SYNKOPEN 5

Gap Trap Laugh

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Ty Bouque

Liza Lim Among the Art Historians

wolke

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Volume 5

Edited by

Nicolas Donin, Steven Takasugi, Magdalena Zorn

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for Seth Brodsky,
to whom it is as much an apologia as
an anointment

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Preface (On Dizzy Theory)

Reencountered at a year's remove, swaths of this text remain as baffling to me as when first I wrote them. This is the risk one accepts when writing towards the outer shore of signification: the wager goes that language, lent enough agency, will, over a certain juncture, think of its own accord. It will leave traces, inscribe, perhaps only in the negative but then still, a sense entirely of its own. It is this unauthorized (that is to say, licensed not by the author, by the non-author) sense that I maintain is the mark of presence of the *thinking habitation of the music itself*. To write fidelitously with a particular music is to register—without expurgation or reduction—the singular and non-fungible pressures it places upon significa-

tion and sense, to trace a skin of language supple enough that it preserves as impression or exuviae the resistances a music mounts to its own translation.

On rereading, the experience of these resistances, for the writer at least, syncopates with what Hélène Cixous—she will make continuous return in this book; here she is again—describes as the address of love:

> My heart beats from not recognizing you, *from recognizing: I don't recognize you*, I sense that I don't recognize you. (To sense that I don't recognize makes my heart beat); what makes my heart beat is that something remains unrecognized, that I sense the unknown, that I keep it unknown. This is love. [...] I love you: I work at understanding you to the point of not understanding you, and there, standing in a wind, I don't understand you.[i]

All writing with music, practiced ethically, is an act of love like this, a recognition of non-recognition, a main-

i Hélène Cixous, "What is it o'clock? Or The door (we never enter)," trans. Catherine A.F. MacGillivray, in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (Routledge, 1998), p. 81. My italics.

tenance of alterity. (Indeed, much of this book will tarry with the notion of "keeping strange," of preserving a quantity of the unknown without rendering it familiar again.) Accordingly, there are several passages I do not recognize in what follows. The difficult task of editing is to know which opacities are merely underbaked ideas waiting to be called forth into relief, and which are productive excesses whose ambiguity is the fuzzy index of their autonomy. Across this book I have opted to leave in, at risk of meaning's dissemblance, several articulations whose intent I can neither fully explain nor adequately credit. It's a hazard I accept. That said, the particular opacities emergent from this text seem to me now to warrant if not an explanation—which would only fix their meaning and, doing so, usurp their productive potential as my own—then at least an attempt to theorize again why the book behaves the way it does. Theory, after all, is nothing more than a speculative calling to account of the excrescences and unconscious patterns produced by an idiosyncratic orientation to being. If the compassing of a resistant anomaly by theory here has produced anomalies and resistances of its own, then theory is invited to begin its work anew.

Provenance would provisionally answer for this book's peculiar occupation. *Gap Trap Laugh* had—appro-

priately, perhaps—a somewhat oblique conception story. In the summer of 2025, Liza Lim asked if I would consider writing something to mark the release of her new portrait disc on Musica Viva.[i] The headliner was the premiere recording of her cello concerto "A Sutured World," and in retrospect I imagine it was that work she had in mind when asking me to write. (The concerto won her the Grawemeyer later that year; perhaps I ought to have heeded the suspicion.) But filling out the disc was the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra's new recording of "Mary/ Transcendence after Trauma," the middle movement of her 2022 orchestra cycle *Annunciation Triptych*. It was "Mary" that pierced me, that addressed me with an imperative to think commensurately with it. (Which has nothing to do with liking the piece more or less by comparison. Avital Ronell describes writing as being "called" without the capacity to locate that necessity: "One doesn't know where the imperative comes from. Nevertheless, one is assigned to it, so that one is always

i Liza Lim, *Lim: A Sutured World/Mary/The Compass*, The Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, Nicolas Altstadt, Carin Levine, William Barton, conducted by Edward Gardner, Franck Ollu, and Christoph Poppen, Musica Viva No. 47, BR-Klassik 900647, 2025, CD.

writing at the behest of the Other."[i] I cannot name what it is about a music that calls me to language; I can only pursue the claim it makes on me in blind faith, guaranteed of no return on the investment. This is not the same as liking it; it's much stranger.) If this book titularly professes to be about *Annunciation Triptych* and then almost entirely disregards its flanking movements, it is because, surreptitiously, the object under study was never the work *in toto* but the excerpted, single movement on this later disc.

