


## ORIGINAL PAPER OPEN ACCESS

## A 'New Social Virtuosity'; A Dissonant Manifest(o)

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This paper examines the intersection of music, creativity, and society through the lens of a critical and self-critical appraisal of the *here.here concert series*; ongoing research-led collaboration focusing on transdisciplinary approaches to experimental music with a focus on the socio-political-environmental dynamics at play between *all* involved in a musical encounter. The authors, both academics and composers, contend that experimental music, in its super-local, interpersonal connections, can challenge the conventional and institutional, serving as an alternative to the homogeneity and self-centred individualism fostered by capitalist systems. We propose the concept of a 'new social virtuosity' ('social virtuosity' in a music context was coined by Maggie Nicols in the 1970s to describe Feminist Improvising Group and their challenge of the "technological or instrumental elitism"; often dismissed by male musicians. (We came across it through the PhD research of one of our students Maureen Wolloshin),' viewing the music landscape as a vast terrain where various musical, artistic, and creative directions intersect and converge, transcending presumed binaries. The paper foregrounds the significance of curatorial practice in bridging these differences and harnessing social dissonance, particularly in the context of the capitalist systems which enable these concerts. The authors argue that curation, despite its necessary interplay with these systems, can act as a tool to disrupt and question them. They explore how the act of curation influences social and political dynamics, examining its potential to create new ways of interaction and empowerment. This approach serves as a contrast to those systems that often cause disconnection and isolation. The authors reflect upon three case studies from the last two seasons of the *here.here concert series* that explicitly focused on the concepts of 'ventriloquy' and 'social virtuosity' as forms of creative agency: entering into critical dialogue with and giving voice to seminal works (Cage 4'33, Alexander J. Ellis (1814–1890)) for the former and three contemporary pioneers of 'social virtuosity'—Eva-Maria Houben—Maggie Nicols and Eddie Prevost for the latter. The concept of 'social dissonance' is examined, illustrating how it can be used as a catalyst for creative dialogue and solidarity, while also encouraging a deeper understanding of our shared societal dynamics. Finally, the paper introduces the concept of 'a new social virtuosity', emphasising the importance of listening, collaboration, and collective intention in creating a shared musical experience that expands beyond the stage to include the audience. It concludes by examining the performance of 4'33 within this context and underscores the power of dissonance as a tool for creative and critical thinking.

**1 | Introduction**

No two people are the same. This simple observation is so fundamental as to be a *social axiom* from which other ideas can

be built, yet it sits in tension to the 'forces' that attempt to homogenise society. We, the two authors are not the same, but arrived at the same place from different cultural, musical, artistic and creative directions. It started with our own

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collaboration, however, in this paper we explore more how our here.here concert series came to be situated as a form of social and creative dissonance, deliberately curated as such; in this paper we expand upon these concepts and combine them with the concept of social virtuosity. While social virtuosity traditionally refers to a musician's ability to create and transform social relationships through music, collaboration and collective experience (see Section 2.3), our proposed new social virtuosity expands this concept. It acknowledges and embraces social dissonance—the tension between individual expression and societal norms—as a catalyst for creative dialogue and social change

The contexts of the authors backgrounds:

Waeckerlé is a multidisciplinary artist, performer and improviser interested in the musicality and materiality of both language and the voice as well as ways to engage with our interior or exterior landscape and each other through and beyond words. Her research and practice have evolved across multiple interconnected work zones—conceptual writing, performance, new musical composition, artist-publishing—and manifests as poetic text scores, occasions for their activation (installation, performance, workshop) and resulting image, text or sound works. She has been strongly influenced by her active engagement as part of the Wandelweiser<sup>1</sup> international collective since 2005 and with Eddie Prevost's long standing weekly improvisation workshop in London and the community of improvisers evolving around it, since 2013.

Whalley's work (Whalley, Mavros, and Furniss 2014; Whalley 2018) branches from Classical, Jazz and Electronic music—often with a focus on art–science collaborations. This path has a parrel line as an academic, most recently focusing on art-science collaboration, society and memory (Whalley et al. 2023). Manifesting as mostly notated scores for trained musicians and ensemble (Whalley 2019) and their performance in concert situations. Whalley's career also includes diverse collaborative projects, exploring the intersection of music with various fields. His compositions engage with social and memory-related themes, offering intellectually stimulating and musically intricate pieces that encourage discussion on music's role in societal discourse.

### 1.1 | Navigating the Musical Landscape

The examples of the authors could easily be mis-interpreted as poles, opposites or binaries. Yet seen in another way, all possible music is a *vast landscape*. Areas of this landscape have become hyper-specialised and intellectualised and/or historicised, and in so doing creates the illusion of binaries. For example, seeing minimalism and new complexity as separate mountains in a three dimensional terrain rather than one dimensional poles. The experience of what music is to people on different places in this landscape is remarkable; for one person singing on the football terrace another counting for the exact cue in an orchestra, another may be a personal spiritual journey, another aggressive punk, they are different mountains in the same landscape. As curators and composers (multimodal music including notated, graphic text score and improvised

music), the authors of this paper have climbed our own mountains—but through curation and conversation have met in a different part of the landscape.

Some might see where we have met as an untrodden and forgotten valley, for sure not so many people are walking here or interested in doing so, but there are *beautiful flowers here*. In this paper, we start at the level of our own collaboration, explore the creative dissonances in the personal and local, and then extrapolate outwards through our curation of here.here towards an understanding of a 'new social virtuosity' (building upon Nicols) in the form of manifesto: found at the end of this article.

### 1.2 | Framing (Our) Experience(s) Within Posthuman Subjectivity

As collaborators, we relate to the kind of posthuman subjectivity defined by Rosi Braidotti. Post personal and pre-individual, relational and in constant negotiations with multiple others (Braidotti 2019, 42). Since 'we are all in it together, but we are not all the same', we see our cultural, musical, artistic and creative difference not as a cause for tension but as a positive and dynamic force against what we have in common: our struggle to survive within and against an increasingly alienating, individualistic and competitive system both within and outside academia. Braidotti's concept of 'nomadic subjectivity' significantly enhances the framework of Mattin's 'Social Dissonance'.

By this we mean that while Mattin focuses on dissonance as a metaphorical and practical tool for social critique and resistance. Braidotti's posthumanism, with its emphasis on fluid, non-fixed identities (Braidotti 2023), provides a theoretical grounding for Mattin's practical engagement with music as a form of resistance. Her ideas about transcending traditional humanist notions of subjectivity align with Mattin's use of dissonance to challenge conventional musical forms and social norms.

In particular her notion of 'nomadic subjectivity' and Mattin's creation of temporary autonomous zones through music reflect a shared emphasis on unbound, 'experimental' identities. As Braidotti articulates, 'Creativity is a "matter-realist" nomadic process in that it entails the active displacement of dominant formations of identity, memory and identification so as to open them up to that roar that lies on the other side of silence' (Braidotti 2014). Both affirm the transformative potential of creativity and experimentation in resisting oppression and effecting social change. Braidotti's nomadic subject as a figure of resistance aligns with Mattin's musician as cultural activist, both utilise their respective mediums to challenge the status quo and foster *new forms of community*.

This alignment allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how music and sound can be used to question and disrupt entrenched power structures and societal rules. Braidotti's ethics of affirmation and her advocacy for transversal politics we contend have some similarities with Mattin's call for political activism and resistance through experimental music. Similarly, Braidotti's emphasis on proactive engagement with the

world and her call for creating connections across different domains (interdisciplinary approach and across and between dominant and marginal practices) enrich Mattin's perspective, suggesting a more collaborative and inclusive approach to resistance.

