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Learning to make noise: toward a process model of artistic practice within experimental music scenes

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ABSTRACT

Emerging at the intersection of industrial, punk, electronic music, and avant-garde jazz, noise music represents a niche subgenre reliant on loud, discordant, and arrhythmic sounds to make music. Yet despite its place within the (broadly defined) experimental music tradition, research into experimental music education has largely overlooked the genre. In response, I explore noise music through the lens of situated learning theory by addressing the following research question: how do noise musicians develop their artistic practice? To do so, I present findings from a comparative case study centered on two intertwined experimental music concert and workshop series focused on noise music. I begin by analyzing interview data from seventeen featured artists to construct a process model of artistic practice shared between musicians. I then employ bidirectional artifact analysis to trace the development of one novice participant in the series through this model. In turn, these findings not only illuminate how experimental musicians learn within informal settings but provide a potential model of learning for informal education communities more broadly. This study also holds implications for situated learning theory by asserting the influence of non-anthropocentric actors within communities of practice.

Introduction

At first glance, asking how people learn to make noise seems absurd: within most education research, noise exists as an unintentional (and unlearned) byproduct of some other activity that hinders teaching and learning (see Verstraete & Hoegaerts, 2017). Yet music traditions such as experimental music, here defined as an amorphous collection of genres (e.g., electro-acoustic, free-jazz, musique concrète) that intentionally break from tenets of the western musical canon (e.g., rhythm, melody, repetitive structure) (see Gilmore, 2014),¹ challenge this generalization. Because experimental music incorporates, redeploys, and purposefully allows space for noise within its musical artifacts (see Gottschalk, 2016; Nyman, 1974), learning how to intentionally make (or, at least, deploy) noise inherently represents a foundational aspect of becoming an experimental musician.

To further explore the generative role of noise within education, a potential first step involves locating sites of research that embrace this type of sound. Representing something of a truism, I contend that noise music provides one such site. Emerging from underground music scenes located in Japan and England during the late 1970s and early 1980s (see Novak, 2013; Taylor, 2016), this caustic offshoot of experimental music combines influences from industrial, punk, avant-garde jazz, and modernist electronic music and largely employs dissonant, arrhythmic, and overwhelmingly loud forms of electronic noise as its foundational sonic element (Bailey, 2012). Additionally, the anti-authoritarian ethos of punk and other do-it-yourself (DIY) musical genres (see Makagon, 2015) runs

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through noise music, producing a communal musical identity reliant on constantly challenging, resisting, and questioning the cultural and musical codes of more well-known musical forms (Atton, 2011). How participants in noise music develop associated musical and sociocultural knowledges, however, remains unexplored.

In response, I use this paper to address the following research question: how do noise musicians develop their artistic practice? Through analyses of interviews with seventeen veteran artists, I construct a process model of artistic practice within noise music. I then use this model to track the development of one novice performer from initially hearing noise music to their first public performance. In doing so, I draw attention to some of the intricacies of noise music as an informal learning space and, more importantly, reveal how the self-directed pedagogies of communal knowledge-building strongly align this context with other informal arts spaces.

Theoretical context

Experimental music education

Within the growing body of experimental music education literature, scholars have largely focused on two key lines of research: uncovering what students learn when making experimental music and examining how formal classroom settings change in response to experimental music curricula and pedagogies. In terms of what students learn, this research builds on Gottschalk's (2016) assertion that experimental music, as a genre, relies on a process of learning through making music, developing new musical knowledge in situ rather than developing skills and ideas a priori and applying them later. Primarily, this work has centered on the use of free-improvisation, or the spontaneous coconstruction of music that sits at the heart of experimental music subgenres such as free jazz and noise (Fischlin et al., 2013), in the classroom. Researchers have subsequently found the pedagogical use of free improvisation to improve confidence (Hickey et al., 2016), build musical connections (Ng, 2011), and help develop both technical performance abilities and positive dispositions toward fellow performers and music more broadly (Hickey, 2015; Kopper, 2018).