On a more practical level, *Gap Trap Laugh* was also a rehearsal. By the time Liza approached me, I had already been commissioned by Bloomsbury to write a short book for their 33⅓ series on her earlier ensemble work *Extinction Events and Dawn Chorus*. The pressures of writing for non-specialist audiences, compounded by the peculiar demands of treating as album a collection of works not originally destined for that format, prompted a series of anxieties: how to compass the necessary contextual ground, not to mention stage an analysis both thorough and relatively readable, in thirty-thousand words?

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i Avital Ronell, "Confessions of an Anacoluthon: Avital Ronell on Writing, Technology, Pedagogy, and Politics," interview with Diane Davis, *JAC: Journal of Composition Theory* 20, no. 2 (2000): pp. 259–60.

How to write something at once legibly mine—signed, in some fashion, by the stylistic idiosyncrasies I understand to be my "voice"—and legibly "for the public" without sacrifice to either? And anyway, there were things I didn't yet understand about her work, general occupations I felt needed to be named before turning those ideas loose on a broader readership. *Gap Trap Laugh* was my sketchbook, my sandbox, my dry run.

Accordingly, quite a few characters are double-cast: the loose theory of shimmer in these pages served as a foundation for the more clarified iteration of the same in *Extinction Events*; the gloss on entrapment—and Rey Chow in particular—likewise; the work put to Seth Brodsky's BOOM in the later volume is foreshortened coverage of its systematic treatment here; and the extreme investment in Cixous demanded by the indwelling occupations of this book turned up what would later become the out-dwelling citations scaffolding the other. But linearity would be simplifying things too much: the introduction to the Bloomsbury book had already been written when work on *Gap Trap Laugh* began, and so the interwoven reprise here of both Peggy Kamuf's *Book of Addresses* and Leo Bersani's *The Culture of Redemption* is entirely the product of that timeline. And, too, the intent to make Jack Whitten a primary interlocutor in

Extinction Events long predated the genesis of this book (the result of a thunderbolt encounter with his "Door to Manhattan" at New York's Museum of Modern Art, when Lim was already on the mind); his fleeting appearance here reflects an early attempt to test their compatibility. There is an argument to be made that both books, though independently whole, form a shadow pair, a biunality, each issuant from the cracks of the other and fulfilling something of the twin's disavowed unconscious. Written in a kind of temporal boustrophedon, the exchanges of their shared moment—like Mary and the Angel in Fra Angelico's Cortona Altarpiece—move in both directions.

The real difference—primary objects aside—lies in comportment. (I had originally written *method*, but that's not quite right. They do share an analytic framework, but the erotic orientation of the book-as-object toward the incorporation of that framework is what marks the true differential.) Intended for a popular book series, *Extinction Events* made calculated moves to keep the work at the reader's center. Even when it strays (and it does stray) the album is never far from sight, and considerable effort was made to knit all interpolations and asides back to Liza Lim. It is a book with little jetsam, intentionally so, and for all its performative divestments from the traditional claims of musical analysis, it retains

that project's foundational ideal of sustained investigation of a single work of art with an eye to the production of knowledge. Hidden at its core is a deeply conventional musicological query: *with time and focused attention, what more might be said about x*?

