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Musings of *DÉS.ILLUSIONS*: An Essay, a Frame

"Une petite ombre, en elle-même, sur le moment, ce n'est rien. On n'y pense plus, on continue, dans la clarté. Mais je connais l'ombre, elle s'accumule, se fait plus dense, puis soudain éclate et noie tout."[1]

- Samuel Beckett

A darkness, *une ombre*, fills the world devoid of illusion—that which gives it color, vivacity, hope, and despair. The collection of short compositions *DÉS.ILLUSIONS* explores our experience of reality through this lens. It was created using these self-imposed restrictions: one acoustic guitar and one voice are to be the only available sound sources; and the visual coding software Max (MSP) must be the primary tool to shape these sounds (and cannot, therefore, be used in a generative manner). These limitations allow for a more crystallized scope and a more pointed focus on intention, meant for better understanding. In order to form an understanding of anything, one must perform an elision on an irreducible and complex reality. Much like a child in a sandbox, picking up a fistful of sand, some will slip through their fingers, but in their palm they can closely examine their collected sample. In the distillation that this project attempts, the two sound sources are able to act as a dialogue, an interaction between subject and object. The use of Max (MSP) provides a disembodiment of the sounds into an unreality, thus attempting to expose illusion.

"Illusions need not necessarily be false—that is to say, unrealizable or in contradiction to reality."[2] Though illusion is most often used to describe a false image, here Freud reshapes it without the pejorative, resulting in a neutrality that has larger applications. From his psychological observation, this neutrality can be further explored when considering perception. The philosophical argument from illusion is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "the

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[1] Beckett, *Malone Meurt*, 25.
[2] Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 31.

argument that the objects of sense-experience, usually called ideas, appearances, or sense-data, cannot be objects in a physical world independent of the perceiver, since they vary according to his condition and environment."[3] This argument would then consider the chair I am sitting in as solely an "object of sense-experience," which gives no indication as to its state on the plane of empirical reality. Our perception, both in the individual and the collective, being the only building block for our realities, abstracts us from any form of objectivity other than that of an illusory construction. Humans have evolved to rely upon forming illusion so as to be able to act in a world that makes sense. This world is thus a product of our creation of illusion, whether created consciously or not, which I subdivide into three degrees of illusion: *le ressenti*, the conceptual, and the abstract. One could consider the word "construct" instead, but "illusion" contains a sense of imitation. Indeed, it takes root in Latin with "*ludere*," as "play" and "*illudere*," as "mock."[4] It is through this expanded definition, wherein realities are compounded illusions, that I have built the conceptual framework of the series of works *DÉS.ILLUSIONS*.

The introductory title track, "DÉS.ILLUSIONS," opens with the discourse between us and illusion. As the voice reorders fragments of the title, like jigsaw pieces, it searches for meaning, while simultaneously drifting into an absurd meaninglessness. Under this, the acoustic guitar interweaves Steve Reich–like polymeters; the external resonant body expels an ocean of narratives. We must navigate through or capsize. These narratives are illusory, the creation of which stems from an innate directive. Through the example of the combinatorial approach to poetry and art, Calvino illustrates in his essay "Cybernetics and Ghosts" that this construction of illusion is a natural product of our minds.

> At a certain moment things click into place, and one of the combinations obtained—through the combinatorial mechanism itself, independently of any search for meaning or effect on any other level—becomes charged with an unexpected meaning or unforeseen effect which the conscious mind would not have arrived at deliberately: an unconscious meaning, in fact, or at least the premonition of an unconscious meaning.[5]

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[3] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "illusion, n.", July 2023. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1942294186.
[4] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "illusion, n."
[5] Calvino, *The Uses of Literature*, 21.

Even as we search to subvert narratives and symbols—as postmodernism attempted—we find ourselves confronted with the illusion of "the unconscious meaning." This simulation of reality is intrinsic to how we form perception. It is through function, semiotics, and all attribution of meaning that we exist and coexist. Illusion is the vehicle for our realities. From the sensorial, we create fabrics of time and space in which we weave our narratives—which we imbibe with symbols. Our reality is always building itself, seeking indiscriminately to root itself in illusion. Herein lies the importance of questioning. Whether through nature or nurture, we add, summate, amalgamate. Biases are illusions seeking to summate, and as they do, they rigidify. Our critical self failing to doubt any such summation is what the questioning individual fights against.

The Insidious Development of Illusion

The reproduction of illusion is exponential and entropic. Some tens of thousands of years ago, humans began to develop speech, exhibiting a propensity for illusion. At a certain point in the expansion of illusion in their perception of reality, it covered so much that even absence began to wield meaning. The anthropologist Severin Fowles in "People Without Things" notes that "absence need not be a source of longing at all. Quite to the contrary, absence can be aggressive; it can be cultivated; it can mark the overt rejection of that which is not present."[6] In music, silence, as the absence of sound, is often used to create an unsettling expectation of the breaking of silence. The most preeminent example of absence in music is certainly John Cage's "4'33." When there is an absence, its aggressiveness lies in it exposing our addiction to answers, to filling voids with illusion. The third track of *DÉS.ILLUSIONS*, "MON NÉANT," meaning "my void" or "my nothingness," illustrates this very obsession, attempting to show just how full nothingness has become. We have covered our reality with illusion many times over, to where abstraction nests in abstraction:

> [...] only the phantom of value still floats over the desert of the classical structures
> of capital, just as the phantom of religion floats over a world now long
> desacralized, just as the phantom of knowledge floats over the university. It is up

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[6] Fowles, "People Without Things," 37.

to us to again become the nomads of this desert, but disengaged from the mechanical illusion of value.[7]

Baudrillard, ever the poet, longs to reach back to a desert "where only the wind watches over the sand,"[8] and—certainly from the Hollywoodian surroundings I stand in—simulacra precedes the real, in such a way that we cannot distinguish the real. Simulations lose their basis of imitation, and we drift along with them. With no clear grounding, we cling to whatever we can, before our grain of doubt morphs into a pixel of absolute certainty. It is then that illusion can be exploitative. When we no longer are the originators of illusion, the simulacrum is capable of mitosis, recursively reproducing, eating its own tail.