Mattin and Braidotti both critique power structures and advocate for change. Marxism focuses on economic class, while Critical Posthumanism expands this to non-humans and the environment. Similarly, both critique technology, with the Marxist approach emphasising the oppressive forces.

In our case, we are using the here.here series to create and curate 'occasions' where we and others can experiment with and practice with our differences to come up with alternative ways of 'being in this together', through music. Our project also provides an opportunity for further development of our compositional voices as well as those of our PhD students, within and across our respective academic and nonacademic networks. And we are bringing into dialogue and contact European composers with improvisers and experimental musicians from the London scene. Thus, a community building element as in Braidotti's proposed practice of posthuman knowledge as collective, collaborative, interdisciplinary and embedded in the world we live in.

However, there is a tension here. One between the idealism of individual freedoms (musical and otherwise) and the requirement for spaces and opportunities to be able to flourish. The reality unfolds; money, time and curation are necessary (not to mention measures of success and impact).

We see the tension between Braidotti's notion of being human (Braidotti 1996, 310) 'Namely, what does it mean to be human in a post-humanistic universe? How to rethink the unity of the subject without appealing to dualistic oppositions or to essentialistic notions of human nature?' and Mattin's critique of 'being human' in response to capitalism, not as contradiction but a dialectic. Mattin's emphasis on social dissonance, the tension between individual expression and capitalist homogenisation, finds an echo in Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjectivity when viewed in the following way. This subjectivity is not a mere celebration of difference but a critical engagement with the forces that seek to constrain and define it. For instance, we examine this in practice in the 'here.here' concert series, as explored in the paper later, we provide a platform for marginalised voices and experimental practices that challenge the dominant narratives of the music industry; or what Braidotti's call for a 'transversal politics' that creates alliances across different domains and resists the marginalisation of certain forms of expression. In this way 'Unfreedom', as part of Mattin's focus on capitalism can therefore be viewed as a *development* of Braidotti's critique of the ways in which dominant power structures limit and commodify identity. By embracing fluidity and experimentation, both Mattin and Braidotti propose a form of resistance that not only evaluates the status quo but also actively seeks to create alternative modes of being and expression. The exploration of identity thinking (picking up on Ardorno) in the context of social virtuosity can also be seen as a direct challenge to the rigidifying forces of capitalism, rather than a distraction from them.

But for this to happen *in practice* entails broadening the concept of alienation beyond its traditional Marxist focus on the human individual's separation from labour and species-being to encompass a wider understanding of the alienation of diverse forms of life, *Zoe*, from their environments, relationships and inherent potentialities. We see this expanded perspective align with Braidotti's concept of transversal politics, which emphasises building coalitions across differences to resist the alienating forces that create social dissonance. By fostering connections and solidarity among diverse groups, transversal politics creates spaces for agency and challenges oppressive structures, as used by the 'here.here' concerts that provide a platform for exploring social dissonance through experimental music. Our approach, therefore, not only exposes the contradictions and inequalities within society but also embraces them as catalysts for creative expression and social change, aligning with the posthumanist emphasis on difference and multiplicity as sources of innovation. Ultimately, the exploration within the framework of social virtuosity serves as a direct challenge to the rigidifying forces of capitalism, offering a pathway towards alternative modes of being and expression that resist the homogenising tendencies of the dominant capitalistic culture.

### 1.3 | The Evolving Role of the Contemporary Curator

In our here.here concert series we merge various musical elements such as, notated and text scores, composed and improvised, music from the classical cannon and experimental music. Our aim; to create a dynamic exchange that challenges and transcends the restrictive, commercialised norms prevalent in academia and the music industry (including the experimental music scene). This approach fosters alternative, innovative practices that counter the alienating effects of these systems, as highlighted by John Holloway (2022). For Holloway, 'We are all struggling to survive but also to accept what is going on in the world [...] To think hope is not to look for a force that comes from outside to save us but to push against from the inside [...] not a push for progress but the drive for the creation of a way of living freed from the destructive dynamic of capital'.

*Contemporary curating of art or music is many-fold: it involves taking care of the works and deciding how they should be organised, displayed, and contextualised conceptually and historically. "The curator is, more and more, an auteur who experiments with different formats, different ways of experiencing the art, and creating different meanings. Like an artist, the contemporary curator tests old formats and invents new ones".*

(Sotheby's Institute of Art 2018)

As Sotheby's explains to their audience; curating is no longer just the organisation, protection, mediation, and celebration of established knowledge or canonical works of historical or aesthetic relevance, it now has the potential to challenge this consecration and propose alternative narratives on how and why they are relevant today socially, politically. As such, contemporary curation of concerts, exhibitions, performances or installations can both contribute to and challenge its role in the

commodification, marketisation and fetishization of certain works of art within our capitalist market economy. This notion of curating is relevant to both our here.here concert series and Mattin's social dissonance project. We are all artists performers, composers and curators trying to 'scrutinise and undo historical and economical lines of thoughts' (Voegelin 2023) from within the academic art world, albeit in different ways and to different ends. Nevertheless, our communal aim is to challenge the world we live in and the institutions we work within, through collaborative, relational and educational strategies that shift the focus from the sonic to include the social through the curating of participatory encounters with the object(s) of our curated events. We are both emphasising the human/social 'taking care of' dimension of curating, over the objects performed, the score: proposing 'a process of relationships and relationships in process, rather than as an organisation of individuated and finished pieces' (Voegelin 2023).

Our *curatorial* object and 'objective' with the here.here project is the way sound and a collective practice of (improvised or notated) music can engage and connect audience, composers, performers and the environment through a shared experience of listening, performing and discussing. Our objective; to create *momentary and safe occasions to experiment with, test alternatives more constructive, participative and caring ways of being together in the world, pushing against or freed from the destructive dynamic of capital*'.

Mattin's object is 'the ongoing mental noise that is social dissonance' and the practice of alienation. It involves and engage the audience and the performers, to think about the alienated state they are in. His objective is for the audience to become more aware of, experience and perhaps in doing so learn how to react to social dissonance and the *unfreedom* created by their own conditioning. The key difference is how we see the relationship between the group and the power-structures and the individual an the power-structures. However, to understand this more fully, we need to situate both performance contexts, as it is through performance and curation that this is realised.

## 2 | Situating Here.Here

In what ways can artistic and cultural practices intervene in addressing social dissonance and how can they help create new forms of social cohesion and solidarity? The foundation of the here.here concert series came from a discussion of the local and the global; what happens at a microcosm reflecting something that's happening in the broader society.

Compositions with strong formal structures have an inherent musical hierarchy related to the musical grammar. Primary themes, grounds, and recapitulations all speak to structural primacy of one moment over another; there is a hierarchical approach that is reflected in the social aspect that surrounds it. Order requires ordering.

The social hierarchies around western orchestral music are well documented, with the conductor or composer at the top (Byczkowska-Owczarek 2022) There is a correlate between what the music does with its hierarchical and formal approach

and there's a correlate with what happens when people get together and exhibit social virtuosity.

Thereby, the transformative potential of dissonance extends beyond the musical sphere. It is a sociocultural phenomenon that, when approached thoughtfully, can challenge established norms, and foster innovative modes of social and artistic interaction. Thus, by understanding dissonance in this broader context, we can start to appreciate its integral role in driving both musical invention and societal evolution.

