

Tracy McMullen*

Jason Moran's *Staged*: Improvisational Blurring and the Boundaries of Conceptual Art

Abstract

I examine jazz pianist Jason Moran's conceptual artwork, *Staged* (2015/18), in order to interrogate the intersection between improvisation and contemporary art. Enlisting and expanding upon George Lewis's coinage and theorization of Afrological and Eurological practices, I outline discourses that have coded improvisation as embedded in tradition, the "known," and history, and conceptual art (as a form of "contemporary art") as free from these. *Staged* brings these discourses into collision and offers new directions for contemporary art through its jazz improvisatory sensibility.

Keywords

Improvisation, Conceptual Art, Jason Moran, Jazz, Race

In 2015 Jason Moran's *Staged* opened at the Venice Biennale. The piece re-created performance stages from two important, yet now nonexistent, New York jazz venues: an elegant curve of the Savoy Ballroom bandshell—the great swing era dance hall in Harlem, and the noticeably cramped, wall-and-ceiling-padded bandstand of the Three Deuces, a small but generative club on 52nd Street during the bebop era. Both stages emanated sound intermittently through various means, including when they acted as "real" stages for live performances upon them. *Staged* has been critically acclaimed and, with the addition of a third re-creation of the 1970s era Slugs' Saloon bandstand, has been touring principle art museums in the United States, including the Whitney Museum in New York City and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. *Staged: "Slugs' Saloon"* (2018) was recently acquired for the Walker Art Center's permanent collection.

* Bowdoin College
Department of Music
Email: tmcmulle@bowdoin.edu

Considering the important venues and reception for this work, one might think Moran is a seasoned visual and conceptual artist. Moran *is* a recipient of a MacArthur “genius” grant, but he gained this recognition in 2010 as a jazz pianist. Although he has been collaborating as a musician with visual and conceptual artists since 2005, this was not only his first solo art show but his first exhibition of visual art of any kind. I place Moran’s rapid success in the contemporary art scene within the context of a long history of African American artistic genre crossing that has often ignored the categories many European American critics, scholars, and artists have erected between and within such categories as music, visual art, literature, and theater. Especially regarding genre boundaries, such definitions have often stemmed explicitly from racial discourses, as George Lewis has articulated regarding improvisation and “experimental music” (Lewis 1996). Indeed, Lewis describes a racialized history that has separated the key terms put forward in this volume: “improvisation” and “contemporary art.” In light, then, of this potentially dangerous intersection, Moran’s *Staged* is a particularly rich work through which to interrogate the juncture of contemporary art and improvisation, especially as it is articulated in the United States. *Staged* calls into question definitions and lineages of contemporary art and points to new directions, including new understandings of conceptual art that would not preclude jazz improvisation from its arena.

I examine Moran’s *Staged* within Lewis’s formative theorization of Afrological and Eurological practices in music. I explicitly expand these categories into broader “extra-musical” territory to indicate larger traditions that maintain distinct conceptions of the past, history, and the individual: a Eurologic that prizes separation and boundary and an Afrologic that understands the past, history, and person as blurred and inseparable. My analysis is stark in order to highlight differences, however, these two traditions are themselves blurred together. Part of working with (that is, accepting) a necessarily blurry world, is to acknowledge the blur and to also take responsibility for knowledge within this complexity. Therefore, in initial and thus simplified terms, conceptual art’s Eurological lens would understand *Staged* as a form of installation art in the tradition of simulacra. Further, *Staged* could be understood as an example of “memory culture,” what Andreas Huyssen has described as an irrational drive for “total recall” through the persistent memorializing of the past (2003, 15). I will contend that Afrological approaches rooted in improvisation inform Moran’s work more than a conceptual lineage of simulacra, however. *Staged* highlights the reality of blur rather than boundary, including the blur of the past with the present, and

the individual with the collective.¹ It reveals a world of connection that is both comforting in its recognition of community and relationship and oppressive in the ways that negative acts and perceptions of the past persist into the present. For good and ill, this is the reality of relationship rather than the fantasy of separation.²