It then has us exploit ourselves, rather than the traditional disciplinary Foucaldian power dynamic. Byung Chul Han in *Psychopolitics* considers neoliberalism as a form of this: the self becomes an entrepreneur, with an obsession of optimization. He warns that "digital psychopolitics manages to intervene in psychic processes in a prospective fashion. Quite possibly, it is even *faster* than free will. As such, it could overtake it. If so, this would herald the *end of freedom*."[9] His critiques seem to consider a restricted focus on Western capitalist barycenters, and additionally offer a unilateral argumentation. However, I have observed his writings within this frame to hold true to LA culture, and by extension most metropoles. As it both creates and feeds our hunger for illusion, the exponential speed greatly decreases the critical eye's ability to question. "Rationality is *slower* than emotionality; it *has no speed*, as it were. Thus, the pressure of acceleration now is leading to a *dictatorship of emotion*."[10] Whether we are cradled and rocked to sleep, or egged into a blind rage, or drugged into a blissful comatose, or pacified into apathy and nonchalance, our emotion creates capital.

I close *DÉS.ILLUSIONS* with a piece in song form for this reason. The song of today no longer functions as a vehicle for myths, but one for emotion. It is a symbol of this so-called "dictatorship," characterizing a world where rationality trails farther and farther behind. I

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[7] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 153.
[8] Baudrillard, 153.
[9] Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, 63.
[10] Han, 46.

attempted to highlight the irony present in my song "PSYCHOPOLITIK": it is an emotion-song written from a standpoint of emotional validation that I received from Han's writings about the exploitation of emotion. However, it also forgoes the traditional journey of the commercial song structure, opting to put the high-point in the center, and without reiteration of the chorus, it aims to leave the listener oddly unsatisfied with the song's arc. Through this somewhat postmodern subversion of narratives, these six pieces do not pursue meaninglessness, in recognition of its impossibility and the ineluctability of illusion. Building upon Beckett, whose works, as Adorno frames it, "put meaning on trial" and "unfold its history,"[11] *DÉS.ILLUSIONS* begins with the futile hopelessness of an *unmeaning*. Yet this hopelessness also carries beauty, the illusion of which can be toyed with—as is the artist's task.

Art as the Framing of Illusion

"The readymade can be seen as a sort of irony, or an attempt at showing the futility of trying to define art."[12]

- Marcel Duchamp

When has futility ever stopped the mulish? Firstly, we must recognize an incoherence between the 19th Century and the post-Duchampian definitions. Whereas the historical meaning is that of the artisan's skill, trade, or craft, the readymade screams the absence of craft. The assigned value to the readymade is nearly entirely conceptual, relating to the second degree of illusion, while traditional aestheticization, on the other hand, is in the craft and its intent to act upon the first degree of illusion:

- The first degree comprises the reactionary to the sensorial (which I denominate *le ressenti*). It includes the earliest instance of meaning attribution.
- The second degree is an illusory summation that requires *more than one* of the variables to relate to the abstract, to the non-physical. This is the realm of conceptualization.

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[11] *Adorno, Adorno, and Tiedeman, Aesthetic Theory, 153.*
[12] "Interview with Marcel Duchamp."

A great majority of the artworks that have shone through pre-Duchampian history are reliant upon aesthetics, rarely exploring the second degree. Indeed, with religion, or more encompassingly, propaganda, being the primary message of art, the focus had to be on the first degree. Furthermore, consideration in the second degree was a disservice to its function. For instance, the Sistine Chapel's ceiling is meant to be witnessed in awe, depicting the magistral glory of the human–god relationship. It is not, however, taken to be a hyperbolic satire questioning the manipulation of ideology. Such works would rather dissimulate the concept behind mesmerizing aesthetics.

In the wake of the readymade, a differentiation appeared in whether or not concept was a requirement for the qualification of something as art. There are, therefore, four denotations the spectator can choose to make:

1a. Art is required to pass a threshold (varying subjectively) of aesthetic/craft (first degree).
  b. Art is not required to pass a threshold (varying subjectively) of aesthetic/craft.
2a. Art is required to pass a threshold (varying subjectively) of concept (second degree).
  b. Art is not required to pass a threshold (varying subjectively) of concept.

Subjectivities in the choice of denotations, the threshold, and the measures of concept and aesthetic, make the spectator play a vital role in the art: they act upon it as it acts upon them. To underscore this, it is useful to use Augusto Boal's term "spect-actor."[13] First, the artist frames the art with a title, context, place, time, presentation, et cetera. Then, the spect-actor completes the framing with the illusions they derive from their experience. Art is the framing as art by the artist and the spect-actor. Since there is a praiseful connotation to calling something "art", it is tempting to shift the definition to fit what one places value upon, but there is no objective definition.

The worth of an aesthetic work has a low standard deviation compared to that of a conceptual work, due to the metric being less abstract and being less demanding of the spect-actor. The aesthete therefore has more control over the success of their practice, which

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[13] Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

proves more convenient in a capitalist market. As Huhn Thomas observes: "Adorno states that a 'certain sadness' or grief accompanies all works of art because of the pervasive entanglement of meaning and illusion."[14] This grief is that of casualty. Every artist builds their siege tower to send their infantry of illusions over the ramparts of the spect-actor's mind. Some make it, some don't. Some are spies that return home. Such is the artist's battle.

