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An Interview with Marcus Boon, Author of *In Praise of Copying*

by David Banash

Marcus Boon teaches 20th and 21st century literature and cultural theory in the English Department at York University. He is the author of *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (Harvard UP, 2002), *In Praise of Copying* (Harvard UP, 2010) and *The Politics of Vibration* (Duke UP, 2022). He is the co-author, with Timothy Morton and Eric Cazdyn of *Nothing: Three Inquiries in Buddhism* (University of Chicago, 2015). He is the co-editor, with Gabriel Levine, of *Practice* (MIT/Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art series, 2018), and co-editor, with Davis Schneiderman, of *The Book of Methods: Writings on the Cut Up by William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin* (U. Minnesota Press, forthcoming). He is currently working on a book entitled *On Practice: Aesthetics After Art*. He writes about sound cultures for *The Wire, Boing Boing* and others. His website is https://marcusboon.com/.
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Abstract: This interview with Marcus Boon explores major themes in the humanities such as copying and originality, artistic and cultural production, drugs and writing, spirituality and activism, and music and vibration. At the heart of Boon's writing is an interdisciplinary focus on practice over product—all the while critiquing both. Boon is a cultural theorist who teaches at York University in Toronto. David Banash is a professor of English at Western Illinois University where he teaches courses in contemporary American literature, film, and popular culture.

Keywords: interview, literature, music, criticism, copying, theory, literary theory

Introduction

Marcus Boon is a cultural theorist who teaches at York University in Toronto. He is best known for his book *In Praise of Copying* (Harvard 2010), a ground-breaking attempt to rethink the whole of cultural reproduction through the ontology of the copy. He was born in London, came of age in the punk scene of the late 1970s, became a music journalist, went on to study literature, and published an important study on drugs and writing *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (Harvard 2002). He is an activist, a Buddhist, and a radically interdisciplinary thinker bringing together the methods of anthropology, continental philosophy, and religious metaphysics. His work offers new conceptualizations of the ways in which art forms emerge in the world, rethinks how art comes to mean, and discloses the ways these art forms and practices suggest new and more ethical ways to live. The following conversations took place in October and November of 2023.

David Banash: Your work is really varied in the subjects, time periods, and mediums you take on. You've written about writers, drugs, and altered states of consciousness in literature, the role of copying in understanding the whole of human culture, but with a particular focus on art. You've produced a book on the concept of practices in art instead of objects in art. You are a music journalist, but also a theorist of music, with your most recent book on music where you describe what you call the politics of vibration, and you've announced a new project devoted to waves. I'm also leaving out many of the smaller projects you have worked on over the years. It was once fashionable to describe intellectuals, following Isaiah Berlin, as foxes, who are interested in many different ideas and move from one new idea to another, or hedgehogs, where their work is united by one deep conceptual insight or approach. Do you see your body of work as a movement of many different ideas that are distinct and evolving over the years, or do you think about your work in terms of a unifying concept or insight that unites these varied and often quite different projects?

Marcus Boon: It's funny in a way that I have never considered before whether there's a unifying thread to my work, or for that matter, why I write. There's a desperation to it, "you just go on your nerve!" as Frank O'Hara said (in "Personism: A Manifesto"). Maybe even a

hysteria, in the sense that Deleuze claimed that all art is hysterical. I respond to what's going on around me, to how I'm feeling, without too much premeditation or planning.

Having said that, I think that my participation in and exposure to various music scenes in my youth set a blueprint for the work that I've done. I grew up in the moment of punk, and then especially post-punk, in the UK; Gang of Four, The Mekons, Delta 5 were some of the first groups I saw live; coming from a working class background I related very directly to The Fall's "prole art threat"; when I visited New York for the first time in 1982, I went to Kool Lady Blue's legendary hip hop parties at Negril and saw/heard Grandmaster Flash, the Funky Four + One; the first time I experienced psychedelics was at a club in London and things started to move when the DJ played the SOS Band's "Just Be Good To Me." It was pure electricity, a spiritual experience just as listening to Coltrane's "Selflessness featuring My Favorite Things" was when I was sixteen. All of this pushed me to become a music journalist—I cranked out a page long review of something or other and sent it to the NME (*New Musical Express*), and Lynn Hanna contacted me and asked me if I wanted to review stuff. At that time the NME was a hotbed of interesting and experimental music writing, people like Ian Penman, Paul Morley, Barney Hoskyns were doing all kinds of philosophically provocative stuff. I wrote about Arthur Russell's *24→24 Music* after hearing "Go Bang!" at the Beat Route. But I hated the way my writing was edited, and I would get so upset that I would throw the magazine in the trash can after reading my distorted words! So there was always a feeling of not belonging, of not fitting in, and of a refusal to settle.

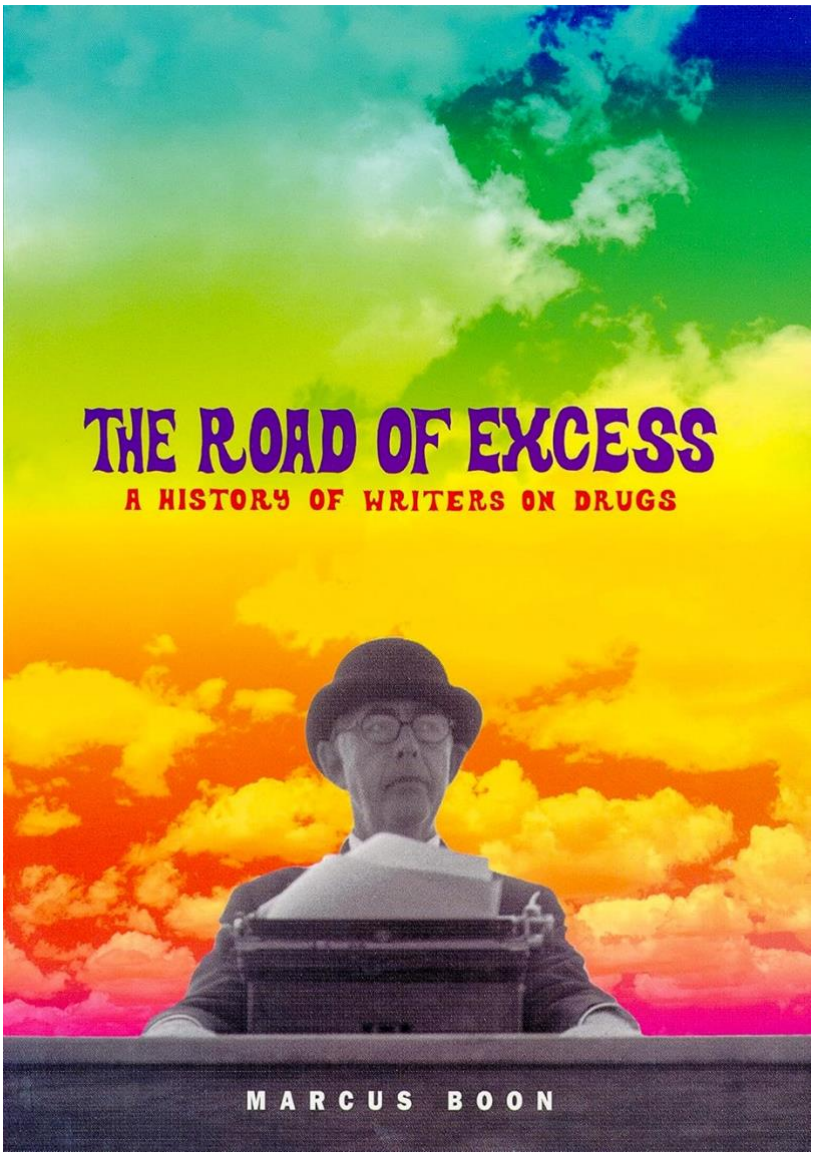
I started writing poetry, heavily influenced by Frank O'Hara, but I lacked the sense of entitlement to keep at it—even though by that time I'd met some people involved with the New York School and the St. Marks' centered post-Beat scene, which I still love to this day. Or maybe I just wasn't a very good poet—I wrote a full length play in the late 1980s called *Spending God's Cash*, which used Burroughs' cut up technique and some of the style of Mark E. Smith's work with Michael Clark (*I Am Kurious Oranj*). In the early 1990s, after finding out that my partner was HIV positive, and diving into the world of ACT UP and the PWA Health Coalition, I wrote an SF novel called *Brain Forest*, about viruses, medical activism, and Komodo dragons. I did my MA and PhD at NYU and my master's thesis was called "The Frankfurt School Trip to *Jurassic Park*", which mashed up the Frankfurt School with the Michael Crichton novel. When it came to writing prose, Burroughs and Kathy Acker were both extremely important to me—I attended the Final Academy events in London in 1982 where Burroughs read alongside people like John Giorno and groups like Throbbing Gristle and Cabaret Voltaire, and I heard Acker read in London and New York several times. The cut-up, which was also practiced by musicians such as Mark E. Smith, was a basic technique for prose writing—as was appropriation and the generative use of quotation. Benjamin's *Passagenwerke* (*The Arcades Project*) made perfect sense to me, and I think of most of my books as collections of quotations as much as my own work, and I see my own writing as being often at the service of the quotation, perhaps to a degree that is unhealthy!