### 2.1 | Describing Here.Here

Compositional and improvisational freedoms—recurring themes in our series and in our respective research—are often put in opposition to each other and both tend to prioritise instrumental and/or intellectual virtuosity.

*Social Virtuosity* and *Ventroliquism* were the two themes we focused on for the last two seasons, the latter prompted by our guest composer's Seamus Cater's approach to his research on and interpretation of the tuning work of Alexander J. Ellis (1814–1890) that we premiered, the former by the research of one of our PhD students on *feminising* free improvisation. We consider both themes are conducive to the kind of affirmative posthuman practices of co- or counter creations advocated by Braidotti. By engaging with the work of a historical figure, Cater decentres the human subject and acknowledges the interconnectedness of knowledge and creativity across time.

The theme of 'social virtuosity' is a concept central to the work, research and musical practice of the three guests of this last season: composer Eva-Maria Houben and her influential book *Musical Practice as a Form of Life: How Making Music Can be Meaningful and Real* (Houben 2019) Culture, Maggie Nicols legendary vocalist and improviser, cofounder of Feminist Improvising Group (founded in 1977) and of the Gathering (founded in 1989) who coined the term 'Social virtuosity' to denote the capacity for effective interpersonal interaction through music making. And Eddie Prevost, member of AMM, founder of the London improvisation workshop<sup>2</sup> in existence since 1999, and writer of a few books on free improvisation including *An uncommon music for the common man* (2020), *No sound is innocent* (1995).

### 2.2 | Eva-Maria Houben and a (New) Social Virtuosity

The inaugural concert (here.here 2023a) of the most recent series showcased new multimodal compositions by Eva-Maria Houben, tailored for solo, duo, and ensemble performances. These pieces were specifically composed for two UK-based musicians, Dominic Lash and Artur Vidal, along with their colleagues. Eva-Maria's approach to composition is collaborative, often tailoring and dedicating her works to performer friends and employing a diverse array of notations, graphic scores, poetic excerpts, photographs and written notes. These elements serve as unique invitations for interpretation, thus emphasising the social dimension of music creation over

aesthetic or technical aspects. This results in a co-creative process between the composer and performers, nurtured by slowly developing friendships and mutual appreciation.

The concert featured three carefully selected works, each allowing considerable scope for personal interpretation and collaborative agency amongst the players and the audience. The first piece, “A Solo Dreaming Legends” for saxophone (2019), was written for Artur Vidal. Eva-Maria and Artur’s friendship, which began 3 years prior at Café Oto, has since fostered several collaborative works and the formation of a new trio, “THE GRAPES”, with Huw Morgan. The score of this piece includes an inspiring quotation from Yoko Ono: “A dream you dream alone is only a dream, but a dream we dream together is reality” (Ono 1972). This underscores Eva-Maria’s belief that, in musical practice, a solo player is never alone but opens up the performance space to the wider world and everyday life.

The second composition, “Loose Ties” (2022), is a duo for piano and saxophone. It explores the concept of performers playing independently, yet in harmony, allowing for intimate interactions between the musicians and with their instruments. The final work, “The Green that is almost a Yellow”, is an ensemble piece dedicated to Dominic Lash and a host of named string player friends, some of whom were present at the performance. This minimally notated piece narrates a story involving a magician, inviting a series of silences to be broken spontaneously by a performer followed by others joining in with long monotonal tones. The act of breaking silence is a pivotal moment of agency. It is charged with suspense, felt by both audience and performers, transforming stillness into a tense canvas. The first note, bold and vulnerable, forges an immediate, shared emotional connection, turning this interruption into a critical caring and auditory landmark in the piece, repeated again and again. “I could hear the silence inside me” said one audience member—highlighting the introspective quality that silence can induce, mirroring Cage’s belief that silence is not absence.

Silence in free improvisation, like social dissonance, disrupts the familiar patterns and expectations of musical discourse. It creates a void that can be unsettling, prompting listeners to lean in, actively seeking meaning in the absence of sound (think of how much silence ‘on air’ on the radio is to be avoided at all costs; it is even referred to as ‘dead’ air). This tension builds until it is released by the reintroduction of sound, creating a dynamic interplay between sound and silence. It also creates an intimate bond between all presents, all immersed in the same silence.

These works collectively propose various modes of countering self-centred individualism, fostering togetherness and mutual care in the moment of music-making. Eva-Maria emphasised in the discussion that followed the concert that each sound made in these pieces is unique, transient and must be ‘given for lost’, promoting a relinquishing of control and a focus on the newness and ephemerality of each moment and as such this philosophy of ‘letting go’ is central to her understanding of virtuosity.

The preparation for the concert involved extensive discussions and planning months ahead of the scheduled dates. The

performers were a blend of renowned and emerging free improvisers and classically trained musicians from the London scene, including Angharad Davies (violin), Dominic Lash (double bass), Hannah Marshall (‘cello), and Artur Vidal (saxophone), alongside newcomers to Eva-Maria Houben’s work like Lara Agar (violin) and Finn Froome-Lewis (‘cello). This collaborative process led to the creation of two new scores by Eva-Maria, inspired by the evolving friendships (Figure 1).

### 2.3 | Nicols and a (New) Social Virtuosity

The second concert, featuring Maggie Nicols and involving Maureen Wolloshin and *Patternbook*, evolved from discussions surrounding Maureen’s PhD research and her attempts at feminising free improvisation. Maureen’s involvement with the Free Range Orchestra in Canterbury and her interactions with Maggie Nicols and other members of *patternbook* were instrumental in shaping the event.

‘Social virtuosity’ in the context of music is a term coined by Maggie Nicols in the 1970s, to describe what FIG was about and their challenge against the ‘technological or instrumental elitism’ of the time, and how this or they were often dismissed by male musicians.<sup>3</sup> It is also worth noting that the ‘F’ in FIG was originally intended as simply female, rather than feminist.

*We were very radical. FIG, we were the punk of improvised music. We were irreverent. We just went in, and we just upset the apple cart. We didn’t mean too. We used to call ourselves the women improvising group, it was for a music for socialism gig and on the flyer, they had called us the feminist improvising group.*

Nicols in here.here (2023b)

Their radical and irreverent style of improvisation was not merely a form of self-expression, but a conscious effort to challenge prevailing ideologies and promote social justice. Through their music, they demonstrated the transformative potential of artistic collaboration and the profound impact it can have on individuals and society.

Male musicians, rooted in traditional perceptions of musicianship, often dismissed, or marginalised this approach (Nicols 2017). They may have seen FIG’s emphasis on social interaction and collaboration as detracting from the *serious* task of creating music or as an excuse for technical inadequacy. This dismissive attitude can be interpreted as a form of gatekeeping, enforcing the dominant narrative that valid musicianship is exclusively tied to technical mastery and traditionally recognised compositional structures. The relationship between musical compositional and societal structures cannot be ignored. Born (1995) analysis underscores the significance of institutional structures and cultural norms in shaping musical production and innovation outside, or even in opposition to, these established structures.

