Interview Between Mattin and Ray Brassier

Mattin: Do you think it could be possible to inject noise into theory (by that I mean to use conceptually some of the strategies that noise makers utilize rather than to focus on producing sounds, to focus on producing theory)? Or let me put it in another way (and related to the series of conferences that you organized): what could noise theory be?

Ray Brassier:Yes, in a way, that was what initially drew me to Laruelle's non-philosophy, but also precipitated my subsequent disenchantment: what I thought would be

habitually engender obscurity, equivocation, ambivalence, polysemy, etc., (a la Derrida's Glas, to take just one notable example of philosophy supposedly tending towards or miming modernist experimentation with form) would be precisely how not to introduce noise into theory...What we find in such instances is a polysemic froth entirely beholden to norms of semantic functioning and yielding a decipherable philosophical 'sense' which turns out to be a philosophical bromide....All this to say that, in the conceptual element proper to theory, experiment at the level of form can

practice" into the idea of non-philosophy as a "practice-of-(philosophical) theory". While I favour a non-teleological alignment of theory with practice, my problem is with Laruelle's contention that it is the individual human being that is the real of the "last instance". If "I" am the real of the last instance, then I am the ultimately determining cause: history, society, culture, ideology, politics, economics, biology, neurology, can be summarily dismissed (along with philosophy) as redundant abstractions with no salient determining force. This easily degenerates into a kind of transcendental

metal machine music, turned out to be Coney Island baby...
So I am all for introducing noise into theory, rather than generating more theory about noise, in a way that ultimately reaffirms the redundancy of both....But the element of theory is the conceptual and conceptualization cannot and should not be conflated with aestheticization: that way, only kitsch lies... Precision, saturation, density, frequential extremity: plausible conceptual analogues for these may be found but I suspect they would lie in the domain of mathematics rather than the kinds of discursive conceptualization usually deployed by philosophers....Also, I now believe that noise is not to be pitted against "meaning" (whatever that might be), as i naively thought when i believed having any philosophical truck with "meaning" was a symptom of reactionary senescence. My current conviction is that a properly exiguous conception of meaning can eradicate conceptual conservativism and engender all the desirable subversive attributes of noise...So to cut a long story short, the sorts of lexical and syntactical trickery that

mask conservatism at the level of content (e.g. Glas), while conservatism at the level of form may harbour extraordinary
radicality at the level of content (e.g. Wilfrid Sellars)...

M: My impression is that one of the most useful tools that you get from Laruelle is his use of determination-in-the-last instance. Could you please tell me why?

RB: I think the concept can do some useful work but not in the form in which Laruelle himself presents it. I'm basically sceptical of the alleged non-philosophical novelty of Laruelle's concept of determination-in-the-last-instance: I fear it boils down to a kind of Fichtean materialism of practice (or what Iain Grant has called "practicism") insofar as the last-instance is identified with the individual human being and determination is identified with his/her practice—even though Laruelle has in mind a very specific concept of practice ---that of theory. Laruelle converts Althusser's conception of philosophy as "theoretical

individualism, where the individual human subject is absolutized (notwithstanding Laruelle's own protests against philosophical absolutism). It also implies a kind of punitive nominalism, were everything but the human individual is relegated to the status of causally inert metaphysical abstraction. Ultimately, I'm afraid this non-philosophical protest against the supposed absolutism and totalitarianism of philosophical universalism ends up being both theoretically and practically---i.e. politically---debilitating. I think venerable questions such as "What is real?", "What is causality?", "What is determination?", are still unresolved and urgent topics of philosophical concern, which it would be short-sighted to dismiss as antiquated metaphysical hangups: they point to the need to understand the complex stratification of reality and the different sorts of causally determining mechanism operative at distinct levels. All this to say that I don't think there is an ultimately determining instance in Laruelle's sense; which still seems to me to be that of an updated version of free human agency or activity—this is of course the core of

Fichteanism. If there an ultimately determining instance, it cannot be identified with the free activity of the human subject. This is not to say that activity, whether practical, theoretical or some fusion of both, cannot serve as a medium for some other determining, material agency, but the latter invariably operates behind the back of the human subject---which is precisely what Laruelle denounces and wishes to rectify with his concept of man as last instance. I favour a conception of the subject as organon or automaton, but one whose heteronomy---i.e. allocentric determination--- actually constitutes a kind of autonomy: the sorts of rule governed behaviour exemplified by subjects engaged in deductive activity exemplify a kind of "heterautonomy" where the only freedom available is measured by the potential failure to do what one is rationally obligated to. This is very Kantian of course, but it's a Kantian rationalism freed from the encroachments of morality.