All of that to say that I regard most of my writing as a continuation of what I heard and hear in the contemporary music scenes I've been involved in—but taking the form of writing rather than music. I want my writing to have the feel of the music, that sense of questioning, that anything could happen, and the courage to step into interzones, no man's lands and talk about what is happening there in a way that is philosophically rigorous yet also clear to anyone who wants to read it.

There's always been a strong spiritual component to the writing—I can't say exactly why since it's not like there was a lot of spirituality in my upbringing. Except that my dad loved jazz, and I listened to Duke Ellington, Errol Garner, Count Basie growing up and got a taste of the Black Radical Tradition through that, a softening of the heart and a feeling of blessing under harsh conditions, something I am forever grateful for. And also feeling the call of—again the possibility of response. My three books are all concerned with somewhat abjected yet spiritual phenomena: drugs, copies, music. It might not seem that music is a particularly abject form, but through my studies with Hennix and Pandit Pran Nath's students, I came to understand that the core of music, its spiritual or healing function, is mostly hidden from the world. And my argument was that the healing power of music couldn't just be thought of as something residual or for others, but it can be something we cultivate for ourselves in an experimental yet rigorous way. I would say something similar for drugs—and the history of drug literature, at once universally known but at the same time not included in literary history because of the disreputable nature of drugs. The Romantics and those who came after were concerned with the possibility of an ecstatic or spiritual transformation via drugs—and I felt and feel the pathos of that, even though I also question whether ultimately that path can offer what those who walk it are looking for. And I would say the same thing for copying, again an abjected or disreputable phenomena, one that we are taught we should not engage in —yet one that can take on a religious or spiritual meaning via the power of repetition, which was something I experienced directly in yogic and Buddhist meditation practices.

DB: The way you describe your work here makes me think about the arguments in literary criticism today between the partisans of critique and post-critique. Rita Feliski has been arguing that critics should strive to get away from the kind of "unmasking" and "demystification" that have defined so much of the way the projects of criticism, following Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche are so often deployed, where the critic stands above the work in a kind of smug overpowering of the work itself. Felski wants to ask what can art *do*, what are these experiences of wonder, shock, and recognition that people go looking for in books, how do they work, what do they enable? That meaning can't be the only ground, and certainly not a sort of too easy "demystification." (As my Partner Andrea Spain always points out, that the post-critiquers don't ever point to Deleuze here is always mystifying). When you say, "I want my writing to have the feel of the music, that sense of questioning, that anything could happen, and the courage to step into interzones, no man's lands and talk about what is happening there in a way that is philosophically rigorous yet also clear to anyone who wants to read it," it seems to me you were post-critique before the term was

invented. One of the things that most struck me about your book *The Road of Excess* is how you avoided "unmasking" both drugs and the literature associated with drug use. Instead, you create deeply nuanced accounts of what authors and readers were looking for in these substances and this literature, and how they used it, what they created in communities that was both enabling and sometimes disabling. Were you nervous about making that your first book? You sort of play with the "disclaimer" in your introduction to the book. If you knew at that time that music was powering so much of your experience and your thinking about the world, why not a first book on literature and music? Did you consider that? Why did you want to come at these questions about consciousness, art, and communities through the sort of tangent line of drugs?



MB: The drug book came about in a strange way. I decided to go to graduate school in the early 1990s after reading an issue of the *Whole Earth Review* that featured a review by

Terence McKenna, of anthropologist Michael Taussig's amazing book *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study of Terror and Healing*. I was already friends with Erik Davis and was connected through him to this interesting alternative spirituality and practice scene around the Open Center in New York. Through this scene I attended some of Terence McKenna's mind-altering talks in New York, read Philip K. Dick, listened to Erik talk about gnosticism (and went to many shows with him including my first and only Grateful Dead concert and a Rainbow Gathering!), to Hakim Bey talking about Moorish piracy while wearing a "No Epistemology Without Pharmacology" t-shirt and so on. But reading Mick's book was what made me want to graduate school—and he was at that time teaching in the Performance Studies deptment at NYU. So I got in to NYU—where my old friend David Wondrich, the celebrated liquor historian, was already studying in Comp. Lit. And I took classes with Mick, as well as classes with Margaret Cohen and Richard Sieburth on nineteenth-century literature. All taught in a very 1990s way, with a heavy dose of Walter Benjamin, who of course had himself written famous essays about his experiments with hashish. I wrote about De Quincey and Baudelaire for their classes, and so it was a fairly easy transition to then writing a broader book about drugs and literature. Which no one had really done, at least in the expansive way that I saw the topic.