The Eurological and the Afrological

Histories of “contemporary art” presume and inscribe a European (and European American) lineage. While artists may be informed by the practices of other cultures, the lineage and the artists understood within the lineage are construed as normatively European. Composer/improviser/scholar George Lewis’s 1996 essay, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” details this inscription regarding “experimental music” in the mid-twentieth century United States. Certain adjectives are deployed to inscribe a racialized separation in musical practice, “coded qualifiers to the word music—such as ‘experimental,’ ‘new,’ ‘art,’ ‘concert,’ ‘serious,’ ‘avant-garde,’ and ‘contemporary’—are used [...] to delineate a racialized location [...] within the spaces of whiteness” (102). Regarding the coding of improvisation, composer/saxophonist/improviser Anthony Braxton notes, “Both aleatory and indeterminism are words which have been coined [...] to bypass the word improvisation and as such the influence of non-white sensibility” (qtd in Lewis 1996, 99). African American artists have both been ignored as influences on “experimental music” and perpetually labeled “jazz” despite sonic characteristics of their work that might more aptly align with works designated “classical,” “serious” or “experimental music,” as has been

¹ Fred Moten brings the word blur into theoretical parlance, particularly in his work *Black and Blur* (2017). Blurring the lines of poetry, criticism, and philosophy, Moten writes, “I’m interested in the b section, the exclusionarily included middle, the bridge. B is for blurr, for the seriality of an extra r, dividing movements like a fantasy...” (163). I use blur to describe the reality of interconnection, a reality unacknowledged by a Western epistemology that construes the known as that which can be only located by the separation of a viewing subject from a viewed object. Or more recently, as the West has come to understand that such separation cannot actually capture the truth of the object, to then gaze upon this fact again and again, as a type of traumatic return. I describe this in the musical reenactments of the performance art duo, Forsyth and Pollard (reenacting David Bowie) and of the band Mostly Other People Do the Killing (recreating the album, *Kind of Blue*). Both attempt to capture the past and then gaze upon the inability to do so (see McMullen 2016 and 2019).

² I say more about the reality of relationship and the fantasy of separation in the final chapter of McMullen 2019.

the case with both Lewis and Braxton. Definitions of music as “serious,” “avant-garde,” and “contemporary” serve to exnominate their association with a white racial identity, establishing these practices as universal and natural (unmarked), while jazz is definitionally marked and therefore, “other.”³

Lewis explicitly marks an otherwise invisible and “natural” European tradition through his analysis of the Eurological, comparing it to the Afrological, a logic based in African American musical practice. He makes clear that these are not essential categories but practices that stem from traditions. The terms “refer metaphorically to musical belief systems and behavior that [...] exemplify particular kinds of musical ‘logic.’ [...] [They are] historically emergent rather than ethnically essential” (93). Lewis uses these categories, in part, to demonstrate the ways white artists, authors, and historians misunderstand, mischaracterize, and devalue African American musical practice, especially improvisation, and distance it from any influence on “experimental music.”

In his description of Eurological perceptions of improvisation, Lewis scrutinizes ideas of freedom. In one conception, freedom is that of the individual to be separate and independent. As Lewis puts it, “From a Eurological standpoint, freedom is sometimes framed in terms of European music’s traditional composer-to-performer hierarchy” (115). He cites Mildred Portney Chase, who writes, “improvisation is the free zone in music, where anything is permitted and considered acceptable. You are responsible only to yourself and to the dictates of your taste.” Lewis goes on, “Similarly, preparation for improvisation is described in terms of the need to ‘free ourselves from those negative attitudes that inhibit us’” (qtd in 115). Thus, this is a “freedom from,” freedom from the dictates of a composer or freedom from one’s own internalized critic. One can see the implications of such a concept of freedom. While this freedom is desired, it also contains an implicit threat: one is basically off the grid, responsible only to oneself, where anything is permitted. One is separate and alone, which can be frightening. If this is *someone else’s* freedom, they are not responsible to anyone and thus could be a threat to *me*. This concept of freedom creates both a desire for, and a fear of, freedom.

³ Lewis deploys John Fiske’s theorization of exnomination. Fiske states, “Exnomination is the means by which whiteness avoids being named and thus keeps itself out of the field of interrogation and therefore off the agenda for change [...]. One practice of exnomination is the avoidance of self-recognition and self-definition. Defining, for whites, is a process that is always directed outward upon multiple ‘others’ but never inward upon the definer” (qtd in Lewis 1996, 100).

