

Preamble 4

Lesser: *Metatechnic*

***Metatechnic* (2019):** number of players indeterminate, forces indeterminate, duration indeterminate.

The score of *Metatechnic* doesn't actually have even that much by way of instruction. It is composed entirely of graphics (except my initials and the year of composition in one of the corners), rejecting text, instructions, or an overview of any kind (figure 1). This preamble will focus on two matters: (1) the score (see figure 1); and (2) the documented interpretation that is a part of the archive that is this thesis. Thus, the first half will probe questions relating to graphic scores in general, while the second half will focus on the *particular* post-facto interpretation found in this archive—in other words, it will focus on *a* documented outcome of the act of interpreting *this* graphic score, an after-the-fact discussion of a particular performance that both reflects further on the questions found in the first section and also poses supplementary questions that pertain to deconstruction but are related only to this interpretation. To distinguish between two phenomena that have, effectively, the same name, I will use *Metatechnic* to refer to the score and *Metatechnic* (Ableton) to refer to the interpretation.

Metatechnic poses questions regarding two broad areas of deconstructive thought: the first, authorship and agency; the second (relating to this specific performance), time and the archive—and regarding how the two come together in the environment of 'live' documentation, especially documentation which shapes the event being documented in what Derrida calls a '*hauntology* . . . irreducible and first of all to everything it makes possible: ontology, theology, positive or negative onto-theology.'¹

Agency and Authorship: *Metatechnic* as Score

"You dream of writing a book. The book is already written."

(Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*)²

If, as Derrida asserts, everything is subject to the play of the trace, is part of an infinite archive, without origin, and only discernible through its *différance*—

There, account taken of the bit and the sublingual slaver, of caesura and agglutination, there is no sign, no tongue, no name, and above all no "primitive word" in the Cratylean sense; nor any more some transcendental privilege for an elementary couple where the analytical regression should finally stop, nor even, since no being [*étant*] or sense is represented there, a mim(s)eme [*mimême*].³

¹ Derrida, 2006, 63. For a full discussion of hauntology in *Metatechnic*, *Pole* and *Four*⁶, see *Hauntology and its Supplements*.

² Jabès, 1991, 207

³ Derrida, 1990, 235.