The artist's capacity to frame illusion is essential. For instance, the importance of a title—perhaps the most considered framing device—can be put forth as such: an exhibit consists of all identical artworks, with the same frame, in the same room, by the same artist. Each one is simply a dotted line that crosses the canvas horizontally, but they are all titled differently.

"Unidimensional Labyrinth"	"Line/Segments"
"USA/MEXICO"	"Cut here"
"Morse"	"Untitled #1"

In addition to title variations, one can imagine artist and context variations, such as seven different artists, with the printouts hanging outside a primary school classroom, or one artist, graduate of the Beaux-Arts, whose frames populate the white walls of Gagosian.

Nevertheless, in assessing value, the artist is subordinate to the spect-actor. A work's value is gleaned from external sources, as if from a panel of a million leering judges. With the final word, the spect-actors can elevate or decimate any work, as is within the power of the individual. The collective works as a representative democracy, with some votes weighing more than others. Art critic Ben Davis demonstrates this with auteur theory, which elevated those who had a signature aesthetic. "The same conceptual apparatus that could reach back in time to transform Raphael in his Renaissance workshop into an autonomous visionary could transform Hitchcock, working for Paramount, into his distant cousin: Hitchcock the Auteur."[15] In this sense, an artist is simply a capitalist who has done a good job branding and marketing. One who wants to make a career simply plays the politician with their manipulation of illusion. More so, that is, than the artist who struggles against the system.

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[14] Huhn, "Adorno's Aesthetics of Illusion," 182.
[15] Davis, *Art in the After-Culture: Capitalist Crisis and Cultural Strategy*, 23.

Without a spect-actor, there cannot be art. Note that the artist can be their own spect-actor. In musical composition, there is no spect-actor but the artist, and the artwork then exists only in their mind. Viewing composition and performance to be mutually exclusive concepts—though there may be an overlap within the process of making music—composition must be combined with performance to form art. Analogizing this to painting, it is equivalent to scribing a detailed description of the mental image of an *œuvre* you wish to create, without actually painting it. In his essay "Composition and Its Various Gestures," Boulez writes that "a composition truly exists only when material destined for performance is set in motion."[16] This holds true for the concert format, but in the case of *DÉS.ILLUSIONS*, it is a captured layering of parts by a sole performer. One may go see a performance at, say, eight thirty on a Friday night, but a recording, though also temporally fixated, is a reiteration. Every instant of a recording's existence is filled with a performance potential, much like a painting always has a potential for being observed and experienced, as fulfilled by the spect-actor. Indeed, the completion of any artwork is out of the artist's hands; they write the bill, advocate it, and hope it gets passed into law. This essay is part of my framing of *DÉS.ILLUSIONS*.

The Artist as Illusion

Though the notion of artist is an illusion—as the term is used in this essay—it is also a concept that enters the second degree of illusion. The artist is much like the author. In Foucault's essay "What is an Author?", he deconstructs our designation of authorship as "only a projection" comprising "the operations we force texts to undergo,"[17] that is, the additions and subtractions of illusions predicated upon texts. This projection of *author* on the individual bears much resemblance to that of *artist*, a branding made from our association of criteria that get checked off in our definition of something as art. Illusory and disconnected from any empirical reality, these projections constitute a break from the individual that Barthes qualifies as a death:

> As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of

16 Boulez, *Music Lessons: The Collège de France Lectures*, 87.
17 Foucault, "What Is an Author?," 213–14.

the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.[18]

Given that narratives are inevitable, there comes a disconnection, loss of grounding, that abstracts the author and artist into the second degree, in a realm of conceptuality. In the piece "MON NÉANT," which already presents a narrative as defined by the listener, I used Max (MSP) to code a disembodiment from the human dialogue. The figure below shows the sampling element of the Max patch: mid-way through the composition, the sound transitions sources from voice and guitar to computer generation through pseudo-randomness. This additional displacement can be seen as a second death, that of the person designated as artist. As the layers compile, the simulacra will bury us.
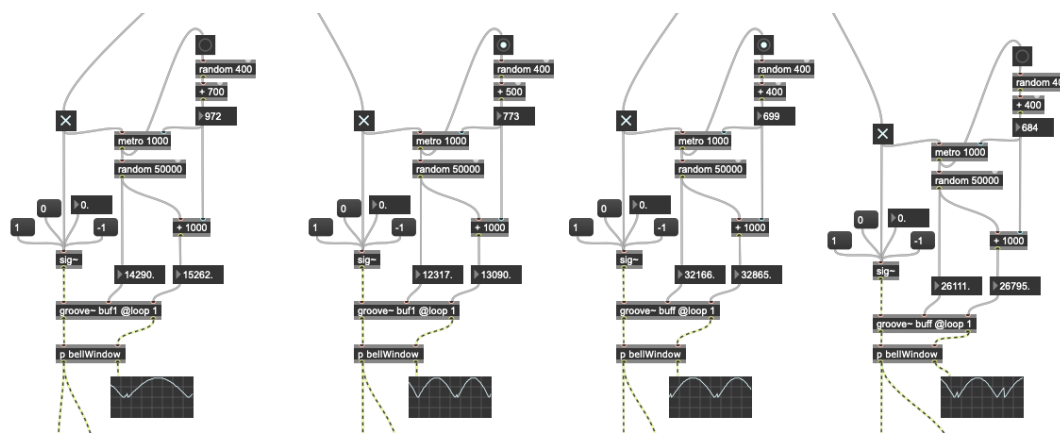
Screenshot of Max Patch "MON NÉANT," fig. 1

Language and Semiotics as Illusion

"Plus la peine de faire le procès aux mots. Ils ne sont pas plus creux que ce qu'ils charrient."[19]

- Samuel Beckett

Language is no place for philosophy, but philosophy must place itself within the bias of language. Whereas poetry relishes the mirage that words peddle, thoughts and reflections

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[18]Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 142.