However, the legacy of FIG and their philosophy of social virtuosity continues to show its ripples of influence in contemporary musical practices. It helps us reassess our understanding



**FIGURE 1** | ‘the green that is also a yellow’ (Houben 2019) with Lara Agar (violin), Isidora Edwards, Finn Froome-Lewis and Hannah Marshall (cello), Dominic Lash (double bass), Eva-Maria Houben (piano) at London Iklectik as part of the here.here concert series (Photograph by Emmanuelle Waeckerlé).

of what constitutes musicianship and challenges us to broaden our definitions of musical expertise. George E. Lewis’s ‘A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music’ (2008) provides a comprehensive study of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a collective of African American musicians that has been instrumental in shaping the course of experimental music since its inception in the 1960s. Lewis, himself a member of the AACM, offers an inside perspective on the organisation’s approach to musical creativity, which emphasises collective action, innovation, and the breaking down of genre boundaries. Just like the AACM sought to break down racial and genre barriers in music, FIG worked towards dismantling gender hierarchies and the patriarchal instrumental elitism of the time.

The here.here performances proposed Social Virtuosity, soon renamed ‘collective virtuosity’ in our introduction to the concerts, as a creative resistance against the alienating forces of social dissonance. They sought to achieve a balance of individual and collective agency through diverse improvisational and compositional approaches. These included using silence as a foundation for spontaneous musical bursts (Nicols, Sketches, 1970), supporting and nurturing soloists through sonic accompaniment (Wolloshin, A, 2021) and creating immersive experiences that resonate with both performers and audience’s ‘attempt to attune ‘the swirling flows of our inner and outer surroundings’ (Waeckerlé, What is left if we aren’t the world, 2022).

The inherent trust that is required to improvise with others implicitly suggest the social aspect. But, as has been highlighted by Mattin and others, this does not mean that a homogeneity is

required. Quite the opposite, a social virtuosity and social dissonance, we argue, are in fact two sides of the same coin; *A new social virtuosity*.

To understand a *new social virtuosity* we must first understand the dynamic tension between social virtuosity and social dissonance is not a contradiction, but a generative force. It is in the negotiation of these contrasting forces that we find the potential for a new social virtuosity, one that embraces diversity, fosters collaboration, and challenges the homogenizing tendencies of dominant culture—including the dominant culture within a particular subculture, such as within that of free-improvisation.

Therefore, this new social virtuosity is not about achieving a harmonious consensus, but about recognizing and valuing the inherent differences and tensions that exist within any social group. It is about creating spaces where individuals can express their unique voices and perspectives, while also working together towards shared goals. This approach is exemplified in the here.here concert series, where musicians from diverse backgrounds and musical traditions come together to create unique, collaborative performances that defy easy categorization. In addition, composers are invited to open their work up to interpretation and scrutiny by new musicians and audiences not necessarily familiar with their work.

In this way, social dissonance (as exemplified in the work of Mattin) can be seen as a form of social virtuosity in its own right. It is the ability to navigate and even embrace the tensions and contradictions of social life, to find creative solutions to seemingly intractable problems, and to build community in the face of adversity.

The new social virtuosity we envision is not a utopian ideal, but a pragmatic approach to music-making and social engagement that recognizes the complexity and messiness of human interaction. It is a virtuosity that is rooted in the real world, that acknowledges the challenges we face, and that seeks to find creative ways to overcome them through the shared experience of music. We expand upon this in the manifesto at the conclusion of this paper.

Returning again to the idea of the dominant culture and subculture we are reminded of the relationship between the individual, the local relationships and wider society was put succinctly by Nigel Osborne (2013) in this musical brain conference which can be paraphrased as ‘Because Music can change people it can change relationships; because it can change relationships it can change groups, and because it can change groups it can change the world’.

Social virtuosity refers to the ability of a musician or a group of musicians to create, sustain, and transform social relationships through the act of making music. It stresses the collaborative and interactive nature of musical creation and performance. Unlike the conventional understanding of virtuosity, which often privileges individual skill and prowess, social virtuosity foregrounds the collective aspect of musical interaction, positing that music is a profoundly social endeavour that thrives on shared experiences, interpersonal bonds, and creative dialogue.

*I can sit there and go ‘whoaw’. Somebody may be phenomenal but when that dominates and that is what music is defined by, that is what I find alienating. It is one colour; it is one possibility. There is so many diverse ways of creating magic.*

Maggie Nicols discussion (here.here 2023b)

By carefully putting individuals who exhibit what Wolloshin describes below, here.here has expanded the circle of performer from the stage to encompass the audience too. This widening of the circle is relevant in relation to the performance of 4’33 as shall be discussed later.

*For musicians the badge of honour has become the technique on the instrument and the amount of pain and bleeding sometimes literally it took to take the technic to that point. It is difficult to look at that because maybe I did not need the bleeding, the pain, maybe I could do this differently. What I really like about here, you can hear the social virtuosity, there is never a dominance, never a need to just accompany because there is a hero playing a solo. There is an interplay that I really enjoy in the listening and when I play too.*

Wolloshin in here.here (2023b)

Listening is the key factor here. Of course, this is in absolutely no way to suggest that musicians exhibiting traditional technical virtuosity are not listening, of course they are and to an incredibly high and nuanced degree. However, in the context of social virtuosity, listening takes on a heightened, broader significance. The performers are not merely listening to the musical components; they are also attuned to the emotional and social dynamics at play, both within the performing group and extending into the audience.

By emphasising the social dimension of music-making, social virtuosity places equal value on cooperation, empathy, and mutual respect, qualities that are essential for fostering a more inclusive and diverse musical landscape (Higgins 2012). Maggie Nichols and FIG were resisting the patriarchal instrumental elitism of the time, with here.here we are pushing against the alienating forces of social dissonance. The inspiration is palpable (Figure 2).

## 2.4 | Prevost and a (New) Social Virtuosity

Free improvisation by nature is a form of creative resistance against idiomatic music and/or the tyranny of the notated score. Yet it has not managed to escape the instrumental elitism, fetishism even and the patriarchal intellectualism and construct of jazz or classical music. Though some do try.

The final concert (here.here 2023c) featured Eddie Prevost and several regular attendees of his long-standing Improvisation Workshop that he started in 1999 (every Friday, 8 PM to 10 PM, in the basement of the Welsh Chapel in Southwark; open to all). With over 600 workshop attendees so far, the workshop is a *musical commons* built around a weekly practice of collective interdependence in and through sound. ‘The workshop suggests that rather than seeking models of musical expression that are derived from elsewhere, each musician is better served by examining the materials at their disposal (their instrumentation-no matter what form it takes), and their responses to the results of searching for sounds, together with the overall effects upon the general (i.e., the ensemble) situation they are in [...]’. Eddie Prevost in ‘Letters to Mirei’ (2022) a printed conversation with Mirei Yazawa (an artist, musician, and workshop attendee since 2009, a pamphlet distributed freely at the concert).

The workshop is still going strong today and helped London become one of the most influential free improvisation scenes in the world. Emmanuelle Waeckerlé (a regular participant since 2014) highlighted the workshop’s role as a haven from the demanding dynamics of the outside world, including academic pressures. So, it was with a bit of trepidation that for the first time she risked bridging the gap between these two worlds by inviting Eddie Prevost and a few new and long-standing members from the workshop<sup>4</sup>. In our attempt to actualise and reterritorialize social virtuosity.

The workshop’s emphasis on collective virtuosity through collaborative creativity and attentive listening to instrument, others, oneself, the environment, offers an alternative to and refuge from the commodification and individualism prevalent in society. This sentiment reflects the ethos of the here.here concert series, championing alternative approaches to music-making and cultural engagement (Figure 3).

## 3 | Here.Here—On ventriloquy

The theme of ventriloquy was inspired by the work of our guest composer, folk singer concertina player Seamus Cater, based in Amsterdam, who mixes song writing and new acoustic music.