Because of the fear inherent in this view of freedom, it is unsurprising that a more common Eurological approach is the need to curb freedom. Lewis writes, "A much more widespread view that has evolved in Eurological music circles with regard to improvisation is the notion that, to be musically coherent, improvisation cannot be left as 'free,' but must instead be 'controlled' or 'structured' in some way" (115). John Cage serves as Lewis' primary example of a Eurological composer of "experimental music." Lewis cites Cage's methods of indeterminacy, which employed external structures via varying "chance operations," such as throwing the I Ching, in order to make decisions. Such a method provides a type of coherency in opposition to the presumably less coherent "freedom" of improvisation.

What I want to highlight, however, is how both of these ideas about freedom reveal a more fundamental issue: a Eurological apprehension vis-à-vis interiority and subjectivity. Lewis reveals the Eurological presumption that improvisation does not offer a level of structure presumed necessary for "art." This is the Eurological preference for what Amiri Baraka called the "noun" over the "verb," the belief that the score, blueprint, or some other formal structure is the locus of the art, rather than art as a process of artists interacting in time.⁴ It reveals a distrust of subjective decision making and a belief in the need for a formal law, an external structure to make decisions.⁵ Further, Cage did not see improvisation as "too free" or even free at all. Cage believed improvisation gave unrestricted rein to our preferences, thus further tethering us to our personality—the opposite of freedom from Cage's perspective. Freedom for Cage meant freedom from personal habits of taste and preference, diametrically opposed to Chase's statement that freedom lies in pursuing the dictates of one's taste. In his deployment of structure, Cage was attempting to be free from his *self*, a practice he often linked to his study of Zen Buddhism, but which I have argued elsewhere was rooted in his particular Protestant-inflected suspicion of the body and its desires (McMullen 2010). This body also represents interior, subjective decision making that does not emanate from an orienting blueprint. Jazz improvisation is a process undertaken by bodies in time that cannot be pinpointed and, as such, cannot be trusted from the perspective of a Cageian framework that yields power to an external, objective system.

⁴ See Lydia Goehr (1992) on Western music and the work concept, and Amiri Baraka (1999 [1963]) and Nathaniel Mackey (1998) on the nouning of Western music versus the verbing of African American music.

⁵ On subjectivity and formalism in Western music and thought, see Taruskin 1984 and Manderson 2010.

From the Eurological standpoint of “experimental music” then, improvisation is either too free (without rules and structure) or too embedded in subjective preferences (and hence, not free). In the Eurological preference for abstraction and external structure exemplified in Cage, there should be no personality, thus, no context. As Lewis puts it, the improvisation/indefinite/new should be “unsullied by reference to the past or foreshadowing of the future” (108). It should be free from “known” styles, which is a way of saying that it “excludes history or memory” (107). What comes before contaminates the purity of the perfectly new and therefore perfectly spontaneous. The interiority of the performer—their preferences and previous history—will sully the spontaneous moment. An external structure such as Cage’s chance operations offers “an important method of avoiding ‘known’ models of improvisation” like jazz (108), which is based on idioms and tradition—preferences, in Cage’s parlance. It takes the person out and replaces it with an objective system. This is freedom, because real freedom in this model can only be completely separate and unsullied by any complication of past, history, or person.

The idea that we can be free of the past or of personality can only come from a view that imagines the separation of past from present and past from person. As I have argued elsewhere, this view is what supports the rise of “memory culture” in the West.⁶ In the Western conception, because we imagine the past as separate, we long for it and attempt to capture it through ever-expanding memorialization. Yet our efforts to capture it only yield more of a sense of separation in that it is our very construction of the past as over and lost that creates this sense. The irony is that while a sense of loss is generated in regard to the past, the past, in fact, is very much with us. Imagining the past is over and then controlling how it is remembered serves to elide the ways that the past remains with us in the form of habits of society: white and male privilege, for example. Thus, the concern of losing the past found in a Eurological memory culture is rebutted by the argument that the past is not in the past at all, but still here and often being rewritten as “history and memory in the image of whiteness” (109).