[19] Beckett, *Malone Meurt*, 33.

undergo a tortuous disfiguration through the figuration of those same words. In considering the very fundamentals of linguistics, the role of illusion becomes apparent. The Saussurian signifier and signified are empty on their own.[20] The signifier is a "sound-image" transferred aurally, but the signified is a conceptual illusion, constituting the sign as belonging to the second degree of illusion. Language is then a series of psychological summations forming a system. It is the mereology of linguistics and literature.

The piece "ÉTUDE DE SOI(S)" uses language, as an external governance, to study the self. What makes up the bed of the composition is a decomposition of the sign: signifiers are broken up into phonemes, resulting in severing the signified. Max (MSP) is used to generate this layer of sound by intertwining recordings of French and English phonetics. When the narrative layer begins, these are then reconstructed into "Frankenstein" signifiers, thus regaining their counterpart signifieds. Music, and indeed arts of all kinds use illusions such as phonetics' signifier and signified, in what Barthes refers to as a "second-order semiological system."[21] This system resembles a nested signifier-signified-sign triangle. Though he is describing mythology, art inherently has a byproduct of myth.
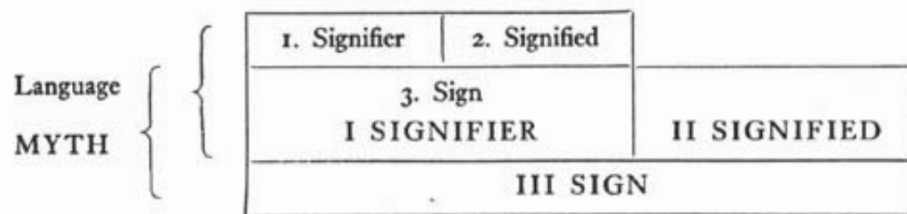
Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972), 113, fig. 2

In painting, the signifier (1.) comprises the brushstrokes, the colors, and other visual elements. The signified (2.) is the illusion: the image created by pointillism, the bowl of fruit in a *nature morte*, the simultaneous perspectives of cubism. In music/sound, the signifier (1.) is the timbre (the interplay of frequencies and their intensities), the melodic contours, and other sonic elements. The signified (2.) is in the recognition: a horn section of a jazz band, a sonata, or the type of harmony. These come together to create the *denoted*—the work without myth—and the

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[20] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 111–112.
[21] Barthes, 113.

signifier (I) is created but still empty. The myth cannot be extracted from our experience of art. The signified (II) is the *connoted*: all the associations made in the spect-actor's mind. This sequentially comes together to form the sign (III), the myth, the art.

Julia Kristeva, through her notion of intertextuality, observes that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another."[22] This is also true of all semiotics-based disciplines. Some of the tiles of this mosaic are visible, while others are merely a silhouette, or simply invisible. For instance, *DÉS.ILLUSIONS* at times overtly reflects influences of avant-garde composers such as Xenakis, Penderecki, or Reich, that have been, in Kristeva's terms, "absorbed and transformed". However, it is not this "mosaic of quotations" that makes the work, as we illude it to be, but rather, it makes the *denoted*, and not the myth.

As previously illustrated, our illusions go beyond language. Susanne Langer, in her work *Philosophy in a New Key*, wrote that "the modern mind is an incredible complex of impressions and transformations; and its product is a fabric of meanings that would make the most elaborate dream of the most ambitious tapestry-weaver look like a mat."[23] Though we only form understanding through the product of these "impressions and transformations" that I am here calling illusions, we may not be able to identify these in our minds. Concretely, synaptic vesicles release their neurotransmitter and contribute to our experience and construction of reality. But where lies the very first abstraction? There is surely a realm of signs that our mind's eye cannot see into. Indeed, Langer postulates that "we are tempted to believe our thought moves without images or words," but it is "signs and discursive symbols" that "are telescoped into such small cues of perception and denotation."[24] In a near future, we hope to be able to more accurately understand the brain's movement of thought. Perhaps then we will attribute signs to types of thought movements or patterns, and will be able to draw a continuous map from the sensory reception to the illusion of reality.

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[22] Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," 37.
[23] Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 227.
[24] Langer, 230.

Functional Harmony and the Song as Cultural Illusion

"Who is in charge of our sensations? The answer is experience. While human nature largely determines how we hear the *notes*, it is nurture that lets us hear the *music*."[25] Jonah Lehrer, in his work *Proust was a Neuroscientist*, spotlights the difference in music (as could be expanded to art in general) between nature and nurture. Relating back to Barthes' *Mythologies*, to create the sign of the myth (the *music*), the signifier (the *notes*) must be summed with the signified, which is created through nurture. It can be understood that the appeal of functional harmony mathematically through ratios of tension and release pleases our brains, but this does not elucidate why we are emotionally gripped by music. That question is answered by illusion, as influenced by nurture and experience.