**FIGURE 2** | Maggie Nicols, patternbook (Heledd Francis-Wright (flutes), Frances Knight (bandoneon, piano), Nadia Tewfik-Bayley (violin), Maureen Wolloshin (oboe, cor anglais) and Emmanuelle Waeckerlé performing at London Iklectik as part of the here.here concert series (Photograph by Harry Whalley).



**FIGURE 3** | Eddie Prevost, Miriei Ya (trumpet), Ed shipsey (objects, voice), Tony Hardie-Bick (electronics), Jordan Muscatello (double bass), Chris Hill (clarinet) performing at London Iklectik as part of the here.here concert series (Photograph by Emmanuelle Waeckerlé).

Our first concert (here.here [2022](#)) with Seamus Cater—3/02/2022—was a premiere of his new song cycle and in depth research into English mathematician, philologist and amateur concertina player Alexander J. Ellis (1814–1890) who influenced the field of musicology with his tuning system.

For the two following concerts we chose works that operates a certain kind of *ventriloquy* of text, of space and of concept, but also works that allow for a metaphorical severing of the hegemony of the master (score, text, composer) over its (voice, instrument, performer) puppet.



### 3.1 | On Ventriloquy: Seamus Cater, Ellis

Every action has a reaction, but not every reaction has an action. Seamus Cater's work is one such action from reaction with his thesis (Cater 2020) reimagining the work of Alexander J. Ellis via the creative path of speculative biography conducted at the royal conservatory of La Hague during lockdown. Through the lens of research, correspondence, composition, and instrument tuning, Cater resounds some of Ellis's key ideas. It's an approach that not only engages historical understanding but provokes thought on dissonance and expectation in the context of historical accuracy and present reality. However, Cater goes beyond mere replication of Ellis's work; the author builds upon it, creating a dialogic relationship between past and present. The tension this relationship produces parallels the social dissonance that arises when re-evaluating accepted narratives and expectations.

*the elements are yours, the traces, the words, the tuning system and the gestures of playing you would have experienced yourself, but the body, voice and performance psychology in the middle of these elements is mine.*

Furthermore, Cater effectively reinterprets and extends Ellis's contributions to music theory and science, weaving historical threads into a contemporary narrative. This exploration exhibits not just Ellis's innovative spirit, but also his dedication and creativity. As such, his work serves as a thought-provoking exploration of the themes of dissonance and expectation in the interpretation of historical data. Rather than to think of musical dissonance as a phenomenon of pitch that has a psychological impact. Cater's discourse, like Bourdieu (1987), recognises that these societal expectations are not neutral, but often shaped by dominant forces within a society. Thus, the work indirectly calls for an awareness of these power dynamics to better understand and address social dissonance; found artfully in the beating of the notes.

Here, Cater's voice and instrument are choosing what to sing and how to sing it, paying homage to and bringing back to life the work, ideas and words of Ellis while developing an imaginary friendship and dialogue with him through letter writing, his chosen format for his thesis. His reinterpretation of historical music theories, intertwined with modern artistic forms, addresses the clash of individual creativity against historical constraints, (we might think of this as social dissonance over time). This process not only rejuvenates Ellis's theories but also challenges prevailing narratives in musicology, mirroring discussions on how social dissonance can foster creative unity and dialogue. Cater's work thus becomes a medium for rethinking established norms, blending past and present, and nurturing a dialogue between them.

*Most of the acoustic research of Ellis was in listening for and measuring scientific phenomena; I wanted to explore these phenomena within musical structures and give voice to the words, to express these things musically and poetically, without being necessarily didactic.*

### 3.2 | On Ventriloquy: Cage 4'33

In the here.here concert *Concept ventriloquy | Cage, Ellis, Oliveros, Reage*, we revisited and played homage to well-known

works (Cage, Oliveros) that also involve giving agency to the performers, to the environment, but also to the act of listening. Cage and Oliveros scores both do and say, they don't describe what we hear but what we do, in doing so, inviting us to instantiate the work. It is we, the performers who are bringing alive the score through performance, not the composer. Thus challenging the hegemony of the master text/composer over its (voice/instrument/performer) puppet. *Teach Yourself to Fly* (Oliveros 1974)—refers to 'When breath flies the nest (body) and becomes sound'. Oliveros first sonic meditation explores the breath cycle as the bridge between voluntary and involuntary activities and as a portal to the unconscious; unintentionally providing a momentary escape to Mattin's idea of enforced social dissonance.

During our here.here concert, we titled John Cage's work, popularly known as 4'33, as 'A length of time'. This work emphasises the everyday act of listening, mirroring the approach of Pauline Oliveros' deep listening and sonic meditations. According to Cage, it is about 'paying attention to the activity of sounds' (1961) and allowing silence to communicate.

Originally conceived as 'silent prayer', the score offers a listening framework. The only word, 'TACET', appears on the score with instructions that the performance can vary in duration and number of instrumentalists. 'TACET', meaning 'be quiet', appears thrice, once per movement. David Tudor's initial piano performance in 1952 and subsequent performances of 4'33 have often overshadowed this underlying message. It has been an intriguing journey to interpret this work for modern times, aligning our version with Cage's original intentions. Collaborative discussions with performers Artur Vidal and Marjolaine Charbin, and others helped us shape this approach. For Cage, the work was not about the performer's freedom, but about appreciating the freedom of sounds, allowing sounds to guide us. In an article by Kyle Gann (1997) titled 'The Aesthetics of Indeterminacy: Cage and the Avant-Garde', the author discusses how the initial performances of '4'33' by David Tudor and subsequent interpretations have often focused on the silence aspect of the piece, overshadowing its deeper message.

We installed an external microphone to capture ambient sounds—birds, wind, planes, traffic—which were subtly channelled inside through Iklektik's advanced ambisonic speaker system, blurring the line between indoors and outdoors. This 'silence' transitioned into Cage's piece. Instead of a timer, we each used a dice throw to approximate each segment's duration (we did not use any timing device), ranging from 2 to 12 min. We signified the start of each of the three movements by briefly opening our eyes. The audience and performers shared this immersive listening experience, closely observing the interplay of silence and sound. The performance naturally concluded with movement, hesitant applause, and a flurry of questions and shared impressions of what had become a deeply meditative encounter with the sonic landscape we live in.

Returning to Mattin critiques Cage's approach, Mattin argues that it attempts to isolate sounds from their cultural and social context, which he believes is an integral part of the listening experience (Mattin 2022, 21). However, this interpretation contrasts with Cage's wider philosophy of sound, often

summarised as ‘I have no use for a radio anymore—all I have to do was open a window’. Seen this way, Mattin interprets Cage primarily as an individual experience rather than a shared one. During the here.here concert, it was precisely that collective listening experience of a subtly ‘augmented silence’ circulating and merging the outside and the inside for over 16 min, emphasised by the performers being spread in the audience arranged in a circular fashion (no stage and audience division) in a darker than usual space around a lamp with a wicker shade and a blue lightbulb placed on the floor next to the piano (remnant of the preceding Oliveros sonic meditation), that made us forget our dissonant condition and feel part of this unusual yet inviting situation and intimately connected to each other in relative silence while it lasted.

#### 4 | Mattin’s Social Dissonance Score

Mattin developed the concept of social dissonance to specifically critique the illusion of freedom within liberal democracies, especially within the area of free improvisation. However, it is a notable contradiction that Mattin is choosing to situate his social dissonance events in the heart of the most prestigious examples of the capitalist marketisation of art (Kassel, documenta: 14). Thus, as Ray Brazier writes in his forward of Mattin (2022), allowing him ‘to turn commodified experience into an experience of commodification, or the experience of unfreedom’.