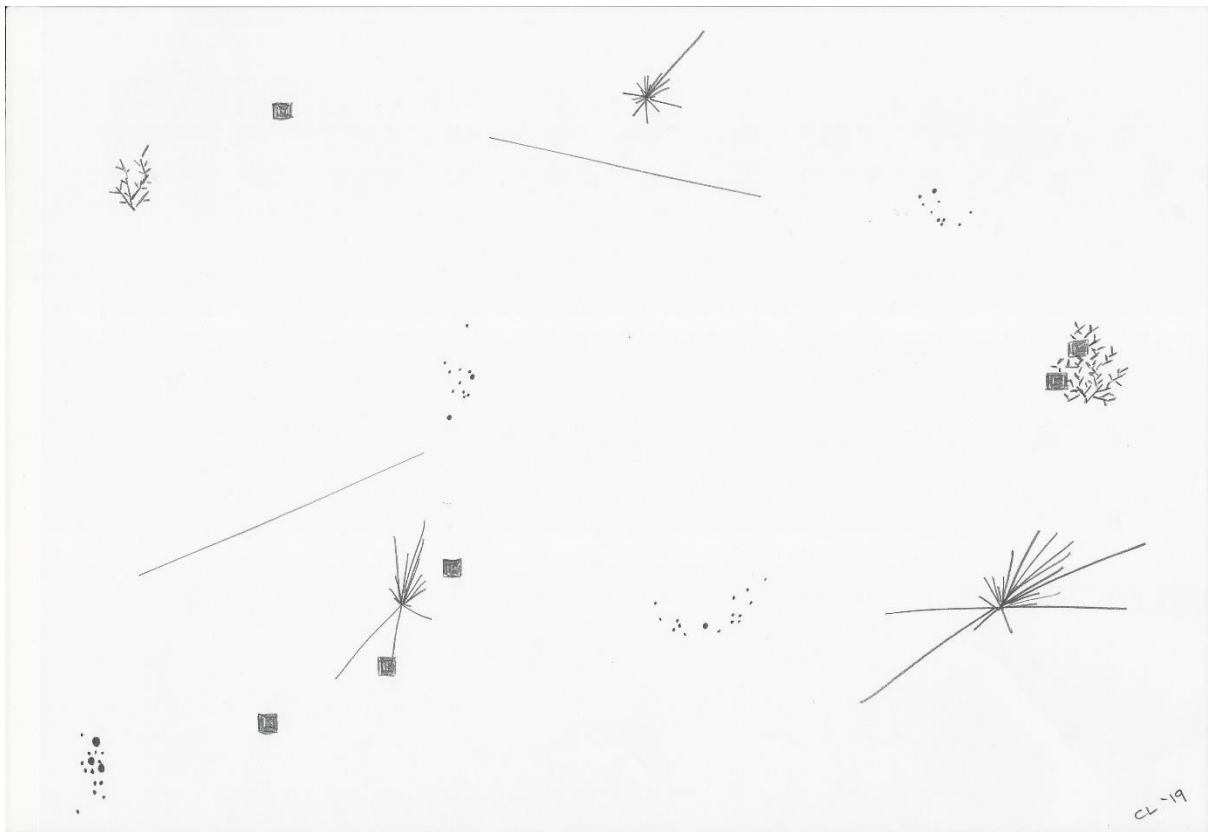


Figure 1. *Metatechnic* score

—then I should, perhaps, open with locating *Metatechnic* within an archive of similar scores, which may or may not share similar concerns. In no way should this be considered a comprehensive taxonomy, though; it is simply designed to show that, as with all books, this one, in a sense, has already been written, is part of an endless circulation. Hence, the scores listed comprise a selection of possible options regarding graphic notation: graphics with no text or guidance given (Cardew's *Treatise*), graphics with some text or guidance (Cage's *Aria*), hybrids that are part standard, part graphic or part text (Cardew's *Octet '61 for Jasper Johns*), text 'cues' for improvisation, in the sense of a call to action (Stockhausen's *Aufwärts*), and works of art that approach the same question from a different perspective, that is, musical concepts that prompt or inspire 'art,' such as the act of painting or drawing, rather than art (in the sense of graphic notation) that prompts music (Kandinsky's *Fugue*). Hence, obvious choices would include works by: Roman Haubenstock-Ramati (1919-1994) such as *Décisions* (1959-61, a graphic score in 16 parts for unspecified forces), *Batterie* (1969, percussion), and *Kreise* (1972, Sprechstimme and percussion, graphics and text); Cornelius Cardew (1936-81), such as *Octet '61 for Jasper Johns* (1961, unspecified forces, the score states only 'not necessarily for piano'), and *Treatise* (1963-67, completely unspecified, graphics only); Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928-2007), *Plus-minus* (1963, symbolic notation, forces unspecified), which allows a certain (limited) degree of performer agency over form, and *Aus den sieben Tagen* (1968), which even though it is a 'text' score, I include here because of the unconventional ways it asks musicians to approach *interpretation*, and also because *Unbegrenzt* uses a symbol as well as words; and by John Cage (1912-1992), in works such as *Fontana Mix*, (1958, a means to create a piece of music, for example *Fontana mix* for tape, or *Aria* for vocal performer) where graphic notation in combination

with transparencies allows *chance* the agency to control the duration, order, and timbre of events (however, *Fontana Mix* does not permit *performer* agency in the standard sense), *Aria* (1958, solo voice of any range), where the graphic notation and text instructions allow for considerably more performer agency, e.g. in the choice of ‘voices’ made by the singer, exact pitches, exact durations and so on, and *Four*⁶ (1992, text and ‘time-bracket’ notation) which permits complete freedom of sound choices in the ‘lexicon’ and limited agency regarding duration. Let us now consider the artist’s point of view—Kandinsky’s, in this case. General titles, such as the *Improvisation* and *Composition* series, certainly *could* reference a musical way of approaching the canvas, but with *Fugue* (1914), *To the Unknown Voice* (1916) and *Contrasting Sounds* (1924), the connection (or ‘play’) becomes more explicit.