The movement of "New Music" was initially fueled by the desire to challenge nurture. It came from a position of questioning, daring to journey beyond the comfort zone of music at the time. Schoenberg, in his *Theory of Harmony*, states that "those who so love comfort will never seek where there is not definitely something to find."[26] Discomfort is a requirement in seeking any increment of novelty in art. Throughout *DÉS.ILLUSIONS*, I sought unknowns by departing from what I knew to be musical. This search for novelty is also predicated upon the listener's willingness to leave the desire for comfort behind. Still, the questioning artist or listener finds difficulty in persistently maintaining that quality. We cannot appreciate that which we do not understand, that which we cannot assimilate with preexisting codes. Even Schoenberg felt it necessary to codify atonality. It is when we are compelled to create new codes—new illusions—that we grow and learn. However, at the very moment that one overcomes the frustrations of one's inability to assimilate the new with already acquired knowledge, the new loses its novelty. In codifying the 12-tone system, Schoenberg locked the door on those explorations. The consequent compositions were then within the scope of comfort that comes with an understanding.

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[25] Lehrer, *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*, 140.
[26] Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*, 2.

Not all avant-garde novelty gets codified so clearly however. Yet, starting during the very first listening of something that contains novelty, the illusions form in our mind that provide an understanding, thus voiding the novelty. Throughout my works I used avant-garde innovations as old symbols, like standing witness to the ruins of what once was great. Still today, bathed in irony, its traditions forge onwards, in a bittersweet remembrance of the rise and fall of an innovating movement. Adorno, having studied under Berg, already noted this in the 1960s, writing that "the concept of the avant-garde, reserved for many decades for whatever movement declared itself the most advanced, now has some of the comic quality of aged youth."[27] In "ÉTUDE DE SOI(S)," I sought to evoke this "aged youth" in using a 12-tone matrix to formulate the acoustic guitar layering.

	I0	I3	I5	I6	I10	I9	I11	I7	I8	I4	I2	I1	
P0	A	C	D	D#	G	F#	G#	E	F	C#	B	A#	R0
P9	F#	A	B	C	E	D#	F	C#	D	A#	G#	G	R9
P7	E	G	A	A#	D	C#	D#	B	C	G#	F#	F	R7
P6	D#	F#	G#	A	C#	C	D	A#	B	G	F	E	R6
P2	B	D	E	F	A	G#	A#	F#	G	D#	C#	C	R2
P3	C	D#	F	F#	A#	A	B	G	G#	E	D	C#	R3
P1	A#	C#	D#	E	G#	G	A	F	F#	D	C	B	R1
P5	D	F	G	G#	C	B	C#	A	A#	F#	E	D#	R5
P4	C#	E	F#	G	B	A#	C	G#	A	F	D#	D	R4
P8	F	G#	A#	B	D#	D	E	C	C#	A	G	F#	R8
P10	G	A#	C	C#	F	E	F#	D	D#	B	A	G#	R10
P11	G#	B	C#	D	F#	F	G	D#	E	C	A#	A	R11
	RI0	RI3	RI5	RI6	RI10	RI9	RI11	RI7	RI8	RI4	RI2	RI1	

12-Tone Matrix, "ÉTUDE DE SOI(S)," fig. 3

Structure, being formed by illusion, is used as a way to create understanding. But what lies in understanding is inherently banal and comfortable. The piece "CHORALE" alludes to structure, placing a starting point in Bach's chorales. However, it evolves to be anything but a chorale. Schoenberg, with his love of codification, clarified that "the chorale is articulated by a pause at the end of each musical phrase" between which "contrasts are only moderate" and are bound together by the "uniformity of the rhythmic movement."[28] To these regulations, my piece is uncaring, though it still contains hints of originating in this chorale form. He also states that the chorale follows a "virtually complete lack of motivic activity in development and

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[27] Adorno, Adorno, and Tiedeman, *Aesthetic Theory*, 24–25.
[28] Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*, 289.

connection."[29] This is then widely disregarded in "CHORALE" as a recurring melody takes shape, participating in its divergence from tradition.

Excerpt of "CHORALE," fig. 4

Traditions from around the world often bear strong similarities. These take part in nurture, and therefore must be challenged by the questioning individual. Traditions in music often are shaped by culture, yet are built using the same materials. Innate likings of things that have an ease of understanding, such as patterns, repetitions, or structure, provide us with a drive for comfort as well as a propensity to reject or fear discomfort. For instance, this is shown in the globality of Euclidean rhythms (rhythms generated using the Euclidean algorithm), most often used in ostinatos that somewhat lull the listener into the repeated pattern.[30] The song "PSYCHOPOLITIK" uses Max (MSP) to randomly generate layers of Euclidean rhythms acting upon samples of acoustic guitar taps. This creates the rhythmic foundation that revolves around itself, playing into the psychological themes of the song.

All art forms are married to cultural illusions. It is this nurture that guides the spect-actor in their evaluation of an artwork. As the artist questions these static illusions and breathes life into culture, propelling the static into movement, they seek particles of novelty. Evidently, this was once the endeavor of the avant-garde. However, the new is always rejected, for when it is accepted through codifications and the creation of illusions, it ceases to be.

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[29] Schoenberg, 289.
[30] Toussaint, "The Euclidean Algorithm Generates Traditional Musical Rhythms," 1.

The Self as Illusion

A myriad of illusions scuffle around in our minds, in an absurd attempt at a comprehensive solidification of the self. Carlo Rovelli, in his book "The Order of Time," notes the self as composite: "Our present swarms with traces of our past. We are histories of ourselves, narratives."[31] *Narratives*. Precisely, when the self is identified through past experiences of an individual up until the present moment, the illusions form a comprehension of self through narratives that holds true for that particular perspective. But it is a part to a whole—both of which are conceptual. In opposition, the present notion of self is not a narrative as it doesn't belong to a temporal frame. The present doesn't exist in time; it is preceded and succeeded by time, but is an infinitesimal cut. Still, these time-relative projections of self are interior. The exterior projections are further removed, and only begin during the mirror stage.