M: You have written about noise in opposition to capitalism: "What I consider to be interesting about noise is its dis-organizing potency: the register of abstraction, whether aesthetic or conceptual. The currency of "noise" as a commercial marketing category is ample testimony to this fact. But this need not provide a license for complacent or reactionary cynicism. Any allegedly "critical" or "subversive" politics must involve disciplined conceptual construction and noise's metamorphicity invites conceptual investment and elaboration to a degree perhaps unequalled by any other extant "musical" genre---precisely insofar as it threatens the logic of generic classification as such. This is where I believe noise's subversive potential lies---at the level of abstract form; and not in any alleged radicality attributed to its sonic content (volume, frequency, pitch, etc.). Construed in terms of the predilections of its practitioners, the politics of noise runs the gamut of political opinion, from absurdly reactionary obscurantism to mystical anarchism. At the same time, we shouldn't be surprised if the politics of noise's consumers turn out to the default politics of all contemporary consumption: that of a terminally complacent neo-liberalism. If noise harbours any radical political potential,

Following what you said at the interview Against an Aesthetics of Noise: "Noise exacerbates the rift between knowing and feeling by splitting experience, forcing conception against sensation. Some recent philosophers have evinced an interest in subjectless experiences; I am rather more interested in experience-less subjects. Another name for this would be "nemocentrism" (a term coined by neurophilosopher Thomas Metzinger): the objectification of experience would generate self-less subjects that understand themselves to be no-one and no-where. This casts an interesting new light on the possibility of a "communist" subjectivity." How might we initiate the process of desubjectification that is required in order to organize ourselves for a collective transformation beyond individual needs and desires?

RB: Acknowledging that individual subjectivity is shaped and conditioned down to its innermost recesses by impersonal social structures would be a good start. Unfortunately, it seems particularly difficult for

incompressibility of a
signal interfering with the redundancy in the structure of the receiver. Not transduction but schizduction: noise scrambles the capacity for self-organization." Do you see any possible political use of the nihilist character of noise for the destruction of capital?

RB: I don't think it's credible to attribute to noise a directly anti-capitalist political valence. The political significance of a phenomenon is often ambiguous (I say "often" rather than "always", because there is nothing ambiguous about the political significance of an English Defense League rally, for instance). Only rarely can it be unequivocally deciphered or straightforwardly translated into an identifiable political stance. And of course, it's not only content that is political, it's also the form of political deciphering: it's not just what something is but how it is interpreted that is political. Ultimately, this means that nothing in the realm of cultural production is inherently pro- or anti-capitalist: popular entertainment is sometimes slyly subversive; critiques of capitalism have long been grist for the academic culture industry. This ambiguity is quite evident in the case of noise. The noise subculture has been around for a long time now---at least since the early 1980s---and I find it telling that during its existence, it's been possible to ascribe to it just about every conceivable position across the political spectrum. Thus the politics of noise have variously been described as neo-nazi, crypto-fascist, neo-conservative, liberal-democratic, anarcho-libertarian... To the best of my knowledge, noise has rarely if ever been aligned with communist or Marxist politics. There is every interest in doing so. But such an alignment should not take the form of the somewhat inane equation between dissonance and political subversion. Capitalism is no more threatened by noise than by any other

then it needs to be elaborated via a process of interrogation, which would involve working through questions such as: What is experience, given that capitalism commodifies sensations, affects, and concepts? What is abstraction, given that capitalism renders the intangible determining while dissolving everything we held to be concrete? What freedom are we invoking when we proclaim noise's "freedom" from the alleged constrictions of musical genre?
This is just to say that the "destruction of capitalism" evoked in your question certainly won't be achieved via any form of spontaneous or participatory experience. It would require the development of a political agency informed and instructed by cognitive achievements obtained over the course of a critical collective investigation. A "politics of noise" commensurate with such an ambitious task presupposes cognitive discipline, communal investigation, and collective organization.