At the same time, my (now ex-) wife discovered that she was HIV positive. And about the time I went to grad school, circa 1991, I was thrown into the world of ACT UP and AIDS activism. I tried to educate myself as to the science of AIDS, attending meetings of ACT UPs Treatment and Data Committee, the alternative health group HEAL, and I started writing medical journalism, as best as I was able, for the amazing PWA Coalition's monthly magazine. Through that I met Joseph Sonnabend, who was one of the first doctors to treat PWAs, as a gay man living in NYC, and who had a strong background as a research scientist focused on immunology. Joe was the director of a community-based AIDS organization called CRIA: part of a growing network of centers for medical research and study that were run by coalitions of doctors, and people with HIV and/or AIDS, and their allies. It was a very noble but often impractical undertaking. I got along really well with Joe, and could handle his eccentricities, so I started working for him as a research assistant, basically trying to turn his often radical ideas into clinical studies of neglected drugs that might help PWAs. Part of my work consisted of doing literature searches, which at that time, could be done partly online, but in the end required the actual labor of going and photocopying articles in twenty-year-old medical journals (i.e. before PDFs!). So I did this work for several years, and I think at some point, this idea of a literature review, which is an essential part of any study of a medical drug, since you review or summarize existing studies of the drug and what it does, made the transit from the world of AIDS research to my scholarly work. And I realized that I could study the history of drug literature through a series of literature reviews—of particular drugs such as marijuana, psychedelics etc., but summarizing the creative and experimental writing associated with each drug and its history, rather than the clinical research.

I went through a period of doubt in the mid-1990s about whether or not to continue with the PhD or stop and go to med school—it had become fairly clear by then that there were limits to what I could do as an activist, and the most honest thing to do seemed to be to become a medical researcher or a doctor. But for better or for worse I felt like I had more to contribute following my own path as a writer, so that's what I did.

In terms of your comments about Rita Felski and post-critique—I spent a year in the mid to late 1990s living in Paris with my partner, doing research at the old BN (Bibliothèque nationale). And during that year, I actually met Bruno Latour and interviewed him. I'd read *We Have Never Been Modern* when it came out in the early 1990s and was blown away by it. I was attracted to STS approaches to things, because it resonated so strongly with my work as an AIDS activist and journalist, in working through the difficult questions of what constituted scientific knowledge, especially at a moment where there was no cure for AIDS, and when government policy was driven by homophobia, careerism and profit. At the same time, treatment activists were trying to make their way through the maze of government regulation, scientist careerism, corporate drug marketing and the rest of the hall of mirrors. So I met with Latour for an afternoon, and one of the things we talked about was how one might understand drugs in terms of actor network theory—and to me it was very clear that the mythology of psychotropic drugs and their influence on literature after the Romantics could be unpacked via actor network theory (which Latour on that afternoon defined for me as "Deleuze plus Darwin")—and that core idea that all culture, everything anthropological, could be understood as an assemblage in which science, art and religion intersected. Drugs were hybrid entities, "factishes" as Latour said around that time. And literature itself was also a hybrid in that sense, and drugs could be the material supports of literary hybridity—an insight that today we could frame in neurochemical and cognitive terms. So I tried to track five types of drugs and using a relatively conventional historicist rhetoric (I told people at the time that I wanted to be the AJP Taylor of drug history), show the changing human/nonhuman assemblage that "drugs" composed in particular places and times. At the same time, I took the religious or spiritual part of the triad of nature-culture-religion seriously—and I was interested in the ways in which writers from the Romantics on had seen drugs as tools of liberation. I think that spiritual impulse can be found in all of my work, and it still animates me even today, though that impulse is entangled in Eros, in depression, in a dystopian childhood and some combination of obstinacy and foolishness. There's a politics to it too—in fact I can't see political emancipation as possible without some spiritual shift or transformation in/of (a) love (supreme). I was devoted to the Beats long before I met John Giorno—I loved Burroughs and had attended the Final Academy events in London in the early 1980s. But while I'd had my own experiences of various substances, some traumatic, some illuminating, some just mellow and social—I didn't feel I was an evangelist for drugs. And I think I was a bit of a disappointment to those who saw psychedelics as the answer to everything. My attitude was probably informed by punk—that's why Mark E. Smith's line "the palace of excess leads to the palace of excess" is the epigram to my book (from The Fall's song "Lost in Music").

As for music—I think the AIDS crisis and then grad school somewhat shook my focus on music for a while. It was there—I played in a grunge band with friends for a while and even wrote a collaborative novel with friends, where we would get together every week as if for band practice, but instead of playing music we tag team wrote a novel. It was something social, collaborative, a way of hanging out. I went to clubs wherever I found myself—Body and Soul in New York, Gilles Peterson's Talking Loud in London . . . I saw 4 Hero play a live drum and bass set in Paris. I listened to a lot of indie music. But it was only after finishing my PhD in 2000 that I got reinvolved with music in a deeper way.

DB: It is really fascinating to hear about your work as a medical research assistant, and to remember the labor that the more analog world of libraries required at that time. I'm also struck by what you said about your books taking up the abject, but also how you respond to what is around you, but here you encounter the tragedy of AIDS, which from the perspective of the establishment at that time, was the ultimate abjection, so much so it could barely be mentioned by those in power for so long. In response to AIDS, as an activist, you were engaging in regular practices of protest and of writing, and then there is your practice as a researcher, with the routines of research, and all of these actives (protest, writing, research) have their rituals, their ways of organizing time and attention, their organizing powers. In *The Road of Excess*, you also describe what might well be conceptualized as practices. In the book you edited for MIT's series, The Documents of Contemporary Art, *Practice*, you survey art not as a parade of objects but as a series of practices that artists describe, experiment with, or aspire to. One of the interesting things there is the objections to talking about "art practice," as if the artist runs the risk of being compared to the doctor who practices medicine or the lawyer practicing law. Of course, one also talks about practicing a religion. By looking at art, but also religion, technological transformations, and more as a series of practices, you really get away from the focus of so much criticism in art, literature, and even music criticism on objects, on texts, that isn't to say they aren't there, there are the objects, but you really look at how these texts or objects are part of a lived experience, but one that is also and often organized by self-conscious practices, or the desire for a transformative practice. One of the things that I often think my students really struggle to understand is how they might go much further if they thought less about the things they wanted to know or create, and more about how to organize life practices that might enable things to emerge. Creative writing workshops and musicians seem to be way ahead on thinking like this. When did you really begin to get interested in practice as a way to understand what you and others were doing in the world?

MB: I think my perspective, from the time I studied with Taussig, but maybe even earlier than that because of my studies in London with poet/scholar Eric Mottram, has always been fundamentally anthropological. It's interesting to note that Latour also began as an anthropologist, studying Jonas Salk's lab in California—so actor-networks are, to my mind anthropological entities. Also therefore cosmopolitical ones, to use the word as Latour's colleague and respondant, Isabelle Stengers, has used the word. But practices are anthropological entities basically, "forms of life" as Wittgenstein said (in *Philosophical Investigations*). And it's not too hard to think of the world as composed by an interlocking network of practices. Although I do also note what my unitarian priest friend Ed Tyler said to me a long time ago when I talked about my interest in writing a book about practices; he said that he'd met a woman who walked out of her door one day and found herself immersed in the light of God—and was that really a practice? I thought about it a lot afterwards . . . yes, you could say that grace does not require a practice, that it belongs to a whole other realm and regime. But on the other hand, I wondered about his friend, to what degree she practiced the ability to receive a blessing, what kinds of readiness or repetition she had cultivated so that, at a moment not of her choosing, and not in accordance with her will, something happened to her. Which in a way is what practice is all about, even basketball practice!