Expanding his term beyond music, the tradition Lewis describes as Afrological can be understood as a counterview to the dominant Western ontology and epistemology, one in which the past is not understood as separate, but in blurry relationship to the present. As such, improvisational “freedom” is understood as occurring within history, in a type of interactive verbing that is an ongoing process. It is a freedom that might have more to

⁶ McMullen 2019. On memory culture, see Gillis, Huyssen, and Boym.

do with acceptance and awareness, with recognizing the past and our connection to it as well as our responsibility *to* others, not a freedom *qua* separation *from* others (“responsible only to yourself”). Rather than separating and then imagining an interior as untrustworthy because it is too inhabited by others—history or personality (personal history),⁷ freedom is embedded in personal narrative, in community, and in process. As opposed to the elimination of personality, preferences, and subjectivity under an abstract, objective system, the Afrological recognizes the embeddedness and interrelationship of phenomena. Thus, Lewis points out what should be obvious: “As with any music, close listening and analysis of improvised music requires attention to information at different laminar depths [...]. The Eurological notion of pure spontaneity [freedom from history and context] in improvisation fails to account for this temporally multilaminar aspect of an improvisation” (108). Improvisation has layers that are further understood and recognized over the course of time, without end. Within improvisation there is a call and a response from listener, performer, actor, giver, receiver, and these can become increasingly blurred the closer and longer one looks and listens.

Jason Moran's *Staged*

An African American jazz artist who appears suddenly in sanctioned contemporary art venues as a conceptual artist could be viewed as an interloper into territory outside their ken. One critic wrote that *Staged* “resists classification under the heading of contemporary art” with no explanation of why that was so, leaving this reader to presume it was because the piece was a site for live jazz performance (a *performing* art and “known” style and therefore not “contemporary”) and was created by a jazz artist (Corrigan 2016). But *Staged* points to a long lineage of cross-category practice found in African American artists and it calls into question the racialized construction of artistic categories and separations, especially between jazz and contemporary art. Moran is part of an African American lineage of creativity that contests categories of jazz, experimental, classical, and even the separation of music from poetry from art from theater. Brent Hayes Edwards has written that, “black musicians so often insist on working in multiple media, not as autonomous areas of activity but in conjunction, insistently crossing circuits, rethinking and expanding the potential of each medium in the way it is like and unlike the other” (Edwards 2017, 19). Further, there has been little

⁷ In the Western ideology, the interior is the site of the emotional, the feminine, the blurred, the private, and the exterior is the abstract, located, rational and public.

incentive for African Americans to accept and abide by categories created by white critics, historians, and curators given the historically limited access black artists have had to American art institutions.

While his family was interested in a variety of arts and Moran has long had an interest in visual art, he grew up in Houston, Texas, focused on learning jazz. He began his professional career as a jazz pianist in 1997, touring with the saxophonist, Greg Osby. He was soon signed by the celebrated jazz label, Blue Note, and issued his first recording as a leader in 1998, *Sound-track to Human Motion*. Moran embarked upon the career of a virtuosic jazz pianist, issuing critically acclaimed solo, trio, and quartet albums for the next several years.⁸ As an improviser, composer, and arranger, he has been lauded for his deep knowledge and extension of the jazz tradition. In 2006, he made his cross into the area of “contemporary art” with his album, *Artist in Residence*, a compilation of pieces he wrote as commissions for art museums that responded to the work of conceptual performance artists Adrian Piper, Joan Jonas, and others. He followed in 2007 with his multi-media collaboration *In My Mind: Monk at Town Hall, 1959* (with visual artist, Glenn Ligon, video artist David Dempewolf and his large ensemble, Big Bandwagon), a reimagining of Monk’s famous 1959 New York City concert. Over the next 10 years, Moran continued and expanded collaborations with visual and performance artists, including *The Death of Tom* (2008) with Glenn Ligon, *Bleed* (2012) with Alicia Hall Moran, *Reanimation* (2012) with Joan Jonas, and *Looks of a Lot* (2014) with Theaster Gates. In 2015 he created *Staged* for the Venice Biennale and in 2018, with “Slugs’ Saloon” added to form a triptych, brought *Staged* to The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City.