"If you tolerate each other, you will tolerate anything"

M: Simon Yuill's contribution, a quote from Raoul Vaneigem seems to perfectly summarize the Evacuation of the Great Learning workshop at the Instal festival in Glasgow. During the workshop, it proved impossible for the group to arrive at any consensus about what to do or not to do, so the last day it was decided that every proposal would be accepted. But as someone subsequently pointed out, instead of collectively achieving something radical, we merely reproduced the paltry freedom of expression which capitalist neoliberalism accords to the individual subject, no matter how false this 'freedom' turns out to be. It seems that capitalism has conditioned our subjectivity to the point where we are no longer willing to give up anything individually, even if this entails a bleak future for everybody.

artists, who have been encouraged to invest in their own individuality, to recognize this. Nothing is more emblematic of the chokehold of neoliberal ideology than the unquestioned conviction that individual self-expression remains a natural reservoir of creative innovation. The cultivation of individuality as a profitable personal resource is an efficient means of enforcing a reactionary conformism. Narcissistic or aesthetic self-cultivation can be usefully contrasted with the sorts of aberrant individuation generated through psychosocial pathologies. (One way of expressing this would be in terms of the theoretical contrast between socially prescribed subjectivation, which is personalizing, de-singularizing, and sociopathic; and socially proscribed subjectivization, which is depersonalizing, singularising, and communist.) Alienation is a profoundly unfashionable theoretical trope, but it might be time to rehabilitate it. It was summarily dismissed in the wake of postmodernist critiques of authenticity. But alienation arguably has nothing to do with lost authenticity, whether at the individual or species level. It is better conceived as expressing the contradiction between actually existing social pathologies and the absent social ideals that they indicate even as they deny them. The alienated individual can be seen to embody the objective contradiction between social ideal and social pathology. But what is required in order to prevent this from lapsing into a sentimental "outsider" romanticism is the imperative to individuate through conscious depersonalization. What is necessary is to achieve an objective or cognitively enlightened, which is to say, impersonal self-consciousness about one's own pathology; i.e. detached insight into how the pathological nature of one's own personality indexes the objective discrepancy between what exists and what ought to be realized at the collective level. By achieving an objective perspective upon her own pathology, the antisocial

individual becomes more social than her well-adjusted, properly integrated peers. This is how individual de-subjectivation becomes the condition for collective subjectivization: one relinquishes the pathological markers of one's psychosocial individuation the better to achieve that depersonalized state in which subjective agency coincides with collective capacity. Subjectivizing depersonalization is the precondition for collectivity. A collective is constituted by a group of individuals committing together to a principle, or set of principles. Only by consciously relinquishing what is pathological (i.e. conventionally social, and therefore anti-social) in one's personality does one become capable of such collective commitment. From this principle or principles, specific objectives can be derived, together with appropriate criteria for discriminating between those proposals that optimize the realization of the central objective and those that inhibit it. The determination of the goal ensures the identification of a method for resolving disagreements. Consensus on matters of principle provides the condition for resolving dissensus over questions of method. Of course, this presupposes a commitment to a certain conception of dialectical rationality, as well as to rational canons of theoretical and practical investigation. This will be too much for some: too "dogmatic", too "authoritarian". An apt response to such protests would be to point out that the alternatives to rationality have hardly proven effective. The revolutionary potential of rationality remains sadly underestimated: reason is routinely castigated as conservative or defamed as "totalitarian". But the transparently reactionary and ideological character of this alignment should be perfectly evident by now, and it might be worth re-considering once more the critical efficacy of pure reason both in theory and in practice.

How do we break out from the correlationist circle?First of all, what is the correlationist circle?