I grew up in London and went to Church of England schools and the like—and I was shocked at the spiritual deadness of those churches, the complete absence of anything like a meaningful experience of the sacred or divine there. It was my experience of music that exposed me to meaningful "shared structures of feeling" both in the jazz that my dad listened to, and then the punk and post-punk scenes I became part of, where there was a strong DIY orientation. Punk was a situation of practice—anyone could form a band, figure out how to make records (I remember a Scritti Politti record where all the costs of making a record were listed on the jacket of the record, along with the relevant addresses). For me

that was also true in the warehouse club scene, where anyone could put together a party with a box of records salvaged together from thrift stores etc. My dad was a fairly serious DIY guy, he had some training as an engineer and I think even built a TV from parts and the smell of the soldering iron was definitely a part of my childhood. But I myself have never been that DIY a person, and I'm actually not very good at "practicing" things! I learnt to touch type when I was sixteen and probably that's been the single most important practice for me—that my thoughts turn into text fairly effortlessly.

I think practice came into focus for me through studying yoga at Jivamukti in New York in the early 1990s. Prior to that I'd studied Tai Chi with the great teacher William C. Chen in New York, an amazing instructor who mostly worked with boxers and who also taught physics at NYU. And I learned the tai chi form from him, and his hydraulics of chi, but my body was quite dead, sort of like a wasteland, from neglect, self-hatred and just lack of meaningful education—and I couldn't really feel anything like chi moving through my body. It remained just an idea. When I started doing yoga, and particularly when I started doing ashtanga yoga, for the first time I could really feel energy moving through my body. It was an incredible feeling, like being high, being alive, being open. And there was no doubt about it—I thought of it in terms of that Iggy Pop song "raw power, it's laughing at you and me!" (from Iggy and the Stooges' song "Raw Power"). It was spiritual, it was healing, it made you cry and there was just this immense feeling of gratitude, the "doors of perception" had been opened up, cleansed and you could see. And all of this came about through a method, a practice, a very specific manipulation of body and mind through asanas. And you couldn't learn it from a book or just through watching a video, you needed a teacher who would physically adjust you so that you perfected the posture. And I was lucky enough to have a number of great teachers, including David Life and Sharon Gannon, Guy Donahaye, Eddie Stern, Ron Reid.

So while I was writing the dissertation that would become *The Road of Excess*, I was also studying yoga, and becoming immersed in the world of Tibetan Buddhism, notably through Gehlek Rinpoche, who taught a weekly class in Tribeca in New York that I would go to, and later Khenpo Tsultrim Gyantso Rinpoche, probably the closest I've gotten to an enlightened being, someone genuinely surprising in his affect and being, a human being that had a lion inside him! And that was also a world of practice, whether saying mantras, or meditating. And I saw some commonality in the world of drugs and drug literature as involving a kind of spiritual practice—but also a practice of community, of survival, of self-destruction even. I think I was able to see the history of drug literature, much of which consists of descriptions of protocols, rituals, practices of absorbing different substances, from the perspective of a much broader framework of practices of the care of the self, to use Foucault's formula, but beyond care of the self, practices of psychological transformation. Which continue to be the ones that really interest me.

In the mid-2000s I began work on a book about spiritual practices, but it became increasingly difficult for me to idealize what I saw happening in yoga and Buddhist

communities, and the figure of the guru or teacher, and the bizarre ways in which followers would treat each other and teachers. I became quite disenchanted with much of that world, and I think I started to recognize my own need for certain kinds of prop or support, and to ask what it would mean to have an autonomous spiritual practice that didn't so much rely on projections and authoritarian power structures. The things that became important to me, and which have remained with me, are these corporeal practices such as yoga and chi king, practices of pilgrimage, i.e. going to sacred places, whether caves where there is a long tradition of meditation, or groves of ancient trees, and finally music as a magical set of practices, embodied by various dancehall scenes inhabited by the Black radical tradition and DJs such as Theo Parrish.

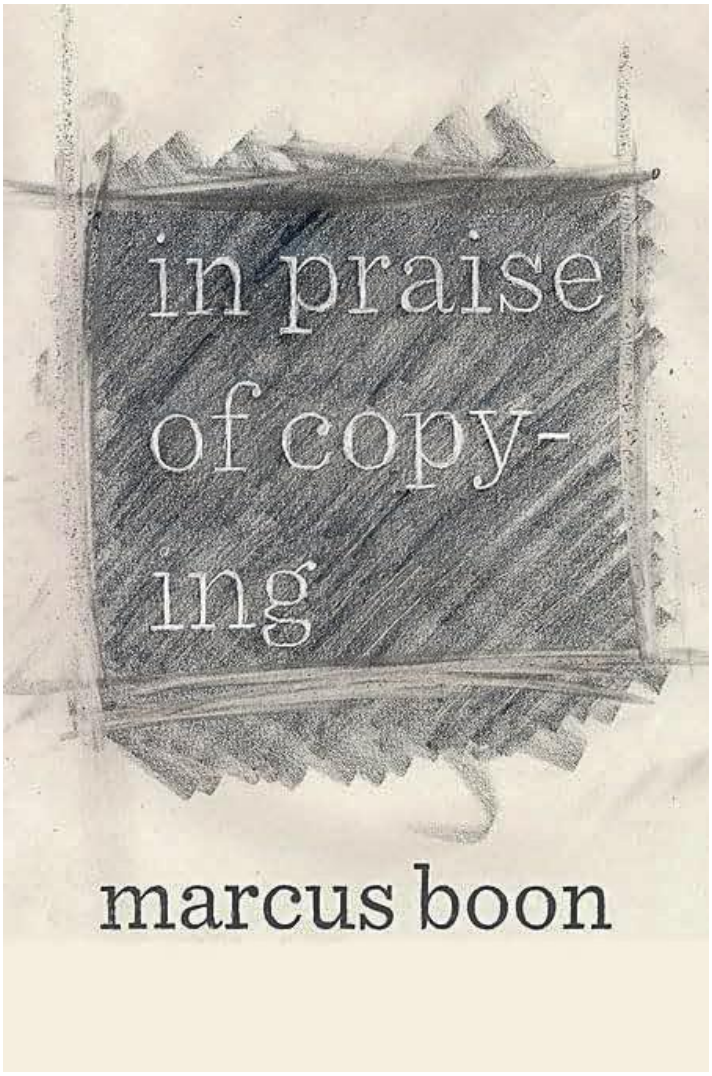
I did come to see practices of copying as being a significant category of practice. I taught classes on copying and practice at York, and I worked with Gabriel Levine, who I knew already from the TO music scene, on his dissertation on the reconfiguration of traditions by avant garde artists, which was published by MIT as *Art in the Time of Uprising*. We put together the *Practice* reader published by MIT/Whitechapel as a framework for thinking about practice in the arts. I think what currently interests me, and what I'm trying to write about in *Practice: Aesthetics After Art* is to what degree the category of art today actually holds us back from fully inhabiting practices as methods for transforming everyday life and political reality. I actually feel quite ambivalent about it, partly no doubt due to five years of going to art biennales and museum shows. In retrospect, I think the period of my interest in practice is the same period of the expansion of neoliberalism into almost every part of our lives. In research on the *Practice* volume, I was surprised to realize how important practice was to the neoliberal economists and philosophers, notably Ludwig von Mises, whose book "Human Action" really sets out a way of thinking about the world as an interlocking set of practices, mostly mediated by Adam Smith's invisible hand of the market. Foucault clearly knew about von Mises, and you can read some of the later *Collège de France* lectures as elaborating a theory of practice very much influenced by neoliberal ideas and theories. I don't think one can easily dismiss everything that happens under the umbrella of practice because of neoliberalism: queer and kinky sexual practices; the psychedelic revolution that is currently happening as "drugs" become healing modalities and commodities; the search for political and economic structures that aim for autonomy and equality without the state (for example the Rojava anarchist "state" on the Syrian-Turkish border); what I call the path of the open road, which imagines what individual human autonomy would look like today, if all human beings had the freedom of travel, of movement without barriers of nation-state, etc. On the other hand, I now wonder whether the word art actually provides a much needed protective zone where ideas and practices can incubate—and that the gap between art and life is actually essential for meaningful and productive lives to happen.