The Lacanian mirror stage, considered ongoing between 6 and 18 months of age, happens as infants become mesmerized by their reflection, when they still have not assimilated it with themself.[32] This stage could be seen as recognition without understanding, the fascination of the new while the illusions are still taking shape. It can be considered that, though we are not born a *tabula rasa*, newborns begin with only the capability to form first degree illusions. They think via "proto-propositional content, which involves objects, properties, and relations rather than concepts."[33] Though the self is construed as conceptual, there is a point of existence where it is based only on sense-perception. However, as early as this notion develops, the second degree extrapersonal self, that is, what others conceptualize of you, comes first. Perhaps because of this and its inaccessibility, we constantly chase after it.

Furthermore, the cultural self is one imposed by the extrapersonal self on the personal self. It is this imposition that "ÉTUDE DE SOI(S)" explores, through the English and French languages as reflections of culture, and their noteworthy overlap. This relates to David Pollock and Ruth van Reken's characterization of the term, coined by sociologist Ruth Useem, Third Culture Kid (TCK), or more broadly the Cross-Culture Kid (CCK), who is brought up in a

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[31] Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, 178.
[32] Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 1.
[33] Bermúdez and Cahen, "Nonconceptual Mental Content," 5.

different culture than their parents, and lives in limbo, dealing with "rootlessness and restlessness": "TCKs are raised in a neither/nor world. It is neither fully the world of their parents' culture (or cultures) nor fully the world of the other culture (or cultures) in which they were raised."[34] My piece aims to express this "cultural abstraction / division" that is so growingly prevalent in the world; we are this conflict of opposing forces, both within and without.

Like particles colliding, the external and the internal are accelerated to near lightspeed, and, beyond our sense-perception, create the spectacle that is our illusion of self. In Beckett's vivisection of the self in *The Unnamable*, the narrator posits:

> "[...] perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as a foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either [...]"[35]

Lyrically datafied, the self is a plane of infinite points, being pushed in and out of a neutral alignment by the external and the internal forces, with a barely substantial command of the internal. This plane, without thickness, is forged into a shell, as hollow as it is thin, belonging to a third degree of illusion—one beyond the reach of sense-perception, inhabited by illusions of illusions. Within this abstract third degree, a simulacra: with each collision of opposing forces, the shell is a tympanum, expelling waves of sound that build, resonate, and fade.

The external is multitudinous and complex, and we seek to understand it. A strong sub-current of this enduring force is that of Althusser's concept of the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA)[36]. The religious, the educational, the familial—to name a few—, are all of great influence on our shell, leaving little room for any internal ideology (if we are to believe there is such a thing). Equally, Han's previously cited observations contribute to these ISAs. Foiling this, our meager command of the internal can attempt to parry these ISAs through

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[34] Pollock and van Reken, *Third Culture Kids*, 4.
[35] Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 352.
[36] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 8.

vehement questioning. Here, Sartre's existentialism lays a framework: "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself."[37] Though perhaps a bit reductionist, this utterance conveys the ability to, through questioning, formulate one's own reality. The more awareness one has of the illusions that have formed and are forming, the more they can counter the heavy weight of the external. It nonetheless remains a losing battle.

Belief as Illusion

"Whenever knowledge becomes rigid it stops living."[38]

- Anselm Kiefer

Belief is an inevitability of life—and a useful one at that. In a necessary human paradox, the *static* of belief propels *movement* like no other. Yet wherever our questioning self does not pass to sow seeds of revolution, belief rules with an iron fist. It is movement that is life's primary force. The narrating voice in "MOBULA" is denominated as such in reference to the mobula ray, a species that either remains in motion or ceases to live. This is also true of the personal self: if the foil loses all pliability, it will break. In Descartes' notion of *dubito ergo cogito*, the negative is implied such that if one doesn't doubt, one doesn't think. I believe that doubt is intrinsic to thought. Certainly it is irremovable from movement in thought.

Belief is itself neutral. It is a strong confidence in belief—faith—that is dangerous. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard, under the nom de plume of Johannes de silentio, qualifies faith as "the highest passion in a human being."[39] Through the story of Abraham and Isaac, he illustrates all too well that reaching this height of passion leads to extreme and rationally unjustifiable action. What benefit may come of the teleological suspension of the ethical, the willingness to murder his beloved son? Could Abraham here not be likened to a Crusader? The highest passion is inherently a dangerous one, and danger is a potential for an increase in human suffering that is bound to be fulfilled.

[37] Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," 3.
[38] Lawrence and Knausgård, *Anselm Kiefer: Transition from Cool to Warm*.
[39] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de Silentio*, 163.

In Siri Hustvedt's *The Delusions of Certainty*, she cautions: "The languages of our ideas are contagious. Words move from one person to another, and we are all vulnerable to coming down with a case of ideas, an infection that may last a lifetime."[40] In fact, ideas are infections that we are constantly thwarting. However, it is the tenacity of those that have become impervious to questioning that we must be wary of. Aiming to sonify this, the piece "MON NÉANT" illustrates the oblique relationship of belief and the movement of questioning. The former is in the stagnation of the chordal vocals, while the latter lies in the sliding flow of the guitar layerings, that for a brief instant coalesce into a chord, only to vanish back into omnidirectional movement.