Very simply, it seems to follow from the following reasoning: whatever you think about is thereby rendered relative to your thinking and so cannot be conceived as existing independently of your thinking about it. Thus, your claim to be thinking about something that existed before you began thinking about it is contradicted by your very act of thinking about it. If you say the earth existed for billions of years prior to your existence now, the correlationist will tell you that what you ought to say is that the earth has existed for billions of years for you now, not absolutely or "in itself". Everything is a "correlate" of your thinking and trying to think about things that are not correlates of your thinking is like trying to step over your shadow: you can't do it. The correlate is projected by your thinking just as your shadow is projected by your body. This is the circle: whenever you believe yourself to be thinking about something outside thought, your act of thinking re-envelops it within thought.
RB: Why is this a problem? Because it seems to imply that we can't think or know anything as it is in itself, independently of us. In its most basic form, correlationism is just another name for the kind of generalized skeptical relativism typical of "postmodern" ideology.

There are three possible responses to this dilemma.The first response is to reject the argument upon which this conclusion seems to rest. It can easily be shown to be invalid.

But there's a sense in which this is not enough because we still haven't accounted for the peculiar force correlationism seems to possess. It's the vulgarization of an important insight. The important insight is that we need concepts to know things, and we can't know things without using concepts. But one can acknowledge this without accepting the argument that seems to lead to the correlationist circle, according to which all we really know are concepts, not things. The way to do this is to understand that even if we can't know things without concepts, we are connected to the world otherwise than through concepts alone. This is because we are not just minds but also bodies with nervous systems connecting us to material reality. Of course, correlationists will object that what is being invoked here is just the concept of a body or the concept of material reality, and that the circle remains closed: thinking only ever accesses its own correlates. But I think this objection can be refuted by pointing out that it rests on a simple non-sequitur: while it is true that you can't think about something without thinking about it, it doesn't follow from this that what you're thinking about is nothing more than the correlate of your thought. I can't think about a dog without the concept "dog", but this doesn't entail that the dog I'm thinking about is the same thing as the concept "dog". This is the assumption through which the correlationist presumes to be able to close the circle. But once you realize it's not valid, then it becomes possible to insist that there's nothing inherently contradictory in admitting the difference between concepts and things that are not concepts. We're connected to those things through our body, which is another thing, and although we have to rely on concepts to know anything, including our own bodies, this doesn't mean we only know about concepts. In fact, we ought to acknowledge that knowledge has two components: on one hand, it requires concepts, which we generate through our minds, but on the other hand, we also receive sensory information from physical reality via our nervous systems, since our bodies are physical things connected to the rest of physical reality. It is the fact that our mind is not a self sufficient system but is intimately connected to a body which connects it to the world that prevents the circle of correlation from closing in on itself.
This is the second possible response to the correlationist argument mentioned above.
The third is simply to deny or ignore the necessity of concepts and pretend we can know reality through some other medium. But this is to exit from the circle at the cost of giving up on the possibility of rational knowledge altogether.
The better way I think is to acknowledge that concepts are necessary for knowledge, but not sufficient. What I'm propounding here is the classical Kantian view of course----the irony being that it is Kant who is usually charged with being the founder of correlationism. In fact, I don't think he is: that dubious accolade is better merited by philosophers like Berkeley or Fichte, who deny that we have any reason to assume the distinction between concepts

and objects. But Kant says we have very good reason to assume this difference, even if we need concepts to know objects. So he leaves open the gap through which we can access what is outside our minds ("the great outdoors"). The point is that we don't need to escape because we're not really locked in: the inside communicates with the outside. But because having a mind and being able to know things requires some distance from those things---a fundamental hiatus---we can't ever be totally immersed in the great outdoors, or lose ourselves in it, unless we want to cancel the very condition that makes us thinking beings in the first place.
So I would say in response to your question: First, that there's no reason to believe the correlationist circle is hermetically sealed in the first place. Second, that some minimal or epistemic correlation between concepts and objects is a necessary condition for knowledge, but that this doesn't mean that objects are indistinguishable from the concepts through which we know them. Another way of saying the same thing is to distinguish between a good or epistemic correlation, which maintains the gap between concepts and objects, and a bad or metaphysical correlation, which tries to close the gap and render them indiscernible. Once this distinction is taken into account, then the conditions of the problem change quite significantly: it's a question of using the correlation to understand its outside, and of understanding its inside as a function of its outside, since there would be no outside without an inside and vice versa.

-Mattin and Ray Brassier