Beyond the benefits found for the individual, experimental music pedagogies have also been shown to positively reimagine the cultural space of the classroom. Making experimental music helps students and teachers engage an environmental approach to education à la Dewey (Sordahl, 2013) and implement democratic pedagogies that reassert the authority of students as experts (Kanellopoulos, 2021; Niknafs, 2013). Outside of the classroom context, both Thomson (2007) and Wright (2013) recognize this fluid understanding of pedagogical authority within free improvisation performances themselves. As groups of collaborators improvise, performers constantly shift between states of leading and following, listening and playing as they develop a shared set of musical gestures and a musical language through the act of performance.

Although very few empirical studies of education within noise music scenes exist, extant research shows that noise musicians distribute the process of teaching across multiple human and non-human actors (musicians, audience members, instruments, performances, recordings, etc.) and also consider shaping the immediate music scene as an educational process (Woods, 2019). Learning within noise music then occurs in the two different contexts defined by Thomson (2007) as the "performance as classroom" and the "scene as classroom," highlighting how learning happens during musical interactions and through the formation of community. Niknafs (2018) builds on this theorization of scene construction as pedagogical model in her study of "Anarcho-Impro" communities in Iran, arguing that contributing to and constructing a music scene acts as a form of collective identity development with radical and anarchist ideologies (much like the disruptive and anti-authoritarian values of punk) emerging through the countercultural act of making non-normative (and, in this case, illegal) music (Niknafs, 2018). Although these texts barely scratch the surface of learning within noise music scenes, they position noise music as a potent learning context and a valuable site for informal arts education research (see Woods, 2020).

Situated approaches to music education

To begin conceptualizing how individuals learn within noise music scenes, Green's (2002, 2006) analysis of the informal pedagogical practices of popular music offers a valuable set of mechanisms to explore. In her work, Green (2002) finds that musicians develop their technique by intensively listening to music with which they identify and copying what they hear in isolation, as well as participating in explicit moments of teaching between peers. Green (2002) also recognizes the "endless talk" between musicians about music, equipment, and musical cultures as a vital learning mechanism despite it being "unlikely to be recognized as a learning activity at all" (Green, 2006, p. 83). This poses a challenge to researchers studying any informal arts space, calling on scholars to attend to the normally unseen pedagogies within these communities.

To address this challenge, I invoke situated learning theory in this study. First established by Lave and Wenger (1991), situated learning theory reimagines learning as a process of constructing a community of practice (COP), or a group "of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact" (Wenger, 2011, p. 1). Applying this concept to music communities specifically, Kenny (2016) builds on Wenger's (1999) analysis to define a community of musical practice through mutual engagement ("music-making group interactions such as rehearsals, workshops and performances"), joint enterprise (the "stated and negotiated aims of the music communities"), and shared repertoire ("the practices or built-up communal resources that distinctly belong to each musical community") (p. 18). In terms of mapping a learning trajectory within COPs, individuals learn by first engaging in legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), contributing to the COP in small but meaningful ways (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In noise music scenes, this might entail going to shows or posting in online forums (Perry, 2011). Over time, community members may eventually become "old timers," contributing to community maintenance and reproduction while also producing artifacts of greater significance (e.g., organizing concerts or releasing albums; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Perry, 2011). This positions identity development as a crucial part of situated learning, one in which people develop an understanding of themselves within a social context while simultaneously shaping larger communal identities (Pinkard & Austin, 2014; Powell, 2005) and navigating the tensions that form between individual and communal goals (Gaunt & Dobson, 2014).

Situating noise in a wider context, Perry's (2011) study purposefully theorizes noise scenes within a broader DIY network of music communities that emerged out of punk's evolving history. This alludes to a strong alignment between the community formation processes of noise music and other DIY music genres. As Makagon (2015) attests, geographically bounded punk scenes form in the same way as the noise scene described by Perry: a group of likeminded musicians find each other, begin making music together, and then slowly form and adapt a communal identity over time as new members engage LPP and negotiate the cultural practices of that community (musical or otherwise). Considering that noise music scenes have always been intertwined with and grown in parallel contexts to punk scenes (Bailey, 2012; Candey, 2016; Novak, 2013), this alignment of community formation seems almost inevitable. The individual and the community consistently change and evolve as new participants, knowledge, and forms of interaction intersect with and emerge from both punk and noise contexts in similar ways.