Moran is not the only jazz musician currently extending his art beyond the sonic. Pianists Vijay Iyer and Robert Glasper, and saxophonist Kamasi Washington have all had recent art museum residencies or worked with visual and theatrical artists (Chinen 2016). Moran is well aware of the long tradition of boundary blurring in African American artistic practice. When asked in an interview about the history of jazz and visual art crossover, Moran lists the communities and associations that occurred around visual artist David Hammons, composers Butch Morris and Henry Threadgill, and the collaborations of composer George Lewis with video installation artist Stan Douglas more than twenty years ago (Simonini 2018). Moran goes on to describe perhaps the most famous example, the Association for the Ad-

⁸ See for example, Hreha 2003; Loewy N.D.; Turner 2003.

vancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), which was formed in Chicago over 50 years ago by one of Moran's teachers, Muhal Richard Abrams. Starting from the early years of the association in the 1960s, "they would do performances all the time—this performance-art-hybrid-theater-compositional kind of thing. And so, you know, I'm from that" (qtd in Simonini 2018). Going back even further, Moran reflects on the Harlem Renaissance with artists like Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington and Mary Lou Williams in "conversations that informed [their] own work and made it more potent, because it had the layers that would sustain through history" (qtd in Simonini 2018). They were creating, and adding to previous, multi-laminar depths that echoed forward and were eventually heard by Moran.

I visited *Staged* at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston in January 2019. It was the main part of a collection of Moran's work that also included his collaboration with Glenn Ligon, *The Death of Tom*, Stan Douglas's video recreation, *Luanda-Kinshasa* (2013) for which Moran was the bandleader, video compilations of several of Moran's collaborations with performance artists, and Moran's works on paper (*Run 4* (2016), *Run 4, Right Hand* (2016), *Basin Street Runs 1 and 2* (2016)). The three installations of *Staged* were spread throughout a medium-sized room in close enough proximity that the sound from the "Savoy Ballroom 1" and the "Three Deuces" would bleed together when they overlapped. This is also true of the two video screening rooms in which *The Death of Tom* and *Luanda-Kinshasa* each played on a loop. The overlap of the sound felt central to Moran's presentation. In *The Death of Tom*—Ligon's abstract black and white video of smudged and blurred footage from the 1903 silent film, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,⁹ with Moran's improvisatory treatment of Bert Williams' song, "Nobody"—the pianist left generous space in his performance. In these gaps, which gave the video a lonely, haunting quality, I heard the muffled echo of forced labor songs from "Savoy Ballroom 1" bleeding through from the room outside. The effect was to highlight the interplay and overlap, the complexity and laminar depths of past and the present, forced labor with jazz labor, joy and despair, indeed, even the layers of call and response itself, where there is blur between what is call and what is response. Overall, Moran's work, and *Staged* in particular, presents a type of embedded connectedness that is in stark contrast to an external autonomous structure. This embedded connectedness is seen in his concern with personal narrative, place, and time/history.

⁹ The final scene, Edwin S. Porter, director. Based on the novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Moran makes clear that jazz is not an “autonomous” art form, but embedded in social context. That “Black music as an artform” is embedded in a social context was argued by Olly Wilson in 1983 in part to address the problem of jazz music being measured by a Eurological yardstick that deemed “serious music” music of the concert hall, presumably separate from everyday life. Moran states, “in jazz music, politics is already embedded in the fabric of the music because the music comes out of a need for oppressed people to actually play a solo, which means tell your story and say it out loud and that was not a right afforded many people at that time, because you were afraid that you’d be murdered” (Phonica Records 2015). This relates to a characteristic of Afrological musical practice adumbrated by Lewis, “the importance of personal narrative, of ‘telling your own story’” (117). Moran makes a link between this personal expression in music and conceptual art through the work of performance artist Adrian Piper. “There’s something about Adrian’s work about how to unveil your personal history which I thought was so indicative of her power as an artist to share her identity and also to share her parents’ identity. It’s very personal” (qtd in Edwards 2018). Moran literally brings Piper’s voice into his work by transcribing her speech for the piano in his composition, “Artists Ought to Be Writing.”¹⁰

