series not only introduced the larger electronic music community to the proliferation of unessentialism, but also established the movement's presence as a mature community capable of producing, manufacturing, and promoting artistic inventiveness.

The list could easily go on, but there are far too many notable contributors to mention here. Certainly, the work of Ryoji Ikeda, Ekkehard Ehlers, Janek Schaefer, and Stillupsteypa warrants closer scrutiny. As does the trajectory of more recent unessentialist output, for it is not without its criticism.

Some have noted that the sheer proliferation of participants, coupled with their exponential production of individual releases, has led to a cultivated level of pedantry and predictability within the genre. Others believe that unessentialism's resurgence in electronic music is finite, but that its aesthetic principles will most likely evolve elsewhere, perhaps in other musical contexts, perhaps in other artistic ventures. After all, the discerning eye can see unessential elements at work in the experimental films of Stan Brakhage, or Jeff Noon's novel *Cobralingus*, in which source passages from numerous literary works, rendered public property by their age, are pulled from their original structures, regenerated, and assembled into new contexts.

In the end, unessentialist principles have arguably gained recent momentum due to two factors: the increasingly stringent transitions in technology and the emphasis this places on the materials it uses, and a momentary lapse of creative evolution in the music scene at large. The consideration of technology as a driving force behind not only the making of music but also the way in which we listen to the end result has changed the dynamic of how we, as a critical audience, approach the act of listening. So now that we have looked at the "whatness" of sound, maybe it is time to reexamine the "whatness" of how we hear. ⚜