Sociocultural theories of learning through creativity

In line with theories of situated learning, some researchers have positioned creativity as a situated phenomenon as well (see Black, 2008), taking on what Glăveanu (2020) describes as a sociocultural approach that shifts the locus of creativity outside of the individual and places it within a distributed (and situated) matrix of cultural actors. Creativity then emerges through the interpersonal interactions between an artist and an audience, artistic collaborators, their tools, the artifacts they create, and themselves over time (Glăveanu, 2014). Beyond these tangible entities, Clapp (2016) argues that ideas "comprise both the what and the where of creativity" (p. 36) with individuals producing new artifacts

that embody and respond to a generative (and evolving) idea. Similarly, Black (2008) contends that culturally defined activity (such as performing within a specific musical genre) restrains and shapes creative action. Taken together, this sociocultural framing positions creativity as an act of cultural participation (Glăveanu, 2011), one in which creative production not only results in the production of new artifacts or ideas but the formation of the culture itself.

Within this sociocultural school of thought, there also exists a growing thread of inquiry related to the role materiality plays in creativity with scholars examining how objects contribute to creative production through their material affordances (see Glăveanu, 2020). To understand this material approach, two different notions within education research provide a valuable lens to examine how individuals construct situated knowledge when engaging artifacts and tools: design-thinking and tinkering. Design-thinking includes the skills and knowledge needed to successfully solve problems through the “iterative, exploratory, and sometimes a chaotic [design] process” (Razzouk & Shute, 2012, p. 336). Choosing what to focus on, productively defining the problem, and making decisions based on feedback from prototypes all fit within design-thinking (Kolodner & Wills, 1996). Moreover, the importance of learning from prototypes positions design-thinking as a distributed process between both human collaborators and the material prototypes being created. As Kabayadondo (2016) attests, design thinking remains situated, responding to the cultural context within which design occurs. Haenisch’s (2013) analysis of the Inside Piano, a unique instrument built by Andrea Neumann, shows how a situated understanding of creativity and design thinking exists within experimental music: Neumann routinely iterated on her instrument design in response to material challenges and affordances she discovered when performing with it in different contexts, aligning the development of the Inside Piano with the design process and her learning with design thinking.

Tinkering provides a similar space to construct knowledge through creativity. Rather than working toward the solution to a particular problem, tinkering involves a more open ended, playful approach to working with tools and ideas (see Vossoughi & Bevan, 2014). Although this process can lead to problem solutions, the focus here involves explorations of a tool’s affordances, including those explorations outside of what Costall (2015) defines as “canonical affordances” that embody creativity. Within experimental music, Keep’s (2009) notion of instrumentalizing exemplifies this practice: rather than mastering a specific set of pre-determined performance skills, experimental musicians build their musical ability by exploring the sounding affordances of a given object (traditional instrument or otherwise) to develop their own unique approach. Material objects therefore play a crucial role in creativity, acting as an influential and somewhat deterministic medium within which creative production forms.

Since learning and creativity exist as situated phenomena distributed across both human actors and material objects, especially within musical and informal education contexts (see Ma & Munter, 2014; Weheliye, 2005), research into situated learning within experimental music contexts (and noise music scenes in particular) needs to specifically consider how creative practices emerge not within an individual but in conversation with individuals, artifacts, ideas and contexts. With this in mind, I return to my proposed research question: how do noise musicians develop their artistic practice? In asking this question, I not only draw attention to the actions and thought processes of noise musicians but the communities, spaces, objects, ideologies, and artistic artifacts they engage.

Methods

Site of research and study overview

The findings from this study come from a year-long comparative case study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016) of the Milwaukee, WI noise scene with an emphasis on two intersecting music series: The Experimental Education Series, hosted at a community-based arts organization called the Jazz Gallery Center for the Arts, and the Noise Knowledge Consortium, which took place at the Brinn Labs makerspace. Each event in the series included an hour-long workshop (designed and facilitated

by the featured artist) and a concert from the featured artist. Following Bartlett and Vavrus (2016) methodology, I position this work within the broader social context of the North American noise scene. This musical COP represents a decentralized collection of artists, fans, and organizers who create and share music across various geographically defined scenes through both touring and digital distribution infrastructures (Atton, 2011; Makagon, 2015; Novak, 2013). In booking both series, I invited musicians from outside of Milwaukee to serve as featured artists, thereby expanding the breadth of perspectives on noise music within this study beyond a localized context. Some local participants also tour nationally, further allowing aspects of the broader social context to exist within the data.