In addition to personal narrative, Moran is concerned with place, specifically the places and stages where jazz has occurred. The physical aspects of venues have an acoustic effect which Moran connects to the development of jazz. “A lot of what a musician does is we listen to the sounds that happen in rooms. Whether it’s a recording studio or it’s live at a club or whatever. You go to church, you hear them sing from the balcony. You listen to them sing in a room. We listen to that as content” (qtd in Edwards 2018). In regard to *Staged*, Moran says, “I start thinking about the way they work in these rooms, that they’re also working in response to the room. Not only to each other and not only to the kind of stipulations that the unions forced musicians to work under in the 1940s and ’50s, but how do they work in a room that’s set up this way, where the ceiling is only like eight feet tall. That changes how you play, tremendously” (qtd in Edwards 2018). The room changes—the Three Deuces is not the Savoy Ballroom, it is not for dancing but for listening. The audience is up close. What were ornaments in Swing become the centerpiece, the winged phrases of bebop. The place, that is, the larger context, has an effect and this effect cannot, in fact, be separated from “jazz,” the music. Further, this effect is not only acoustic. The Savoy, the Three Deuces, and Slugs’ Saloon were cultural gathering spaces. Moran

¹⁰ Released on his 2006 album for Blue Note, *Artist in Residence*.

states, “these are cultural institutions [...]. it’s all the conversations that happen in there and it’s all the conversations that they lead to outside of those spaces” (qtd in Phonica Records 2015).¹¹ Finally, Moran maintains that place has an effect in even more subtle and less tangible ways. Describing his recent performance at the Park Avenue Armory, Moran recalled that the concert “was also as much about seeing as it was about performing. Every wood crevice, every audience member, every softly glowing light fixture, every tile in the fireplace, and every note that responds to it” are part of the experience (quoted in Blumenfeld 2016b).

Embedded in Moran’s presentation of place are questions of time and history. Most obviously, none of these venues exist anymore. Moran expresses concern that, “in America, we tear down everything” (qtd in Edwards 2018). This aspect of the piece is part of what I would align with the preoccupations of memory culture—the fear that “everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion.”¹² This is a reading, and potentially an aspect of the piece, that I find narrow and foreclosing of the complexity of time and history acknowledged in other readings or aspects of the work. When Moran asks, how do you “pinpoint emotion, pinpoint narrative, pinpoint history, and look at the question: how do you share that within the framework of a jazz concert?” I am concerned with the conception of knowing as a way to pinpoint, to find that Euclidean point.¹³ Attempting to find that point leads into a dizzying house of mirrors, at least in attempts to capture and recreate the past. In such pinpointing we find the precession of simulacra.

Contemporary Art and Improvisation

In the normative history of conceptual art, Moran’s *Staged* is in a lineage of installation art and, by virtue of its restaging of past venues, a type of simulacra. Modern ideas of the simulacrum are rooted in the notion that images exist as representations without an original meaning that grounds that representation. Baudrillard’s influential treatise on the subject, *The Precession of*

¹¹ Jazz historian, Michael Heller articulates and elaborates how jazz spaces functioned as community nexuses for empowerment, nurturing, and political organizing, including Slugs’ Saloon (Heller 2016, 45).

¹² Sebald 2011 [2001], 24. Andreas Huyssen argues that our postmodern “memory culture” is driven by this “panic of oblivion” and seems to seek “total recall” (Huyssen 2003).

¹³ Moran quoted in Edwards 2018. Lewis refers to a Eurological desire to find perfect freedom in a “now” separated from the past and future as if it were “an infinitely small “now,” a Euclidean point” (108).