DB: Ah, this is interesting! I wasn't expecting you to be so ambivalent on the role of practice. Clearly, practices have been key to your own intellectual and spiritual journey, but then, as you say, practice is no guarantee of liberation either. Capitalists perfect and

promote practices, and certainly there are the practices of the fascist body, too, and from Hells Angels to Proud Boys, they too engage in practices to organize and give meaning to the tremendous energies practices can harness and unleash. But even in liberal spiritual practices the danger of the authority. Didn't Leonard Cohen talk about the power struggles of his Buddhist monastic practices as part of what he called "Boogie Street" the hustle of everyday life? This is rather an aside, but it also strikes me that the deadness you describe in mainline religious practices is almost a kind of defense against such potential energies, as if it is a conservative response of those institutions is intentionally built to stop them and thus maintain and reproduce the status quo that would be disturbed by enabling too much energy. I'm also really struck here by your return at the end to the potential freedoms of seeing art as separate sphere from life. So much of the historical avant-garde project was an attempt to synthesize art and everyday life, but that seems to be just what a global consumer capitalism wants, and not only wants, but has been successful in remaking in forms of lifestyles centered on consumption. In my own work on collage forms, so many avant-garde artists and theorists hoped that cutting into signs of the world would be an art practice of liberation, and here I'm thinking of a line from Tzara to Burroughs and Debord. I'm now starting to think many of their hopes were really an effect of living in the twentieth-century's broadcast mediascape, where it seemed almost any cut was a shot at liberation, and now in the networked world, reactionary forces are as or even more likely to use various strategies of cutting-and-pasting, collage and montage to organize their energies in the sort of endless meme wars happening now. Collage really did totally dissolve into everyday life, but it turns out there was no guarantee of liberation at the level of form.

All of this brings me to your work on the copy, which is the work I think you might be most well-known for in academia. When I read your book on copying, I was stunned at its insight, scope, and the implications of it, and I've been trying to get just about everyone I meet to read your book. I was also really surprised at some of the negative responses to it when it was first published. I don't want to try and offer a complete summary of the argument here, but the fundamental claim you make is that anything we take for an original turns out to be, if closely examined, produced in a process of copying, and that, indeed, and even more surprising, *the only way anything can come into being is through the practices of copying*. In a way, you attack both conservative and progressive sacred cows here: it blatantly attacks the copyright regimes of capital that depend on fictions of originality to control and monetize intellectual property, but at the same time it takes on both the progressive's romantic myth of the artist's original genius and the impulse to police things like cultural appropriations. I've often recommended your book to critics that seem to be struggling to account for the ways that a work of art, a genre, or a practice proliferate and transform, but they often lack a set of concepts to describe this, or get too hung up on accounts of originality and influence, and I often think that your concept of the copy makes so much of that clearer, just providing a much more nuanced, historically and formally accurate way to talk about works of art and the social practices and scenes that give rise to them. It just seems to cut through a defensive hedge of concepts that try too hard to ground meaning in ideas of originality. I promise there is a question here, but I'm trying to formulate it. Let's

see if I can pull it altogether: Just now, you were talking about the advantages of seeing art as a sphere separate from life, giving it a kind of more classical autonomy, but your own work in the copying book seems to me to flatten the field—everything is the process of copying, and at that ultimate level of generalization at least, there is no difference between art and life, indeed everything meets in those moments of reproduction that we name copying. Can art be meaningfully separated here into something autonomous if we are trying to think the copy in the way you do? How are you thinking about the concepts and practices of copying ten years after you published *In Praise of Copying*?



MB: Yes, I share some of the same concerns and questions concerning collage and other practices of "cutting through media" in the age of platform and app-based disruption and "break something . . ." as a corporate mantra. We now have an apotheosis of this happening with generative AI and large language models, where the iteration and permutation of pre-existing materials can now simulate entire histories of languages, images, sounds. Around the time I was writing In *Praise of Copying*, I got very absorbed in

Alain Badiou's work and his idea of events as singularities, which is also to say novelties, that expose us to a truth that then requires from us truth procedures that are adequate to it. You can read this as a restatement of the modernist faith in "making it new" and of progress through experimentation, and determinedly against the culture of the copy, mimesis, etc. I think it suggests an interesting practice, the practice of a truth procedure, and one that is ostensibly anti-copying—yet Burroughs' hopes for the cut up were precisely that the cut up should be an event in language which exposed truths. Interestingly, Burroughs and Gysin placed their hopes in the ability of randomness and the physical manipulation of text, which is in fact quite different to what we find with generative AI, at least so far. "A roll of the dice will never abolish chance," as Mallarmé said (in the poem "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard")! To answer your question about the autonomy of art in a world of copies: I think that is why I turned to practice, as a way of understanding the decision that we make concerning our position in a general/cosmopolitical economy of copies. Art is a practice, a "mode of existence" maybe in Latour's terms—but it's true that maybe what is implied in my work is that aesthetics are everywhere in a world of copies . . . in fact maybe it's not so different to what my fellow Buddhist Timothy Morton argues in his work. One of the books that I'm working on at the moment is called *Practice: Aesthetics After Art*.