Data collection and analysis

This article includes two separate analyses of data generated from this study. The first focuses on analyzing interviews conducted with teaching artists and the second presents findings from a single case study of one novice performer as they develop their practice. In doing so, I use these analyses to respond to my research question by producing a model for learning in noise and then verifying and exploring this model in practice. To collect data, I conducted semi-structured pre- and post-interviews with each of the seventeen featured artists (see Table 1).² The first interview focused on the participant's history with experimental music and noise, both as a performer and listener, and their intentions with the workshop and performance. The second interview explored their reactions to the event as a whole, including opportunities to respond to video recordings I made of the workshops and performances. This created space for participants to articulate their intentions and the meaning they ascribed to specific moments in the series. I then fully transcribed all of the interviews and utilized an open and iterative approach to both descriptive and pattern coding techniques (see Saldaña, 2015).

I also interviewed five audience members who attended the majority of events and initially self-identified as novices who had an interest in learning about noise music.³ All five of these participants joined the study by responding to publicly available posts that I made on social media. To organize these interviews, I employed Seidman's (2005) three interview structure: a pre-interview centered on participants' existing relationship with and understanding of noise; a mid-interview focused on the details of their involvement in the workshops and concerts thus far⁴; and a post-interview where participants reflected on their experience and how their understandings of noise music changed. After fully transcribing each interview, I used the same coding techniques described above.

For this article, I focus on one of the aforementioned audience members, Jack Hietpas, in particular. I present Hietpas as an individual case study because of the complete nature of his participation. At the beginning of the study, Hietpas had never performed noise music in front of others or created a "finished" artifact. During the last event he attended, Hietpas opened for the featured artist (see Cook, 2019). This arc positions Hietpas as a valuable case to consider, revealing potential areas of alignment and divergence between Hietpas' "complete" development and the processes described by the veteran artists. To conduct this analysis, I relied on Halverson and Magnifico's (2013) bidirectional artifact analysis methodology to trace the development of Hietpas' final performance across time. I conducted the interviews described above while also collecting artifacts produced by Hietpas as he developed the piece. I then utilized techniques inspired by photo elicitation methods (see Epstein et al., 2006), asking Hietpas to respond to those artifacts in the interviews. This allowed me to "construct narrative threads across the data types that trace core ideas and tools present in the final product back through their development," (Halverson & Magnifico, 2013, p. 409) moving across time to reconstruct the creative process behind this performance.

Table 1. Participating teaching artists.

Name	Stage, Project or Band Name	Formal Musical Training	Identified Musical Tradition	Artist Webpage or Recorded Material
Lea Bertucci	Lea Bertucci	Instrument training	Noise artist	http://lea-bertucci.com/
Bryce Beverlin II	Ice Volt, Bryce Beverlin II	Undergraduate degree	Noise artist, free improviser	http://www.insidesmusic.com/bryce/
Christopher Burns	Christopher Burns	DMA, Composition	Electro-acoustic composer, noise artist	http://sfsound.org/~cburns/
Nicholas Elert	Nicholas Elert	Undergraduate degree	Electro-acoustic composer, noise artist	https://nicholaselert.bandcamp.com/
Shannon Kennedy	Nephila, Pedestrian Deposit	Instrument training	Noise artist	https://monorailtrespassing.bandcamp.com/album/subcutaneous-memory
William Mueller	The Smudge, Bucko Crooks	No formal training	Noise artist	http://thesmudge.bandcamp.com
Jon Mueller	Jon Mueller	Instrument training	Experimental musician	http://rhythmplex.com
Rick Ollman	Rick Ollman, Seed Sounds	No formal training	Free-improviser	https://soundcloud.com/user-240416425/sessions-with-sandy-2018-10-27
Taralie Peterson	Louise Bock, Spires that in the Sunset Rise	Instrument training	Noise musician, Free-improviser	https://louisebock.bandcamp.com/
Hal Rammel	Hal Rammel	No formal training	Free-improviser	https://www.halrammel.com/
Kate Rissiek	Rusalka	No formal training	Noise artist	http://rusalka.org
Mike Schauwitzer	Slow Owls, Mildew	No formal training	Noise artist	https://youtu.be/JtqGV0Kui18
Amanda Schoofs	Amanda Schoofs, Bachelorette Party	Masters degree	Experimental musician, free-improviser, noise artist	https://soundantisound.com/
Gabriella Schwartz	Nummy	No formal training	Noise artist, performance artist	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gxT83KqvrY
Shanna Sordahl	Shanna Sordahl	Masters degree	Free-improviser, noise artist	https://www.shannasordahl.net/
Matt Taggart	Luer, PCRv, Matt Taggart	Instrument training	Noise artist, Fluxus artist	https://pcrv.bandcamp.com/album/implosion
August Traeger	August Traeger	Instrument training	Sound artist	https://somnaphon.bandcamp.com/