Gap Trap Laugh was an experiment in the inverse. It is among my abiding beliefs that the intellective potential of New Music lies in its theoretically endless[i] capacity to marshal the history of thought into novel relations. Relative semantic weakness works here to its advantage: New Music[ii] can activate ideas, draw them close, arraign them into contingencies *without* the obligation to justify

i "Endings [of formal readings] are as provisional as the beginning." Lou Silhol-Macher and Eugenie Brinkema, "The Enduring Problem: An Interview about Form," *qui parle* 34, no. 1 (2025): p. 252.

ii When so capitalized, "New Music" refers to the decentralized field of composers, sound artists, performers, curators, and thinkers who route their loose aesthetic heredity back to European and select American modernisms of the early twentieth century, and who continue to ask pressing questions about sound, perception, form, history, and attention. For the best gloss on the term, see Seth Brodsky, *From 1989, or European Music and the Modernist Unconscious* (University of California Press, 2017), pp. 108–27.

or determine in advance the transecting angle.[i] Treating New Music as a thinking art requires we rezone the task of the critic in turn: criticism would no longer pursue the assertoric reconstruction of what it imagines is the work's prefigured truth, a kind of closing down of meaning. Instead, it would be dedicated to the production and maintenance of a kind of textual space, one capable of sustaining the inexhaustible speculation generated when the infinite project of approaching a work meets the varying trajectories by which that work rebounds or flees from sense. The dimensions of the space would thus be determined only by an unflagging attempt to follow those ricochets to their utmost limit, consequences be damned. "The energy of a zigzag," writes Eugenie Brinkema of this preferred figure of formalism, "is in its inefficiency as movement."[ii] *Extinction Events* had to be efficient, had to activate concepts in service of some-

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i But then we should ask what Derrida asks: "To 'arraign' is to ask for identity papers, for an origin and a destination. It is to claim to recognize a proper name. How do you name without arraigning? Is that possible?" The possibility for New Music to arraign thought without nominating it is the question of this book. See Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand (University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 7.

ii Eugenie Brinkema, *Life-Destroying Diagrams* (Duke University Press, 2022), p. 27.

thing like a familiarity with the work. *Gap Trap Laugh* is nothing but inefficiency all the way down, reneging on the very premise of familiarity (what is efficiency if not familiarity's ease of overview?) to seek instead a rigorous mapping of the catastrophic consequences a single musical moment can have on theoretical concepts. Rather than assume the history of Annunciation Art has anything to tell us about Liza Lim, *Gap Trap Laugh* reverses the order of operations, asking after the specific theory Lim's work might propose about the general category "Annunciation" and the bodies and politics therein. It treats the work as a *textual* producer without text, and takes its task to be the impossible fidelity of harnessing in words those intellective resonances.

I'm hardly the first to note that New Music is an evermore textual discipline. The porting of ideas and intellectual frameworks through a careful conjugation of paratextual material has become composerly common practice. This leading of the witness has habituated New Music analysts into a default vector of analysis: the history of those textual affiliations licensed by the composer is assumed to acclimate us to the depths of her work. (When a composer professes a particular love for a poet or a painter, for example, her music will almost always be read as a mimetic response to that stimulus, as stemming

from it in some indexable fashion.) The reverse shot, however, remains to be excavated: what would it mean to start from the music and open outwards to the history of ideas? For the music to unconceal some nascent, speculative space between literature, philosophy, art, film, law, theater, or medicine, something previously undisclosed or unthought? Rather than asking after some musical truth accessible only by starting at attested influence, the about-face would involve imagining New Music as a *literate*, *desiring* art whose interlocutors only come into being by the work's orientation towards them—an orientation which cannot be known in advance. Said another way: there is no established history of thought from which this music emerges as its teleologic slurry; instead, that history, in Rebecca Comay's words, "presents itself [...] as the unconscious or blanked-out transmission of a void,"[i] a void with no haecceity except the always-singular arrangement of material that a given work beckons forth to decorate it.