In his score, Mattin instructs: ‘the audience is your instrument, play it to practically understand how we are generally instrumentalised’. We might even argue that he employs a form of collective gestalt therapy, immersing his audience in an experience of alienating dissonance, a result of their own societal conditioning. Collective Gestalt therapy, as explored in Adam Kincl’s (2020), emphasises the interconnectedness of individuals within a group setting. The similarity between the application of Gestalt therapy’s focus on present-moment awareness, personal responsibility, and holistic integration to the group dynamic is apparent. By encouraging authentic expression, group awareness, and experimentation, participants explore personal experiences and relationships, which reflect broader social patterns.

Returning to Mattin, the performers guide the audience in collective role-playing activities to act out and react to this enforced alienation, deepening their awareness and understanding through experience. The absence of a traditional musical or aesthetic object, apart from the ambient noise of the audience themselves played as instruments, produces a tension and a void. This void of a concrete aesthetic focus facilitates a deeper introspection, encouraging the audience to listen to their own ‘alienated minds’, propelled by the performers turned therapists’ guidance. Each individual has the choice to stay or leave, yet they are treated as a collective, as the audience. Here, there is not much consideration of individual agency or degrees of perception as in bespoke therapy sessions. One could argue that using this manufacturing of alienation as an enabling and productive condition and the audience both as a work force and a consumer, is once more replicating the way the capitalist system is exploiting us and constantly pushing us towards more productivity, growth, and novelty in return for some play time. As such Social

Dissonance, as a score and performance, remains a form of capitalist social reproduction, within a capitalist institution, exploiting the audience as free labour in their leisure time.

Mattin acknowledges that capitalist systems are adept at absorbing and capitalising on their own oppositions or antagonisms. The fact that his project is funded by and hosted in major art institutions exemplifies this. These institutions benefit from the project’s success without facing direct challenges to their operational models. Consequently, audiences might feel deceived or disillusioned, as they are confronted with the very conditions they may seek to escape during their free time like engaging with culture or visiting museums.

In this context, a *form* of social virtuosity emerges both from the performers, through their skill in influence and persuasion and from the audience, in their reactions to unexpected provocations. This form of virtuosity, both reactive and defensive, reflects the survival skills necessary in a ruthless, exploitative, and chaotic world.

This is perhaps where we differ. Mattin’s term of social dissonance and its given definition we find describe exactly what is fuelling our project and the kind of tension we are trying to navigate as academics, curators, composers, performers, and human beings.

*social dissonance is the discrepancy and tension between the narcissistic individualism promoted by capitalism and our social determination*

(Mattin 2022, 7)

We are more interested in taking that *unfreedom* and individual alienation as a starting point, to then find creative ways to minimise or transform it into a force to enable a momentary collective and collaborative freedom and agency pushing against it. A kind of collective agency that does not dissolve individuality but on the contrary acknowledges and encourages difference and multiplicity. We are all in it together, united by our collective and individual struggle within and against a system, but not all and the same. In this context let us now reflect again on Mattin’s Score:

*Listen carefully,*

*The audience is your instrument, play it in order to practically understand how we are generally instrumentalised.*

*Prepare the audience with concepts, question and movements as a way to explore the dissonance that exists between the individual narcissism that capitalism promotes and our social capacity; between how we conceive ourselves as free individuals with agency and the way that we are socially determined by capitalist relations, technology and ideology.*

*Reflect on the I/We relation while defining social dissonance.*

*Help the collective subject to emerge.*

*Instrumentalisation of the audience:* The explicit designation of the audience as an instrument, while potentially aligning with the participatory ethos of the here.here series, raises ethical concerns reminiscent of Marx's critique of the commodification of labour. In a Marxist framework, the audience's agency and autonomy may be compromised if they are reduced to mere tools for the performer's artistic expression. Furthermore, from a posthumanist perspective, this instrumentalization blurs the boundaries between subject and object, potentially objectifying the audience and undermining their inherent dignity.

*Manipulation through concepts and movements:* The directive to 'prepare' the audience with concepts and movements, while perhaps intended to foster critical engagement, could be interpreted as a form of manipulation that conflicts with the democratic ideals espoused by the here.here series. In a Marxist lens, this could be seen as a subtle form of ideological control, where the audience's thoughts and actions are guided towards a predetermined outcome. From a posthumanist perspective, this approach may overlook the complex and emergent nature of human subjectivity, potentially limiting the audience's capacity for authentic self-expression.

*Conflicting notions of self:* The exploration of the dissonance between individual narcissism and social capacity, while resonant with Marxist critiques of alienation and capitalist individualism, may inadvertently reinforce these very tendencies if not carefully handled. The here.here series' emphasis on collective experience and shared meals could offer a potential counterpoint, but the score's focus on individual narcissism risks overshadowing this aspect. In addition, a posthumanist perspective might question the binary opposition between individual and collective identity, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness of self and other.

*Defining social dissonance:* While the concept of social dissonance is central to the score, its open-ended nature could lead to a lack of clarity and potentially divergent interpretations. This ambiguity, while perhaps aligned with the experimental and open-ended nature of the here.here series, could hinder a deeper understanding of the concept. A Marxist perspective might emphasize the structural and material conditions that give rise to social dissonance, while a posthumanist approach might explore the affective and embodied dimensions of this phenomenon.

*Emergence of the collective subject:* The aspiration to facilitate the emergence of a collective subject, while laudable in its attempt to foster a sense of community and shared purpose, raises concerns about the potential for homogenization and the suppression of individual voices. In a Marxist framework, this could be seen as a form of false consciousness, where the collective identity is imposed from above rather than emerging organically from the lived experiences of individuals. A posthumanist perspective might emphasize the importance of recognizing and valuing diversity within the collective, allowing for multiple subjectivities to coexist and contribute to a richer, more complex understanding of the social world.

Looking now more broadly at the examples given by Mattin; the concerts by Moe Kamura, Taku Unami, Jarrod Fowler and Lina

Issa serve as potent illustrations of Mattin's concept of social dissonance, demonstrating the transformative power of artistic interventions to challenge societal norms and provoke critical reflection.

In the concert by Moe Kamura, Taku Unami and Jarrod Fowler, the musicians' decision to hide from the audience throughout the performance disrupts the traditional power dynamic between performer and spectator. This act challenges the audience's expectations of a passive listening experience, forcing them to confront the absence of a visual focal point and question the nature of the performance itself. This deliberate subversion of conventional concert etiquette can be seen as a form of social dissonance, as it disrupts the usual flow of the event and prompts a reevaluation of the roles and relationships involved.

Similarly, Lina Issa's performance, where she invited others to replace her at work or home, challenges the commodification of labour and the societal expectation to constantly be productive. By relinquishing her role in these settings, Issa exposes the absurdity of a system that values individuals solely for their economic output. This act of artistic defiance can be interpreted as a form of social dissonance, as it disrupts the normal functioning of work and domestic life, prompting viewers to question the underlying values and assumptions that govern these spaces.

The question is what type of social relations are at play when we gather to perform and listen? To this end, we seek to redress the balance between the sonorous and the social and use sound not as an aesthetic object but as a vehicle or conduit for a multi-directional individual and collective agency, above and beyond the conventional linear composer, performer, audience transactional model. 'Listening and sound making, as always local and relational activities, have the capacities to disorder a visual, taxonomized and singular knowledge [...] we become auditorily aware of our inter-being' (Voegelin 2023).