I think *In Praise of Copying* shares a fair amount with certain energies that were around in the early 2000s when the book was written. The book was actually started as a collaboration with the poet Kenneth Goldsmith, who is an old friend of mine—and with whom I shared a strong interest in practices of appropriation, montage etc. We actually set out to write a book that would have been a manifesto for "copyleft" practices of art making and experimentation, at the moment of *Adbusters* and the *détournement* of corporate images, of indie hiphop and Afrofuturism, of the application of techniques of appropriation art to writing such as are found in Goldsmith's *Day* (which copied the entire text of a single issue of the *New York Times*) or indeed M. Nourbese Philip's *Zong!* (we improbably were all on a panel together re. appropriation and art in 2008!). The manifesto didn't really work out though, and our ideas were actually quite different to each other's, so the book split into two books, one of which was my *In Praise of Copying*, the other being Goldsmith's *Uncreative Writing*. I saw what I was doing as a prologomena to art in the age of digital copying, and I was actually quite careful not to dwell too much on the new technologies of digital copying that were proliferating with the personal computer, the internet, the web, apps, etc. I thought that in order to understand the kinds of practices of digital copying that are now ubiquitous, one should ground such understanding in an ontology of copying—and in the end that ontology for me came out of Buddhism, where I found practices of copying to be everywhere—but the ontology was different, since it was an ontology of emptiness, or sunyata, or dependent origination, rather than that of Platonic idealism or its various echoes in the history of Western philosophy. I was engaged in these practices of copying, such as mantra chanting, mudras or corporeal gestures (also found in yoga), or for that matter meditation itself—where the practice of imitation and of repetition aims at a slow and/or sudden transformation of being in the world. Behind some of this of course were

basically Deleuzian elements—the famous formula of difference and repetition for example, where every difference involves an act of repetition and every repetition produces differences. And underlying that was the less often talked about topic of Deleuze's monism . . . to me an incompletely established or articulated monism, which Badiou seeks to whack Deleuze with in his book on him, but which I think underestimates the philosophical and ontological resources of "real monism" or, to use Catherine Christer Hennix's phrase "monomonism"! What makes the copy possible is an underlying monism or undifferentiation of being and matter at a primordial level. Mimesis exists because at some level everything is connected and capable of transformation into something else. It is iterable in the sense that Derrida established in "Sign Text Event." Or, in the language of Buddhism, but also other monistic doctrines such as Advaita Vedanta, the copy is a part of the whole, and the practice of copying can in certain situations also reveal the structure and presence of the whole. So part of my thought in *In Praise of Copying* was to say, in an elaboration of what Bataille says about the accursed share and a constitutive excess that produces us, that if we are constituted by and as practices of copying, whether molecular, mathematical, discursive or whatever, our freedom consists in choosing how we participate in cycles of copying—and indeed the world of global capitalism is a world constituted by repetition, by copying, everything Marx says about the commodity form; beyond that in a perhaps Foucauldian way, nation states, subjectivities etc. are also produced via a structuring of mimesis and the copy. Digital culture is no different—but it draws us closer to the Badiouan world of mathematical ontology, of set theory and the most basic formulations of identity and difference that we have. And we can choose, at some level, or at least ask the question: what are the forms of repetition and copying we want to engage with? In all of this, there was a concern for and interest in what I would call the practices of the poor and an attunement to working class life that probably came from growing up in a working class family in the UK, to the ways that punk, especially The Fall's prole art threat, articulated the possibilities of an art and even philosophical practice that spoke alongside the poor in some way, whether that meant hip-hop and punk, practices of improvisation and *bricolage* which are necessary part of living when you don't have much money. Collage and appropriation were an important part of punk and post-punk, not to mention hip-hop, of course.

I think *In Praise of Copying* came out at an interesting moment. In some ways it was received as part of that copyleft movement that was part of the technoutopianism of the 1990s and 2000s and the sense that wow, look! you can copy music off of CDs and share it with Napster, with PDFs you can do the same with books, ditto with movies! *In Praise of Copying* had some of the same flavor as books like Lewis Hydes' *Common as Air* or for that matter Goldsmith's *Uncreative Writing*, which took on the possibilities for digital experimentation with copies. And of course, there were new forms of appropriation based art and culture, such as UbuWeb, which was a vast autodigestion of the historical avant-gardes, not totally dissimilar to some of what we see with AI today—but Goldsmith didn't try to hide the autodigestion, he presented it as a new type of artwork.

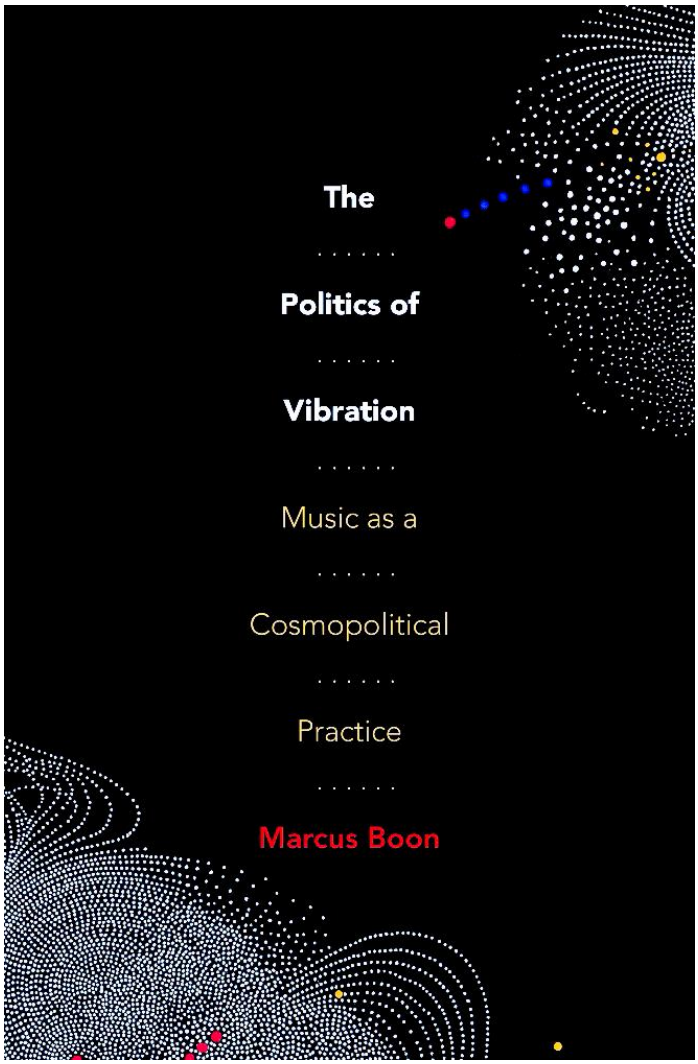
For me, the most important part of my own work on copying concerned appropriation. And while it was still possible to talk about appropriation and appropriation art in 2010, the explosion of social justice-based discourse around that time, and of cultural appropriation as theft, quickly shifted the cultural ground. I was very interested in the concept of depropriation, in other words a practice of removing a framework of ownership from art, culture, life itself. I wasn't alone in this—Judith Butler also used the word for a year or two around that time before focusing on dispossession as a preferred way of talking about these things. It became increasingly difficult to explore appropriation and depropriation as potentially emancipatory practices, because these things became so connected with cultural appropriation as the theft of things that owned by other, usually marginalized peoples. The fact that marginalized people practice appropriation of necessity and also for pleasure and as part of a "shared structure of feeling" ("version like rain!" said Lee Perry), and that they have also generated ideologies of depropriation such as indigenous ideas of stewardship of the land, tend to be sidelined, often in a rush to adopt what are basically neoliberal ideas of private property and ownership—of identity but also land, meaning, culture and so on. It has become very difficult to even talk about an emancipatory horizon of shared environment, subjectivity, land, let alone a universal commons of some kind that is not predicated on private property. Even though, of course, Black Studies scholars repeatedly explore this in a variety of ways, from Moten and Harney's undercommons to the idea of ensemble or indeed abolition. The dangers and risks of appropriation are substantial indeed—yet some kind of conscious practice of appropriation or rather depropriation is unavoidable. We need a model of relation to each other, to ourselves, to environment that is not predicated on the privatization of ideas, subjectivity, objects or environment. In a sense, generative AI represents the latest and most bold and audacious attempt at a privatization and commodification of the general intellect—we really need to ask what it would mean to depropriate the large language models in such a way that they were actually at the service of and control by the people. This is a debate that is actually going on in the AI community: can we have open source AI models or will the democratization of those models lead to the destruction of the world? But we could look at this the other way and ask: what projects could generative AI be put to that are actually emancipatory.