There is little comfort in questioning belief, other than perhaps in the relief of fulfilling a set moral duty. Schoenberg writes that "it is thus easy to have a 'Weltanschauung', a 'philosophy', if one contemplates only what is pleasant and gives no heed to the rest. The rest—which is just what matters most."[41] A *Weltanschauung* can be here taken to mean a system of beliefs, or static illusions acting as solutions. As opposed to frameworks, that stipulate nothing and demand nothing, solutions prescribe and provide: answers to fill a void.

My void. *Mon néant*.
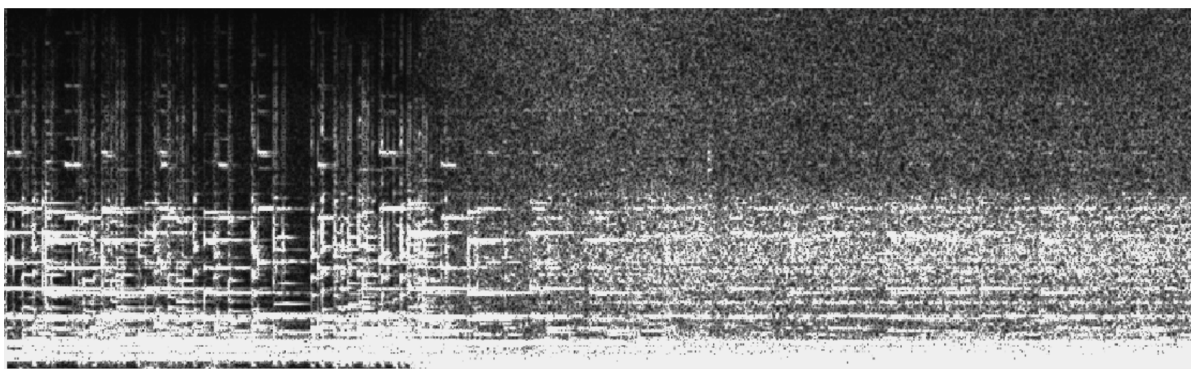
Spectrogram from Max Patch, "MON NÉANT," fig. 5

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[40] Hustvedt, "The Delusions of Certainty," 149.
[41] Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*, 2.

Metaphysics/Being as Illusion

Heidegger's *Being and Time* ends with this question: "Does *time* itself manifest itself as the horizon of *Being*?"[42] This frames Being not as an entity, but as an image. If we were to imagine time as the horizon of Being, it serves as the anchor of perspective, informing Being of its up/down orientation, but leaving it nonetheless bereft of cardinal points. Our life spans from its beginning to its end along the horizon, a line segmented by the frame that is our perspective. We enjoy the immersion, and are enveloped, consumed by this landscape; we don't dare linger near its perimeter. The curious–brave or stupid–may be compelled to face the extremities. Others are contented by the mirage. The former must face existential angst, while the latter is transfixed by the uncanny *trompe-l'œil*. Both in their own little worlds. The angst-ridden journey obstinately to the extremities of this horizon of Being, but are ipso facto halted by the frame that encloses perception.

This expedition without end turns quickly from a hero's journey to one of grieving. Here the curious becomes the existential:

1. In denial are those who retreat to their dens of belief, or shuffle off into another—but just the same. A philosophical suicide, as Camus would term it.
2. Anger boils as the failings of a belief system burn through the shut eyelids. Belief begins to melt through the frustration of the grown ineffectuality of defunct solutions.
3. The bargaining stage is the last attempt at sewing shut the holes of the wool pulled over the mind's eye. A partial acceptance occurs to justify the hope that remains moored to the dock.
4. Depression happens when that line of hope is severed, and reality becomes listless and drifting. Many forfeit the journey here and seek to return to square one.
5. Acceptance of the Absurd is coming to terms with our desire to find meaning and purpose remaining unfulfilled. When acceptance is reached, the angst is relieved, and we regain the control and freedom of our existence, setting our own course—more or less, something to that effect?

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[42] Heidegger, Macquarrie, and Robinson, *Being and Time*, 488.

It is this experience of grief that "MOBULA" attempts to paint a picture of. The monologue takes inspiration from Beckett's *Not I* and the unreserved extrication of the extraneous. I characterize a voice, resounding in itself and in nothingness, symbolically coming of age, their "feathers shedding," and attempting to make sense for themself. As Mobula contemplates philosophical suicide as a leap "over the gaping canyon,"[43] they are enticed by the lure of higher meaning—yet are held fast by their inability to choose bliss over angst. Is it acceptance or resignation? A ponderance of liminal distinction; two sides, same coin.

One may form an illusion of meaning through existence, determining an axiality around which to plot our realities. Without it, we would be left to err in disorientation, having *become* the Absurd, non-functional—a graph without axes. Camus' absurd hero aims to face the axis' artificiality, by "overcoming his phantoms and approaching a little closer to his naked reality."[44] He champions this struggle, this rebellion, which is in itself an axis—and even begins to plot a solution through *l'homme révolté* and the contentedness of Sisyphus. An existence cannot be assigned an essence *and* face the Absurd. Sartre suggests an alternative axis, but we are condemned to the freedom of having to define it for ourselves. Though he is *descriptive* in this framework, Sartre does make a concession to *prescriptivity* when he speaks of the subjectivity of this freedom also having an external responsibility: "In fashioning myself I fashion man."[45] Furthermore, he advocates not letting passion excuse rash actions. This resembles more a *Weltanschauung*.