Participant selection and positionality statement

In terms of my role in both designing and conducting this study, I relied on my experience as a noise musician and concert organizer to curate and promote the series. As the sole organizer, I booked each event which, in turn, defined the research population of artists. To do so, I mostly invited my colleagues that I had gotten to know through nearly two decades of artistic production. While this may lead to certain unavoidable biases, my deep familiarity with and personal connection to the artists' work also created an opportunity as an interviewer to thoroughly explore their artistic practice in ways that would not be accessible to less knowledgeable interviewers. Additionally, I employed a number of musical criteria unrelated to this research to curate the lineup of featured artists: ability to draw a crowd, diversity of creative practices and aesthetic qualities, suggestions from others in the Milwaukee noise scene, etc. To this extent, the curation of these series aligns with Patton's (1990) notion of purposeful sampling since the group of artists in this study covers the breadth of artistic approaches and personal identities that comprise this musical community.

Findings

Toward a process model of artistic practice in noise

Through my analysis of artist interviews, I produced four larger categories related to how noise musicians develop their artistic practice: an initial blown mind moment, an extended exploration phase, influence from other artistic traditions, and a finalized practice. Participants also discussed five interrelated musical components within these categories: musical artifacts such as recordings or performances (coded as “music”); the surrounding music scene; performance and composition techniques; musical technologies in the form of instruments, recording devices, or other sound making tools (guitar effects pedals, found objects, etc.); and dispositions related to making, listening to, and theorizing music (see Table 2). In this section, I discuss each of these themes individually as a means toward producing a process model of artistic practice in noise shared by the participants.

The blown mind moment

As a first step in developing one’s practice, the participants discussed what I define as a blown mind moment, named after a common phrase (“my mind was blown”) used during the interviews. For these artists, the blown mind moment involves either a single encounter with noise or experimental music making techniques, a wider moment in time in which participants regularly came into contact with noise and its associated practices, or a sudden realization of their own inclination toward noise or experimental music. Similar to Kolodner and Wills (1996) emphasis on redefining and reimagining the problem space in design thinking, this encounter radically transformed the artist’s perception of music

Table 2. Descriptions of each stage of the process model in relation to each musical component by the teaching artists.

Musical Component	Blown Mind Moment	Exploration Phase	Influence from Other Arts Traditions
Music	I remember that first listen, being like, “what? Music can do this?” I didn’t even know. By the third listen, I was like, “I love it.” (Peterson)	I had a job as a shipping clerk for a record distributor. I would frequently be chastised for spending too much time reading the album covers. I spent most of my money buying records. (Ollman)	-
Scene	I drove to Providence and played my first out of state show. Seeing what was going on with Providence blew my mind. (Schauwitzer)	I was going to a lot of shows, just absorbing and figuring out what appealed to me (Bertucci)	The support that I have seen in a lot of noise communities, I see the same thing in Candomblé as this alternative community structure and chosen family. (Sordahl)
Technique	Kaija Saariaho: discovering her practice of solo acoustic instrument with computer and processing electronics was like, “that’s what I want to do.” (Elert)	We would go into a practice room, set up pedals and experiment, see what settings would give me shivers. (Bertucci)	It was taking the collage techniques I did and then turning that into sound. It was a lot of the same things that I learned with visual art that I wanted to do with sound. (Rissiek)
Technology	I hadn’t heard sounds like this before. The instruments were from around the world. It blew my mind. (Beverlin)	I would come home and get different tools- droppers, spray bottles, buckets, glasses, blenders. I would experiment with the sounds. (Schwartz)	Getting into set building and costuming, that pushed the instrument building into another realm. (Kennedy)
Disposition	I realized that I was way more interested in all the sounds the effects pedals could make. I remember having the distinct feeling that I don’t care about playing guitar, I care about these effects and these cool sounds. (Traeger)	It was definitely me sitting alone in a room with a recording device, just experimenting and seeing what I could work with. I was really interested in the idea of using the recording studio as the instrument and trying to learn what that meant. (Elert)	I started discovering Fluxus. What fascinated me was that I could take these same ideas and apply them to noise. Music expanded into the idea of visual art or anti-music. (Taggart)