I think if I was rewriting *In Praise of Copying* today, I would add a chapter on simulation. I find Debord's ideas in *The Society of the Spectacle* still very helpful, and one of the few theoretical models that undergraduate students today really seem to get. Baudrillard is pretty unfashionable, yet we live in the world that he wrote about, from his theories of symbolic exchange, through his exploration of simulation and the ecstasy of communication, to the powerful work on seduction, and the struggle between societies built around representation vs. those built around tricksters and games. From nanotechnology, to 3-D printing, to CRISPR and gene editing, to generative AI, to robotic automation of industrial processes, to the absorption of global politics into the society of the spectacle, the "accursed share" of copying expands its domain. Even COVID is a gigantic culture of the (viral) copy. In terms of an emancipatory politics, I suppose you could

imagine an acceleration of the culture of copies such that literally everything could be 3D printed until everyone had what they need. The doomscrolling version would be that the proliferation of weapons of all kinds, and of inflammatory rhetorics of all kinds, algorithmically amplified, suggests a rapidly approaching point of no return. I think the Buddhist practice of copying suggests a different pathway, one of self-transformation, approached as a collective project, a turning away from these kinds of proliferation in the direction of something difficult but real.

DB: I think a thread through our entire conversation here is the relation between forms and ethics. In some of the older leftist tradition, I'm thinking of Adorno's *Aesthetics*, but it's there in Brecht and many others, there was a hope that an artist or movement could build a kind of text or object or practice that couldn't be coopted by fascism or that might even resist capitalist appropriation. But in both *The Road of Excess*, to *In Praise of Copying*, you identify the ethical possibilities, but you leave open or even point directly to the ways that there is no guarantee, no truly safe space in which to rest. That is, as you just said, recognizing the power of copying for transformation can lead to ethical self-transformations, and maybe even utopian possibilities of finally eliminating scarcity in ethical ways, and yet the most rapacious capitalism or fascism also deploy the remarkable powers of the copy. There are no guarantees! However, in your book on music, *The Politics of Vibration: Music as a Cosmopolitical Practice* it seems that you come closer to seeing music as a wholly positive force as you focus on case studies of different ways in which music as a Deleuzian vibrational assemblage emerges out of a complex interaction of a community that has a specific history, technology, and often a subculture putting all that to use in novel ways to create a space for the vibrations of the musical event to happen. There is so much optimism in your book on music, and such an emphasis on its healing potentials. But, it also had me thinking about Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. In some ways, he describes some of the same features that you do in looking at the scene and context in which music emerges, but he sees music in such brutal terms as an assertion of power, a grabbing and holding of a territory—there is not a lot of healing or optimism in Attali's conception of music. Attali always makes me think of that very moving moment in *Casablanca*, where the Nazis are in the club and start singing "*Die Wacht am Rhein*" and then the Morrocans, the refugees, the bartenders, the band, all from different countries, sing them down with the *La Marseillaise*. On the one hand, great to sing the Nazis to silence, but on the other hand, both are nationalist anthems of war, and *La Marseillaise* isn't successful because it is somehow formally better as music, but because there are just more enemies of the Nazis singing it in that moment, the situation could be easily reversed in a different context, like the beer garden scene in *Cabaret* where the Nazi youth sings "Tomorrow Belongs to Me." You don't dwell so much on the darker potentials of music to liberate the energies of nationalism, fascism, and the like (like white power skinheads drawing from the energies of punk too), but clearly that is there, isn't it? At moments in your book on music, looking at what you call vibrational ontology, it seems you are almost tempted with something of that formal guarantee of the ethical in music at its deepest level? I guess I'm asking, does your work show that Attali is wrong or that he just

hasn't gone deep enough? Do you think there is something like an ethics or a healing at music's deepest levels that isn't corruptible, or are those powers of music always contingent?



MB: It's a good question. It's interesting that you bring up Attali's *Noise*, which is a text I love and still teach—but I actually took a very different message from Attali's book. Because Attali, at the beginning and end of his book, brings up the possibility of a new epoch of the political economy of music, a new formulation that will be built on what he calls composition. It's not entirely clear what he meant by this, but he does discuss free jazz, improvisation, music made by amateurs, carnivals and dancehalls, amongst other things. And I imagined Attali going to the concerts performed by the Art Ensemble of Chicago, when they were residents in Paris in the early 1970s, and being blown away by their sound, the way I was blown away the first time I heard "People in Sorrow", and hearing in that sound something similar to what Fred Moten and others have more recently articulated in Black Studies as a political space and structure of "otherwise possibilities", of the

production of "ensemble" as an informal alliance, of the "consent not to be a single being" which is to be found in the experimental and dancehall based music scenes that I've participated in.

For myself, I think it's less a question of a formal guarantee than a question of what in practice you can do with music, or what music can be. Everything that I value, whether drugs, music, Buddhism, sexual play and experiment, copying, love and friendship, vibration, practice itself, is undecidable in the sense that Derrida uses the word: the gift contains the poison, and things can go both ways. There are no guarantees. That is clearly true. I don't doubt that the Art Ensemble must have had arguments and disputes and all the rest of it in Paris—George Lewis more or less says that in *A Power Stronger Than Itself*. But, as Marx says in the "Theses on Feuerbach," these questions cannot be decided in advance or in theory, they have to be decided in practice. And the question is: what kind of practice can we construct? That is where the ethics or maybe "ethical know-how" (Varela) is to be found. I love this story that Hennix tells about Pharoah Saunders, the great saxophonist, who collaborated with a group of the Moroccan Gnawa musicians in the 1990s. Gnawa is very much a healing tradition in which music plays a strong role. According to Hennix, Saunders "said that before they move on to another stage of the lila ceremony, they have to reach a certain level in the section of the sound that they presently are at . . . in other words, you're not allowed to move on until you've gotten all the way" (*The Politics of Vibration*). So there's contingency—but there's also a sense of purpose, a goal, a place you're trying to get to, via the practice of music. That place is the place of ontology, and when we say "vibrational ontology" we mean that the universe, including ourselves, is composed of vibrations, waves, and that music, as a vibrational practice, therefore has a privileged relationship to ontology. And to align yourself with that place of ontology is healing because it restores a feeling of balance of literally being attuned. It's a joyful feeling. It is, if you like, a state of truth.