We exist in, of, and by illusion. Beyond it, even *nothingness* is paradoxical, since the word forms the sign: it is an illusion meant to mean illusionless. There is a wall that our comprehension cannot scale due to the limitations of using illusion as the tool for building reality. That wall lies at the edge of the second degree of illusion, because existence cannot be acknowledged without its concept. Much like art, Being happens only when one qualifies it as such. Just as consciousness cannot be acknowledged without the consciousness of something,[46]

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[43] See Appendix
[44] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 115.
[45] Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," 2.
[46] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, 15.

we cannot acknowledge (i.e. build an illusion of) what may precede illusion. One could at best define it as a negation: not-somethingness.

Evermore, we search for axes to revolve around. One could be satisfied with Bergson's axis: "As craftsmen of our own life, and even its artist when we so desire, we continually work at kneading the matter given us by the past and present, by heredity and circumstances, into a unique form, new, original, and unforeseeable as the form a sculptor gives to clay."[47] Its poeticism is alluring. But, once more, this clay and this sculptor cannot hurdle the second degree of illusion. The aim of accepting the Absurd without fabricating any essence to existence is a futile one. The foundations of our humanity, what drives us onwards, is a force that precedes our notion of existence. *Le ressenti* (the re-sensed) resides in the first degree of illusion; it is the very beginnings of the experiential. It englobes the reactionary, that is, to the reception of sense-data, both within and without the body. It is the first instance of consciousness where we attribute a preliminary illusion to our experience. *Le ressenti* is the first belief. Before we can conceptualize Being, we have already constructed meaning. Like an inbuilt failsafe, *le ressenti* is an armor around the naked reality, an intrinsic unacceptance of the Absurd. This is the idea that, if one twiddles their thumbs, the passive comprehension of its occurrence through our sense-experience is our first attribution of meaning, and that, hypothetically, if the mind was otherwise entirely inert, it would be *the* meaning to life.

Perhaps this unavoidability of experience through illusion can appease our desire for a higher meaning. *Le ressenti* can serve as an axis around which to plot our realities, all the while grounding ourselves as close as possible to an honest reality. In doing so, we populate our reality with a purpose, one that reasons against suicide as such: refraining us from that act is simply the desire to perdure in our experience of *le ressenti* and the reality that we have constructed from it. This stemming from a goal that is no different to that of science—making the smallest possible leaps. We must draw in a pointillistic way, and the smallest distance between points makes for the strongest image.

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[47] Bergson, "The Possible and the Real."

Throughout the pieces of *DÉS.ILLUSIONS*, I focused on illustrating my struggle in facing the inevitability of the illusory leap from Camus' "naked reality." The opening track depicts the character that is lost within their own recursive web and cannot make up from down. In pieces like "CHORALE" and "MOBULA," the computerized signal processing (using Max) recalls scientific attempts to circumnavigate illusion in an abstraction of senses through external mediums. Still the senses are a chokepoint that all communication must pass through. "ÉTUDE DE SOI(S)," in its extrication of signifieds, leaves the spect-actor to contemplate the aural *ressenti* of language. In a binary world, it searches for meaninglessness extra-sensorially, bargaining for a reality beyond our own illusions.

It is not with a dictative intention that I formulate these thinkings, but one of conversation. The torch of questioning wants to light fires. It is its motion that keeps us alive, even if it is that of twiddling thumbs. As we may grapple with the myth of language and its limitations, it bears a beauty and a humor that truly shine only in the depths of hopelessness. In a sense, the semiological dovetails with the semi-logical: best to communicate ideas when they are still forming, lest they concretize into faith. Though music and art have the power to build myth and shout their illusions in resonant halls, writing is a whisper rippling through town, calling upon its people to spill into the streets and spatter their words–until these words cascade into a revolution, roaring loud enough, just loud enough, for whispers to trickle into the next town.

Appendix

MOBULA (Script) - Luc Trahand

A voice existing simultaneously in a void and in a space. Somewhat frenzied. Invariant swarm, constant chaotic surroundings underlying the narration.

MOBULA: down … down … down … feathers shedding … soon to be … coming in on 19 … 19 revolutions … how odd I feel … felt … down … down … out … at odds with this place … every place indeed … made out to be … rambling peripatetic … pathetic oddity … 19 jigsaw pieces … no sense, no picture … question? -shoot! … shoot … shot my shot … fish in a barrel … they muttered pitifully … pity, pity … of their pity I'm no subject … object of ridicule … shoot me … shoot … but all is silent … soundless void eating away … nibbling at my consciousness … gnawing … clawing … tooth and nail and … all silent but for … something … pounding … pumping … thumping … ex vivo … the missing piece … ah! … how? … don't! … no dice, no matter … no … ah! … *(chuckle)* … just now realising … ex vivo, no volition–envole–volit- … of my own … own volition … I own volition … own volatility … own fuck all … *(chuckle)* … boiling … it's all boiling over … how? … leaping … bounding … boiling … over … over … if I realise, have I made a leap? … begging … what did I leap over? … no matter … a leap would mean an end … there are no ends … no ends … or just the one … one and done … not so done, not under done … don't! … no, I must leap … no, I might have been wrong … like always … again, again … boiling over … let's pretend … pretend it prepended my penchant for preternatural patterning … what a nifty little thing … so quaint … a mirage in the salt dunes … an expanse of celestion clovers … a riptide upholstered in a skin suit … and the void, nibbling … the chasm crossed over in leaps by the more committal minds … they leave behind … chemtrails … woven bridges, stitches over the gaping canyon … contortions of volition … the corals' colours calling … calling cutting … through a thick grey haze … I stray … this way, then that … a sob, sobbing … a sigh, sighing … Mobula! … a cry … *(chuckle)* … crying … and the ceaselessly enduring obligation … down … down … down … turning … turning and turning and turning *(slowly garbled and transformed into "entering entering")* …

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