Through here.here we aim to use our social abilities as enabling condition to experiment with other modes of social constructions, and interdependency, to generate momentary antidotes to social dissonance, through sound and the practice of music collectively saying no to it by calling and searching for something else, through a sort of 'Co-construction or counter construction of affirmative values and relations' (Braidotti 2019).

Marxism, with its emphasis on historical materialism and class struggle, posits a structural understanding of alienation, focusing on the separation of individuals from their labour and the means of production. Conversely, critical posthumanism, drawing on Deleuzian thought and feminist theory, challenges the very concept of a fixed human subject, stressing instead the fluidity and interconnectedness of all forms of life. This ontological shift necessitates a re-evaluation of the Marxist concept of alienation, extending it beyond the human realm to encompass the alienation of diverse forms of life from their environments, relationships, and potentialities.

Rather than attempting to force a direct reconciliation between Marxism and critical posthumanism, our approach involves

translating and reinterpreting key concepts from one framework through the lens of the other; and we demonstrate this through the practice of the here.here series. For example, the Marxist concept of alienation can be reinterpreted within a posthumanist framework as the alienation of diverse forms of life from their inherent potentialities. Similarly, the posthumanist emphasis on fluidity and becoming can be seen as a way to challenge the rigid structures and binaries that underpin capitalist exploitation.

*The greatest fallacy of both liberalism and anarchism, though, concerns the primacy of the individual. What John Cage, anarchism, Silicon Valley ideology, certain assumptions about freedom in the free improvisation and noise scenes, reactionary movements, and far-right identity politics such as the alt-right have in common is their belief in a naturalised conception of the individual as proprietor of their experiences. Furthermore, they share the assumption that the unmediated core of this individual has the potential, from within the given situation, to express their freedom.*

(Mattin 2022, 25)

Even within social structures, individuals possess agency—the capacity to make choices and act upon them. While our choices are influenced by our social context, we are not simply passive recipients of external forces. We can critically evaluate the norms and expectations placed upon us, challenge oppressive systems, and actively shape our own lives and at the same time social movements and collective action can also amplify individual voices and create meaningful change. This perspective emphasises the importance of individual responsibility and accountability. We are not merely products of our environment but also active agents capable of making ethical choices and contributing to the well-being of ourselves and others. In other words, we exercise agency \*within\* our social context, influencing and being influenced by.

Mattin attacks ‘the phenomenological approach to sound, which pre-supposes ownership of experience’ (Mattin, 198). His approach to alienation eschews a phenomenological framework, critiquing its inherent assumption of experiential ownership. Instead, he advocates for a historical contextualization of alienation through empirical analysis, thereby bridging a gap between lived experience and theoretical understanding. This methodology seeks to transcend the binary of reactionary romanticism and accelerationist optimism, offering a nuanced perspective on alienation.

#### 4.1 | Curation of Here.Here and the Deliberateness of Iklectik as Social

The here.here concert series started in 2019 as research led and practice based *collaboration* around our common interest in multimodal compositional strategies and the socio-political-environmental dynamics at play between all involved before, during and after a musical encounter: the work, curator, composer, performers, production team, listeners, the location. As such we are interested in curating situations or occasions that

are conducive to a relational and democratic practice of music, around a particular theme or work. Thus, destabilising the fixed authority and hegemony of the curator, the composer, and the work in favour of a collective and collaborative processual construction of an aesthetic object.

Over the last 4 years and in collaboration with Iklectik Art Lab (London) we generated 15 such occasions, featuring the talents of over 100 musicians, 7 international composers, and we premiered 5 original works. Through our curatorial process, the act of performance, preconcert sharing of intention, postconcert discussions and online dissemination of recordings, we brought to London audiences and to our UCA Farnham campus international and UK new music works. The London experimental music scene is one of the most active and varied in the world, our project fostered links between it and European musicians (mainly from the Wandelweiser network such as Stefan Thut, Marcus Kaiser and Eva-Maria Houben).

The continuing partnership with Iklectik, its central location yet surrounded by nature, its inviting performance space with state-of-the-art surround sound system, and the commitment and technical expertise of its team, has allowed us to slow down and really take care of all our ‘protagonists’ and experiment with various configurations of performer/sound/environment/audience interaction. We chose Iklectik because building community and creative resistance was at the centre of their charitable mission and their marginal status at the time: they did not have the prestigious standing of *Café Oto*, still the prime London venue. Their commitment to the music community and ingenuity during lockdown soon changed this and they have become central to the music scene. Sadly, power and capital are putting an end to that. The site and surroundings, occupied by small creative businesses, artist studios, a park and a small farm is being sold off for luxury development, succumbing once again to the pressures of the market economy and real-estate over the well-being (or real-being) of local communities, despite the huge support and resistance.

Our curatorial strategy involves two strands. Inviting contemporary composers, from the UK and Europe, sometimes around a particular theme inspired by their work (ventriloquy and social virtuosity) to expose, share and discuss their work in a new context, with performers from the London scene or Farnham and new audiences. We make a point of inviting and mixing classically trained, experimental musicians and improvisers, some not always familiar with the chosen works. We are keen to mix improvised and notated approaches so that everybody involved from whatever background can have a chance to expand and challenge their practice and contribute their unique understanding to the work. We include plenty of time and space before, during and after the concerts for discussion and practice but also for eating together. Re-examining pivotal 20th century musical works within the framework of the 21st century; we are essentially ‘bringing into touch’ canonical works with their origins (Cage, Ellis, Oliveros) and facilitating a re-understanding by tracing back to the source. This authentic source, although persistently present, has often been dismissed or forgotten. By reconnecting with these origins, we aim to provide a richer, more nuanced and contemporary appreciation of these seminal works, revealing layers of meaning and

influence that might otherwise remain obscured. We are also addressing present-day concerns such as the recurrent marginalization of crucial figures, patriarchal structures and issues around monetisation. For instance, we have addressed why accomplished and influential artists like Maggie Nicols, Eddie Prevost and Eva-Maria Houben (guest composers of the last here.here season 22/23 on the theme of Social Virtuosity) are absent or side-lined from mainstream narratives, despite being pivotal cultural contributors and influential community builders in the UK and Europe. By employing curation as potent research tool we have successfully reintroduced these influential figures into an academic setting, providing them the platform and recognition they truly deserve. Thus, undertaking the kind of posthuman minor research and practice, that can challenge, deterritorialize dominant and established discourse and in doing so, refresh, update or recontextualise it.

*the nomadic lines of flight of minor sciences cut across, reterritorialize and recompose the dominant knowledge production systems precisely through creating multiple missing links, opening generative cracks, and visiting marginal spaces.*

(Braidotti 2019)

## 4.2 | Curation, and the (Capitalist) Consequences of Decision

As curators of the concert series funded by an academic institution ruled like everything else in our global market economy by competitiveness and profit<sup>5</sup>, we constantly must negotiate to enable the concerts to continue, even more so when the project is challenging the systems and institutional framework that allows it to exist: where we have no choice but to turn our talent and richness into a measurable commodity if we want to succeed or simply survive. Our concert series of experimental music is a research-led collaboration made possible by academic internal research funding. As such we must constantly negotiate and find a way to fulfil criteria and benchmarks of sustainable dissemination, pathways to ‘impact’ through ‘quantifiable outputs’, often at odds with the potentially precarious or uncertain situations and encounters of creative resistance that we are fostering whose purpose, outcomes and impact push against such competitive or quantifiable notions of productivity and success.