There are no guarantees that the place of ontology, what Hennix calls a topos, will open up in a mechanical way due to a particular practice of playing music. The music is played and improvised in reaching for that moment when that next level opens up. You have to prepare, you have to know and have walked the path previously, but then you have to improvise because that state that the ritual was seeking or invoking is a contingent one, even a kind of living entity. While the Gnawa have a very clear and conscious sense of this practice of sonic invocation, a teleological approach to music, and while various other musical traditions around the world have related forms of awareness (I am thinking of Indonesian gamelan music, the songs and clicks of Amazonian ayahuasca shamanism, the raga spirits of Indian classical music), most contemporary music lacks that teleological dimension. They are searching, yet in a sense not clear what they are searching for. There's tremendous pathos to that, of course—it's the modern condition. And I think Attali was unable to fully theorize it either in imagining the emerging epoch of composition, though his invocation of Rene Girard's mimetic theory and music as a sacrificial scapegoat to ward off the violence of indifferentiation suggests that he was getting close to something

important. Mimesis itself is a power of indifferentiation (copies exist because of the nonduality of original and copy). The problem of how we open up to our constitutive indifferentiation, to the "undivided universe" (Bohm and Hiley, *The Undivided Universe*, 2006) is a profound and delicate one. It is the territory of spiritual and religious practice—but also of music, and the joy that we experience with it. Of course, from the other side, there's always the risk of reification, of the settling of the living form into a cliche or something dogmatic and merely the symbol of itself—Pandit Pran Nath said that he'd never met someone who could hold the notes, i.e. the notes that makes the magic happen, in their pocket.

I am definitely attracted to musics and musicians that believe there is a healing or spiritual power to music, and who seek to deepen or amplify our experience of that. *The Politics of Vibration* was born from an interest in writing about contemporary figures who believe in the possibility of a formal statement of music's potential for spiritual transformation—and then how in fact that plays out in a world that has little time for such things. So I wrote about three figures, Pandit Pran Nath, Catherine Christer Hennix, and DJ Screw, who were all interested in a formal psychotropism of music—Pran Nath in preserving Hindustani classical vocal technique in the age of decolonization and minimalism, Hennix in her formal mathematical proposal of musics that can lead us in the direction of the Parmenidean One, and DJ Screw, who literally slowed down every track he played on every mixtape, in the belief that one could escape the dominant time regime thereby.

It was my encounter with Hennix that really drove the book—we'd corresponded and talked on the phone since I wrote an article about Pran Nath back in 2001, and I was at a conference in Berlin where she'd just moved to, and I went and visited her in this little carriage house she lived in in Neukolln. She was an extraordinary person—mathematician, composer, deeply immersed in Lacanian psychoanalysis, a devoted Sufi, amongst other things. And she became the core of the work I did in *Politics of Vibration*, because she proposed in a highly formal mathematical way, that music could offer a transit from the mundane "sad world" (Brouwer, "Life, Art, and Mysticism," 1996) that we inhabit, to the One, i.e. that undivided universe that I talked about above. As a composer working with just intonation based tuning systems in which the pitches used are based on ratios of prime numbers, and as a mathematician who had her own radical take on a mathematical ontology, and also as someone who'd grown up in Stockholm in a household where great jazz musicians like Eric Dolphy were visitors, she was able to link mathematics and philosophy (not to mention psychoanalysis, Sufism, the politics of being trans and more) to music in a precise but enigmatic way that I found fascinating. And her music, both the live concerts and the recordings, lived up to the theory. The room would seem to melt and space and myself as a being in the space would somehow transform. So for about a decade, the decade in which I wrote *Politics of Vibration*, I visited and studied with her, learning how she understood things. And it changed how I understood myself, her world and music.

At the same time, I was interested in why music does have such a precarious place in the world, why, if indeed ontology and vibration are connected, the fact of it remains so hidden, so obscured and marginalized, and the musicians that keep the practices through which knowledge of a vibrational ontology is kept alive lead such difficult lives. Thus the politics of vibration: in a Bataillean way, all societies make a decision concerning the organization of vibration and in particular the status of music within a society. So we're back to Attali in a sense.

DB: Reading *The Politics of Vibration*, and hearing about your own journey to write that book, it seems to me that the concept of music you've been able to articulate can really clarify and develop so much that seems to me stuck. For instance, I really liked Amy Hungerford's book *Postmodern Belief*, where she looked at the way belief, faith, religion and the quest for the sacred are everywhere in postmodern literature, though that is often occluded or actively repressed, but, in her reading, postmodern because they all avoid any statement of just what the belief is in—belief without dogma. Yet, in almost every example she gives, the dogma is replaced by music or sound, like the dialtone drone of a landline phone at the end of Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*. Yet, she never points to music or sound, or vibration as the key, even though it is there, in example after example. It seems to me like her work is showing how all these authors, Ginsberg, Salinger, DeLillo, are all knocking at the door of the vibrational ontology you are theorizing. For me, this is much like your copy book, offering a way of clarifying, suddenly seeing the answer to questions books like Hungerford's are asking but don't quite have the concepts or the approach to answer in the way you would, where, as Greil Marcus always says, the best work opens up a place to go, to keep thinking.

Now that you've completed a decade to write the music book, what will you do now? What are you thinking about today?

MB: For myself, I've become increasingly interested in the broader implications of a vibrational ontology—in thinking about the status of waves of all kinds (light waves, ocean waves, brain waves, earthquakes and volcanoes for example) in different human societies, and with my partner Christie Pearson, who's been exploring the politics of public bathing for several decades, trying to understand if there are general proposals concerning wave cultures, whether at the level of philosophy or of practice and design, that can be articulated and open up new kinds of political space and social and spiritual transformation. That topic of space has been an increasingly important one in my conversations with Hennix over the last few years. Part of what she taught me was that one can think of space as being subject to topological transformations and that art, music and visual art, but also literature and even philosophy, can act as vectors, or, more precisely, functions which cause spatial transformation. I've learnt a lot from talking with Christie about it too. That sense of curiosity about space, that "we do not yet know what a space can do", in Lefebvre's sense of "the production of space", but radicalized in the sense of thinking about how particular kinds of waves and wave fields generate particular kinds of

space—and thinking about all of that philosophically, but also in terms of art, design, the practice of making space … all of that is of great interest to me!