Adapting a concept Mieke Bal tendered for contemporary art (itself a riff on Patricia Parker's reading of Shakespeare), we might call this *preposterous reading*: a hermeneutic reversal that reads "what came chrono-

i Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 80.

logically first ('pre-') as an aftereffect behind ('post') its later recycling."[i] And though we might quibble over the recycling bit—Bal is thinking of art historical citations, of a Baroque both invented and revisioned by its incorporation in modernity—the method is clear enough. This would be analysis under the sign of the *hysteron proteron*, the rhetorical figure of last things first. Accordingly, nothing of any so-called textual "influence" would be taken to predate the music. There would be no givens, no certitudes, no affordances. (*The work does not always know its own terms*, this book is fond of saying, echoing Adorno: "The contradiction according to which every work wants to be understood on its own terms but none can in fact be so understood is what leads to the truth content."[ii]) Preposterous reading would instead involve treating the textual guardrails of a work—paratexts, colloquial knowledge of the composer's aesthetic preoccupations, general interpretive assumptions, musico-historical referents—as contingently emergent *from*

i Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 7. See also Patricia Parker, "Preposterous Events," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1992): pp. 186–213.

ii Theodor W. Adorno, "Parataxis: On Hölderlin's Late Poetry," in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Columbia University Press, 1992), 2:112.

[…]

exordia:
todo sobre la madre

Yes, *sí*, *la*—because, in accordance with Bersani, "there is no single (or proprietary) subject to support 'my'"[1]—that possessive *mi* that would make of every mother *my* mother. Likewise, no authorial authority (always masculine, Kaja Silverman reminds us) to lord over and delimit signification. Let it remain defiantly *the* mother (capital Mother), Kristeva's "immeasurable, unconfinable maternal body,"[2] that matters [*mater*-s] here. In the beginning was *the*.

... perhaps, then, we ought to recast *sobre* too, discarding the totalizing epistemology of subjects (*all about*) in favor of a matrix [*mater*-ix] of spatial adjacency (*all about*). What follows is not entirely *anent* the Mother but

emphatically *around* (near, on, over) her: the Other of M-other, near but not the same: flesh of my flesh, only (k)not me.

—language falling to pieces again in the face of women: *écriture féminine* one more time, grammar flailing to encompass woman's excess, the non-sayable superseding meaning, communication, structure. Woman, yes—but mother even more so: "Although it concerns every woman's body, the [semiotic] heterogeneity," writes Kristeva, "that cannot be subsumed in the signifier, nevertheless explodes violently with pregnancy (the threshold of culture and nature) and the child's arrival (which *extracts a woman out of her oneness* and gives her the possibility, but not the certainty, of reaching out to the other, the ethical),"[3] to: *do so-b-re*.

So *sí*: *mi* → *la*: perfect, authentic, this once-begotten *cradle*[4] renewing with the maternal vanquishing of the subject.

And already we have begun to sing:

Vergine Madre, figlia [...][5]

Writing in its passage to singing: *mother*.



Having killed off phallicizing homosexuality in the early minutes of the film (in the form of a gay father-obsessed son that resembles uncannily the author-filmmaker), Almodóvar's *Todo sobre mi madre* becomes a discretely feminine proliferation of iterable traits and roles: every daughter also a mother, every mother also a lover, every woman an echo of another. The sheer potential of "partial, figurative, and mobile extensions"[6] posited by that iterability points to what Leo Bersani calls *homo-ness*, a form of relationality that recuses Being from the imperatives of socialized desire and psychic singularity in favor of a sublimated self that recognizes its own becoming in various externalities. "'Mother' is both present and lost everywhere," Bersani writes in his later account of the movie with Dutoit: "its presence is its lostness, the unlocatable and unsettled nature of its referent and its attributes. Repeatable being—being that continuously fails to be unique—creates a hospitable world of correspondences, one in which relations, no longer blocked by difference, multiply as networks of similitude."[7] In other words, *Todo sobre mi madre* trial-runs a kind of being-with-others that is not, as so much cinema is, a projected mania of singular subjects defending their autonomy through small and large violences, but rather a space in which the anonymity of