Simulacra, indicates this in its title: what precedes the simulacrum is another simulacrum. There is never an original meaning to be found, only another image, another representation. I link this sense of “no meaning” to the Eurological desire to be free from history and personality. Susan Sontag’s influential essay on contemporary art, *Against Interpretation*, can be read as exemplifying this viewpoint. Sontag argues that critics should place their attention on the surface of the work, creating “criticism which would supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art. [...] reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it” (2001, 13). If critics continue in their project to find meaning in works, artists should find ways to sidestep this tendency: “Ideally, it is possible to elude the interpreters [...] by making works of art whose surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can be [...] just what it is” (Sontag 11). This view has influenced the work of recent conceptual artists reenacting music (see McMullen 2019, 64–95) and can be linked to what Lewis above recognized as Eurological: that a work—or spontaneity, or freedom—could be “just as it is,” separate from context, history, tradition, that is, from meaning. Scholars of African American music in the 1980s like Olly Wilson and Billy Taylor recognized this dominant ideology and had to directly and explicitly counter this idea about what constitutes “Great Art.” They articulated that meaning and purpose are essential to African American music as an art.¹⁴ The Afrological does not imagine music or art “just what it is,” but on the contrary as inseparable from context and greatly concerned with meaning.

What arises from understanding the world as simulacra and apart from context and meaning are intellectual paradoxes. Performance and conceptual artists involved in simulacra that strive to reperform the past “exactly,” whether of musical recordings, past concerts or historic events, have all expressed fascination with the “impossibility of recreating the event,” the “paradoxes [...] contradictions [...] impossibility of it,” how “the copy never reproduces the original completely” (qtd in Reynolds 2011, 52).¹⁵ Simon

¹⁴ Taylor writes, “The Afro-American value system was the determining factor of what elements remained in the music or were discarded. Did the music make you want to dance, party, get drunk, make love? Did it express frustration, anger, joy, sadness? Afro-American music had to have a purpose, had to say something to the person; or it was altered or discarded” (1982, 86).

¹⁵ See McMullen 2016 on the band Mostly Other People Do the Killing’s note-for-note reenactment of the Miles Davis Sextet’s album, *Kind of Blue*. See Reynolds 2011 for his interviews with performance artists Jo Mitchell, Rod Dickinson, and the performance art duo, Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard.

Reynolds writes that the performance artists with whom he spoke were “forthcoming and engaged” when discussing the intricate, meticulous, and arduous effort that went into re-creating the material detail of their chosen pasts as precisely as possible. They had no problem discussing with great animation the “how” of their work. “But,” he states, “somehow the ‘why’ kept eluding us in our conversations” (52). I wrote a book on why we keep trying to capture something we know we cannot, involving ourselves deeply in what Theodor Adorno drolly termed “pseudo-activity” (McMullen 2019; Adorno 2006 [1991], 26). The point in the context of this article is that in a world that has separated itself from meaning, we are left with fascinating ourselves with the incommensurability of the signifier and the signified—the ways that our representations cannot capture the Real. Thus, we fetishize the intricate, meticulous, arduous work of attempting to capture the past in a recreation. Artists burying themselves in the materiality, that is, the “unified and clean” surface of their work and unable to grasp much regarding why they are making such art is the inevitable outcome of a worldview that repudiates interpretation and meaning.

Moran involved himself in some archeology of the past that is redolent of the processes of the artists interviewed by Reynolds. Of recreating the stages, Moran shares, “I tried to source as many photos as I could from archive collections and then also try to start to talk to musicians” (Phonica Records 2015). Moran would ask people who had been in these venues about the colors of the walls and other details. “It was something about this missing part of our history which I wanted to pull up, so that maybe then I could jump on that stage. Maybe it’s part of my own need to feel these places, because no one cared anymore” (qtd in Edwards 2018). The interviewer then asked him, “Do you think of them as memorials?” “Sadly,” Moran responds, “I think I do” (qtd in Edwards 2018).

For a variety of reasons, however, I do not think Moran fetishizes the past like the re-creators above. He does not concern himself with recreating these spaces “exactly.” He describes a moment when he understood “it was impossible to actually recreate the photograph. Like the fabric that’s on the Savoy Ballroom, that is not actually the fabric that they had” (Phonica Records 2015). The practices of the artists above would involve arduously recreating that fabric as precisely as possible. Moran is unconcerned with that. I am apprehensive, however, about the influence and yes, context, of conceptual art that prefers abstraction, separation, and surface to meaning, tradition, and blur on Moran’s work. *Staged* invites us to consider which spaces are deemed cultural institutions and which are not; which are saved and which are destroyed. This is important, yet, I worry that grasping for what is lost