Decision making, of one form or another, is at the heart of artistic practice. And perhaps, the most drastic of all decisions can be found in the act of curation, considered here an aspect of creative activation of our social dissonance. The uncomfortable bedfellow of the gatekeeper, our curator’s role, we argue, must at one and the same time acknowledge the hierarchical and capitalist systems in which the pragmatic undertaking of ‘organising an event’ occur, yet can also have the capacity to unravel and re-examine the social-political systems in which it exists. Questions arise; What form of participation and engagement can novel thematic curations encourage? For instance, by explicitly highlighting ‘social virtuosity’ or ‘ventriloquy’ as forms of agency. Maybe, in this way curatorial practice can be used to overtly negotiate with and navigate the

very capitalist institutions anthropocentric ways that, albeit uneasily, enables the very concerts to take place? Or to put it in general terms, how can curators balance (their) idealism and pragmatism? How can the inherent dissonances that emerge from this process be converted into a virtuosic act? Can we find creative resistance and temporary strategies to pushing against and beyond?

## 4.3 | Relational Aesthetics and Relational Practice

Relational aesthetics as ‘a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space’ (Bourriaud 1998) has been challenged for its tendency to maintain the status quo rather than actively engaging with and addressing critical global social issues. It is perceived as utilising tactical approaches within pre-existing frameworks, rather than strategically instigating significant societal transformation. Scholars such as Claire Bishop (2004) have queried the term’s efficacy and necessity, particularly criticising its potential for redundancy and a propensity towards spectacle or exhibitionism, especially in art with an activist bent. This critique suggests that while relational aesthetics provides an innovative perspective on the role of art in social interaction, it may not fully realise its ambition for radical social practice, therefore necessitating a re-evaluation or possible rethinking of its role in contemporary art discourse.

We counter this, in contrast; the participatory nature of endeavours like Mattin’s work and the here.here project presents a persuasive counter-argument to these critiques. These initiatives emphasise audience engagement, transitioning art from a state of passive observation to one of active participation. Central to relational aesthetics, this methodology revolutionises the artistic experience into a deeply immersive social interaction. Involving the audience in activities such as role play, these practices cultivate a collaborative form of art that not only challenges established viewing paradigms but also actively participates in and responds to existing social dynamics. Here, In the context of artistic practice: ‘Role play’ can be considered as a specific artistic technique or methodology that is used to create more immersive and participatory experiences. It can involve a wide range of activities, such as improvisational theatre, interactive installations, or participatory workshops. In the context of relational aesthetics: ‘Role play’ refers to a participatory activity that involves the audience actively engaging with the artwork and potentially assuming different roles or perspectives. This is a key aspect of relational aesthetics, as it aims to break down the traditional barriers between artist, artwork, and audience.

The production of subjectivity, as described by Mattin, however, somewhat squares this circle (or even circles the square).

Therefore, this participatory aspect addresses certain criticisms of relational aesthetics by showcasing its capacity to forge meaningful social engagements and to confront traditional art practices, thereby reaffirming its significance and the transformative potential inherent in this approach within the contemporary art landscape.

The objective is to create captivating musical experiences that provoke thought, foster community involvement, and confront societal challenges, thus moving beyond the perception of music as purely performance art and/or aesthetic object albeit a relational one and acknowledging its role and potential in enhancing human connections. If relational aesthetics and relational practice are to be theoretically contextualised in real-world practical applications; they must be situated. We do this through the here.here concerts.

## 5 | A Dissonant Manifest(o)<sup>6</sup>

A manifesto serves multiple purposes in both artistic and academic contexts (and in the case of this article as an ‘inconclusive conclusion’). First, it acts as a source of inspiration and motivation, providing a clear vision or goal that fosters unity and purpose among individuals or groups. Second, it offers guidance by outlining the necessary steps or strategies to achieve a particular goal. Third, a manifesto can challenge established norms and practices, offering a critique of the status quo and leading to new ways of thinking and creating. Fourth, by inspiring action and challenging norms, a manifesto can significantly impact artistic and academic activity, influencing the direction of these fields. Finally, a manifesto serves as a public commitment to certain principles or actions, creating a sense of accountability for the individuals or groups involved. This manifesto represents the tangible outcome of our collaborative practice-based research addressing the inherent social dissonance at play for all involved in the curation, creation and performance of a musical work or encounter. With the hope that it can and will be put to good use to push against it.

In navigating the musical and social landscape, we acknowledge the interplay of major and minor practices and discourses as conceptualised by Braidotti. By going past, and then looking back upon the dichotomies of traditional musical forms and embracing the ethos of ‘new social virtuosity’, we venture into a place (in the musical landscape) where sound becomes a medium of social interaction and collective experience. It is in this context that we introduce our manifesto:

- *Sound is social*: We declare that music, in its essence, is a profoundly social endeavour. It is a space where identities, cultures, and ideologies meet, engage and transform. It is not just an auditory experience but a shared, collective enterprise and practice of human connection.
- *Honour the dissonance*: We accept the existence of social and creative dissonance as a catalyst for dialogue and innovation. The tension between traditional and contemporary/experimental musical ideologies and our own explorations leads to a fertile ground where new possibilities for expression emerge.
- *Challenging binaries*: We challenge the rigid boundaries and binaries that exist in music and culture. The perception of binaries between classical and nonclassical, composed and improvised, a or technologically advanced and traditional, serve only to limit our understanding and appreciation of music’s vast and diverse landscape.

- *Embrace collective agency*: We champion collective agency and cooperation, in place of individual domination and competition. By situating music-making within the broader context of social interaction and collective decision-making, we enable a more equitable and inclusive approach to creation and performance.
- *Music as resistance*: We understand music as a form of resistance against homogenising forces, against the alienating influences of capitalist culture, and against rigid hierarchies in society. In this sense, every note played, every sound produced, every silence maintained, is in itself an act of political and social resistance.
- *Dismantle gatekeeping*: We strive to dismantle gatekeeping in music, by challenging narratives that tie musicianship exclusively to technical mastery and traditional compositional structures. Instead, we appreciate musicianship as a manifestation of human connection, individual expression, and social commentary.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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### Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>More can be found at <https://www.wandelweiser.de/>.

<sup>2</sup>We understand that Mattin took part in these workshops.

<sup>3</sup>We came across it through the PhD research of one of our students, Maureen Wolloshin.

<sup>4</sup>Ross Lambert (guitar), Nathan Moore (guitar), Chris Hill (clarinet, objects), Crystal Ma (objects), Mirei Ya (trumpet, voice), Regan Bowering (percussion, objects), Emmanuelle Waeckerlé (voice, objects), David Grundy (melodica, electronics), Tom Mills (theremin), Jamie Coleman (trumpet), Ed Shipsey (voice, objects), Jordan Muscatello (double bass), Tony Hardie-Bick (electronics).

<sup>5</sup>As we are reminded of by ‘management’.

<sup>6</sup>The parenthesis represents the distinction between manifest - to make evident or certain by showing or displaying, and also pays homage to Waeckerlé’s “Ode (owed) to O.” series of works (2017), one of them O(nly) was performed after the Oliveros and Cage piece, based on a ‘ventriloquist’ reading and musical translation of Pauline Reage’s infamous erotic novel *Story of O* (1954).

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