With these scores in mind, the closest precedent for *Metatechnic*, musically, would seem to be Cardew’s *Treatise*, although from a purely conceptual perspective, I would equally place it with the Kandinsky canvases. The original concept had been twofold: to devise a work where I could test certain conclusions (then forming) regarding deconstruction, principally related to matters of time and undecidability; but also, of equal importance, to devise a work that was separate from its practice—that is, a work whose interpretations are as multifarious as its interpreters, and for which, moreover, those interpreters can be drawn from any domain, like *Four*⁶, so its ‘users,’ its interpreters, need not be aligned with an ‘expert culture’ of any kind, but, on the other hand, ‘expert culture’ would be as welcome as any other. *Metatechnic* embraces a very wide field of both authorship (performer agency)—which is fluid, and access—which is open.

The score of *Metatechnic* consists of a number of repeated similar, but not identical, symbols, circulating around an empty void, a place of nothingness—or what Mark Fisher calls ‘the scandal of an uncreated thing’ perhaps?⁴ Thus, the score of *Metatechnic* is a visual lexicon of evolving, circulating shapes, with endless performative potentialities. The score can be read in any direction, the players are free to jump symbols, to go backwards or forwards, to create their own path through the score and to create their own not only events, but event-spaces as well. As to the symbols, I can only write here what they suggest visually *to me*: cracking ice, botanical form, labyrinth, and cosmos. Is it possible to say such and such a symbol *means* an action or an event? No; the interpretation is individual to each player. No matter how many players there are, no matter whether they choose to preprogramme their events or to make a totally unrehearsed (‘blind’) performance, the symbols’ only function is to enable *that* performance in *that* moment. As Cage noted, ‘as the music left my home and went from piano to piano and from pianist to pianist, it became clear that not only are two pianists essentially different from one another, but two pianos are not the same either. Instead of the possibility of repetition, we are faced in life with the unique qualities and characteristics of each occasion.’⁵ Every performance is a Derridean supplement of the previous one, a supplement of any rehearsals, and a supplement of the score.⁶

⁴ Fisher, 2016, 43. See also: Herbert Brün (1918-2000), *mutatis mutandis* series (1968) and Anestis Logothetis (1921-1994,) *Labyrinthos* (1965).

⁵ Cage, [1980] 2009, 8.

⁶ We had one rehearsal only before the performance, solely to test the technical capabilities of the Ableton pads. These had been programmed to show different colours for the following modes: an empty cell (white), a full cell (blue), a cell in the process of recording (flashing red) and a cell engaged in playback (green). Cells were arranged in horizontal rows of 4 x 8, making 32 cells in total. It was possible to apply an action (recording or playback) to one cell in each row, meaning that by the end of the piece it was possible to have 8 actions taking place simultaneously for both players—16 in total.

The subcategory of graphic scores that include text instructions raises a supplementary point regarding authorship, but here the emphasis is on authorial control. As interpreters, we are always free to pose questions regarding a score to ourselves (of course), although we are not necessarily free to pose these questions to others (e.g. performers, composers and conductors). However, sometimes the guidance in a score seems to deliberately rebuff this process of questioning by giving too many unbending answers too soon. If a score alleges, in some sense, to give certain affordances, or even to explicitly encourage performer agency, and then withholds that promised freedom, or if the freedom comes with too many strings attached to be much of a freedom at all, then for me (as composer as much as performer), there is a sense of disappointment. It seems to be a missed opportunity. And the disappointment is not that the score has text, or instructions, rules, or controls—for those are a given part of many musical scores, and are often a most welcome addition—but rather that when the text or score gives an impression, an illusion of agency that is then withheld (this would usually occur in the context of working with the composer), it gives a misleading impression of what it is not, and there is a certain feeling of performing under false pretences. This can be considered through two examples:

1. If a score has instructions (whether text based, conventionally notated, or employing symbolic notation), then that score should be open to deconstructive readings, including instances of deliberate pastiche if appropriate. Therefore, if the performer is legitimately ‘playing by the rules’ then the charge of ‘stop doing your *own* thing’ is a highly suspect accusation. Here’s Christian Marclay discussing his own work and, and (later) on working with John Zorn:

There have been performances that I didn’t like as much as others, mainly because the interpreter was trying to outsmart the score, coming up with some gimmick instead of making some interesting music. That’s the danger of giving someone so much freedom.⁷

Is it possible to ‘outsmart’ a score? Wouldn’t that just be the perfectly valid exercise of hermeneutics? If the composer has a definite and fixed view of the outcomes and processes that they want in their work, then why create a score which gives the performers *any* freedom in the first place? It is not impossible to devise a score with clear constraints, that does not allow any affordances that the composer is not prepared to give. So, if the score genuinely permits ‘some gimmick,’ then is it not the case that that ‘gimmick’ is valid, even if it is not to the composer’s liking? In other words, such scores cannot but avoid allowing their readers to bring something extra to the reading (interpretation). All musical notation (including text and graphic notation) is a call to action and, as such, is open to translation as negotiation, misunderstandings and subversion. It is an inevitable (and always possible) consequence of the writing: the hauntology of the archive, the spectre or consequences of its past, coming back to ‘haunt’ it and the future paths not taken, doubly so when any tele-technics are involved, where space, time, and access, are potentially all problematised. Derrida describes this as the “communications” and interpretations, selective and hierarchized production of “information” through channels whose power has grown in an absolutely unheard-of-fashion..., and at the center of this colloquium the question of media tele-technology, economy and power, in their irreducibly spectral dimension.⁸

2. Concerning interpretation again, Christian Marclay adds: ‘when I played in John Zorn’s pieces there was always someone who would use some strategy to negate the music, because there were ways, while playing by the rules, to become a soloist, and decide to do nothing. The silence was a

⁷ Marclay, 2014, 77

⁸ Derrida, 2006, 65.

way to show off one's prowess, but it never served the music well.⁹ Again, this problematises authorship: if, as stated, the player is working within the 'rules,' then the player's contribution must be legitimate. It is a 'writing' of the work within the performative context, and one negative subjective response cannot invalidate it. When the score allows for composers and performers alike to be authors, then the field of possible futures is simply that much wider. *Metatechnic* embraces all performances, whether the composer 'likes' them or not.¹⁰ I want to let the score (I'll call it 'my' score for the time being) unfold in its undecidability as it may—let it flaunt its potential, its *différance*; and if that should include tangles of subjective 'wrongness' (temporal or otherwise), then so be it. It *is*, because of what it is *not...yet*.

Performing the Archive: Tele-technics in *Metatechnic* (Ableton Version)

No book is complete. Is it three times I have written mine?

(Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*)¹¹

Only an author can answer that question. But I would ask in reply, whether perhaps we have all been written on, and numerous times? Whether as composers or performers, we are all authors, subject to the play of the trace, the marks of the archive, yet none of us are authors of anything completely *new*, for we all build on other's foundations. Who those others are, is another question altogether. In Derrida's words: 'the *being* of what we are *is* first of all inheritance, whether we like it, or know it or not. And that... we can only bear witness to it. We inherit the very thing that allows us to bear witness to it.'¹²

I had originally thought I would need to provide some instructions for *Metatechnic*, but I came to the conclusion that it simply wasn't necessary. I never wanted to do my readers' (performers') thinking for them, and giving copious quantities of instructions felt not only superfluous but also a betrayal, a trick, a false promise from a score that alleged to be interested in allowing performer agency. So, I left a map, instead; a map that allows for any interpretative route (which is of course still giving advice to the future—I can't escape that paradox quite so easily). And in one way, that map represents the endless play of the trace, moving through decades of accumulated performing, writing, drawing, and listening experience, but, in the abstract, that map does *not* simply represent me. In *Metatechnic* (Ableton), the map is an archive of touch, of technique, of time, and of memory. It is a map of virtual documentation and its consequences. For *every* performance, it enables a potentiality, it is a map of possible journeys for anyone who chooses to make the first step. And this

⁹ Ibid, 77

¹⁰ Which raises the question of the 'unreliable' author. In other words, are 'authors' the sole arbiters when it comes to their own works? Working with Heinz Holliger on his *Sechs Lieder*, *Mileva Lieder* and *Dörfliche Lieder* (in the summer of 2017), he would 'compose' on the hoof—that is, alter dynamics, pedal marks, and tempi from the recently edited and typeset versions of the score, so the score was more fluid than might be first supposed. When I worked with Stockhausen on *Sternklang* in 1992, he would quite frequently berate his players for making 'mistakes' or 'alterations' when, in actual fact, he had simply forgotten how a particular section sounded—and was thus working from a 'false,' although artistically equally valid, alternate memory.