can lean into unhelpful Eurological tendencies. Moran states, rightly, that there is a “disease we have right now to document everything.” He goes on, however, to concede: “but I have it in my bones” (qtd in RoundO Films 2014). In his works *In My Mind: Monk at Town Hall, 1959* and *Staged*, Moran honors and recognizes the past and in the case of *Staged*, loss, without pasting over that loss with a fetish. While I think there is a danger of fetishizing and getting lost in the precession of simulacra, I think it is the improvisatory elements based in the Afrological that point toward a more realistic understanding of blur over a fascinating but ultimately futile intellectual antinomy. Unlike efforts to “bring back the past” in order to somehow have that past with us because “everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion,” Moran’s works suggest that the past is in fact still with us but in very complex ways that demand our awareness and decoding (interpretation).

Moran’s use of sound especially articulates the layers of the past that resonate with us even as specific venues may be gone. *Staged* sets up a periodic conversation between forced labor songs recorded at the Angola State Penitentiary in the 1930s emitting from “Savoy Ballroom 1” and the twelve-minute song cycle composed and performed by Moran emanating from the “Three Deuces” via a Steinway Spirio piano that plays back Moran’s performance without the pianist there. Moran says of the confluence: “It’s a different kind of ghost [...] [the Spirio] plays the song ‘He Cares’ and it’s in sync with the Savoy Ballroom with the man singing ‘He Cares’ as well as all the hammers and chains from the recording of the Angola prison workers. So there’s an ambient sound coming from the Savoy Ballroom stage but the answer comes from the music that happens on the Three Deuces. So they do have a conversation” (Phonica Records 2015). Moran sets up a conversation between these forced labor songs in the past and his more recently performed music. “It’s not only a conversation about where the music was but it’s also a conversation about the history that preceded those spaces that still ties them together” (Phonica Records 2015). Moran questions the purpose of African American musical labor, stating that “work songs,” or forced labor songs, were deployed by slave masters, prison guards, and employers to make enslaved, imprisoned, and indentured people work harder and longer. “The music was used against us...So how was jazz used against us?” (qtd in Krasinski 2016). *Staged* makes us think about how the music resonates from and through the past and the present and the future. The good and the bad, the beauty and the ugliness, the freely given and the forced. Indeed, he seems to ask what *is* freely given and what is forced in the context of an American tradition of racialized hierarchy. The sounds foreground the continuity of the past with the present: connected, blurred, haunting.

Improvisation can be a way of understanding the world that directly engages meaning and context, so much so that it can (at least strive to) bring everything *in* rather than attempt to separate everything *out*. Thus, the practice of improvisation can be a direct repudiation of an epistemology of boundaries, offering instead an acknowledgement of blur. I contend that Moran views conceptual art, so influenced by the intellectual tradition represented in Baudrillard and Sontag, through a jazz lens.¹⁶ Setting up stages from the past to interact is redolent of musicians on the bandstand listening and responding. Moran highlights how this hallmark of black music—improvisatory call and response—has always included the audience (the listener), the place (“every wood crevice”), the past, and the present, blurring who is calling and who is responding. The temporal laminar depths are what the listener brings to it, all the musicians that have preceded and are a part of the music of the current present, and indeed, all of the past that is a part of the present now. This is a Black music-derived improvisatory process unfolding in the realm of contemporary art—self, music, history, other, time as a blurry, messy, unlocatable relationship that is always with us and that will never be adequately pinpointed but demands our responsible acknowledgement and action based on awareness. Moran states that place and music, music and the past, are “the relationships I want people to question” (Phonica Records 2015). I would argue that Moran’s focus on relationship extends into every aspect of his work thus far, musical and beyond. Thus, *Staged* does not “[resist] classification under the heading of contemporary art” but broadens our understanding of what contemporary art is and can be.

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¹⁶ I am not making claims about all conceptual art, but want to highlight a reading of Sontag and Baudrillard that indicates a Eurological fascination with the signifier that will never meet the signified. It is my contention that the Eurological perspective understands this as a site of trauma and thus will continually (re)enact (that is, gaze upon) this moment of incommensurability.

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