¹¹ Jabès, 1991, 342.

¹² Derrida, 2006, 68.

map, this ‘book,’ will never be complete. It will be rewritten during every subsequent interpretation. For, as we know, the archive is never closed; as Jabès says: ‘So time passes, tunnel without end.’¹³

“My place is at the threshold”

(Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*)¹⁴

In writing *Metatechnic*, as well as exploring the issues of authorship and agency already mentioned, I wanted to provide a score that would *allow* for the possibility of making a space for an exploratory deconstruction of time in musical terms—more particularly, the undecidability of time and the consequences in live performance of the tele-technic documentation of earlier events. The ephemeral nature of music and, more broadly, sound and the use of Ableton as an instrument of (selective) documentation seemed to lend themselves particularly well to a deconstructive approach. Hence, I wanted the temporal domain of the piece to be able to flow or circulate, but under the independent control of each player, so that none could know what the others would do or when they would do it. In *Metatechnic* (Ableton), there were three players: two pianists and a sound engineer. Both pianists used Ableton Live during the performance to capture, record, re-play, and layer sound events (in combination with the ‘live’ material), and both pianos were prepared in advance, but not to any prescribed design. I had originally intended to prepare the pianos solely as an intertextual nod to Cage, but I came to conclude that there were more possibilities in preparation than just intertextuality.¹⁵ Preparation would allow for a very tactile approach to playing as well as another means to illustrate the passage of time since in the Ableton version, both pianos are de-prepared during the performance. Thus, as the pianos progress back to their original, unprepared states, Ableton allows the selective, player-controlled documentation of increasingly complex, multi-layered ‘bites’ of material from the performance’s ‘past’ to drive the performance forwards—a sort of temporal palindrome.¹⁶ As performers, we approached both the tactile qualities of the preparation and the documentary possibilities of Ableton in different ways. For me, the whole piece works on the pleasure of touch—of tactile considerations pertaining to the piano as instrument as well as deconstructive process, and Ableton as ‘instrument’ as well as potential archive.¹⁷ I deliberately tried to forget which loop was which, apart from in a very broad temporal sense, as I did not want a *specific* musical outcome but rather a gradual layering of time through touch. My duo partner was the opposite—he associated sound and movement equally, retaining an aural and visual map of the loops, so as to make a more ‘standard,’ musically informed performance. The sound engineer was free to interpret the map in any way he chose, in this instance resulting in spatialization and diffusion of the sound throughout the performance space.

¹³ Jabès, 1991, 277.

¹⁴ Jabès, 1991, 17.

¹⁵ Cage makes use of a live de-preparation of the piano in 34’46.776” *for a Pianist* and 31’57.9864” *for a Pianist*. For more information see *Empty Words*, [1980] 2009, 8-9.

¹⁶ I have used the word ‘temporal’ here to make explicit the difference between an audible palindrome that unfolds in time and a visual palindrome that can be comprehended fully in one moment.

¹⁷ Rather like a DJ with turntables.

The use of Ableton references hauntology insofar as it invokes both a multi-layered approach to time and the inevitable 'lost futures' of such an approach, and it also facilitates the process of *shaping* the documentation (allowing for a 'live' repurposing of information) that simultaneously forms the archaeological substrates of *Metatechnic* in this performance. It not only allows for a selective archivization of what is being created (played) but also, during this process, creates what is archived, all the while playing within the labyrinth of time. Thus, "the future is the past coming."¹⁸ Past, present and future fuse; they are all available at the threshold, being present and not present each time a new loop is created, offering a 'repetition *and* first time'¹⁹ as subsequent layers are added. A final string of questions: are the loops documentation or performance, are they present, past or future, are they here or there? All is open to deconstruction: you decide.

References

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¹⁸ Jabès, 1991, 189.

¹⁹ Derrida, 2006, 10.