or their own identity as a burgeoning musician. This allowed the musician to reimagine the space of exploration and radically opened up the possibility of what music could be. While the participants as a whole identified blown mind moments related to each of the five musical components present in this study, each individual only needed one encounter involving one of these components to begin developing their practice.

Turning toward a blown mind moment related to technology, Jon Mueller experienced this moment as a young child playing with his first instrument:

I had the guitar laying on the ground and I just let it start feeding back. To me, that was magic. It added this whole other layer to the instrument that I didn't get from listening to records, where this instrument lives on its own. I really felt like that was a turning point for me to understand instruments and music in a different way.

After witnessing his guitar feeding back, Mueller shifted from thinking of guitars merely as tools to manipulate and instead saw them as “living on their own.” This produces a new conceptualization of how to make and understand music which eventually developed into his own unique artistic practice.

The exploration phase

After experiencing an initial blown mind moment, participants enter the exploration phase. In alignment with Vossoughi and Bevan's (2014) definition of tinkering, artists explore the affordances of their new discovery without a determined end goal. During this phase, artists dive heavily into noise/experimental music and its surrounding scene while simultaneously tinkering with techniques, technologies, and dispositions. Notably, while participants may have connected their blown mind moment to one or a few musical categories, every single participant described some amount of exploration in music, scenes, techniques, technologies, and dispositions. The fact that every participant described exploring all five categories before producing a finished artifact suggests that artists would not have a fully formed practice without engaging all of the themes.

Hal Rammel embodied this approach when exploring the sounds he could create with a singing saw through a process similar to Keep's (2009) notion of instrumentalizing:

There was a record by Derek Bailey and Anthony Braxton that was very sparse. I played along with that record and found a way to make the sustained lines of the saw work. There's no rulebook . . . I want to learn from the saw. I want the saw to teach me things.

Interestingly, this process mirrors Green's (2002) finding that popular musicians listen to and play along with recorded music as they develop their practice. But in Rammel's case, he could not copy the musicians on the album since the record did not include a singing saw. Instead, he used the record as sonic inspiration to develop his own unique singing saw technique.

Returning to a COP lens, the participants in this study produced a significant moment of divergence by conceptualizing the exploration phase before gaining an awareness of the noise scene. In describing this divergence, Mike Schauwitzer used a shared phrase to describe his explorations outside of noise music contexts:

My first exposure was the noisier stuff that Sonic Youth was doing. Sound collages, stuff like that. My brother and I would try to do that. We had a boombox and we would just layer sounds. We were drawn to that part of the music and figured “why can't we do that?” I didn't even know noise was a thing.

Despite hearing examples of tape collage, Schauwitzer still understands his exploration of this technique as something disconnected from noise music and its surrounding scene because he “didn't know noise was a thing.” Exploring the scene and its associated musical artifacts would come later in Schauwitzer's (and multiple others') development.

Other art and cultural practices

Contributing to the exploration phase, the participants in this study also extensively discussed the influence of practices from other cultural traditions on their own development as artists. While some described the influence they drew from other musical traditions (western classical music, jazz, rock, punk, etc.), participants also drew from a wide range of non-musical traditions including visual art, theater, dance, sculpture, and film. Cultural practices outside of what commonly gets defined as the arts (such as meditation and video games) also played a role. For instance, Gabriella Schwartz notes that she “derived the most influence from the mundane nature of manufacturing. Watching people operate machinery, feeding steel bar stock into screw machines or stamping lathes, that repetitive nature has certainly influenced me.” Although participants did not discuss the categories of music and scene outside of Shanna Sordahl’s mention of Candomblé (see Table 2), they did draw on technologies, techniques, and dispositions from other artistic and cultural traditions.

“Finalized” practice

After engaging the blown mind moment and exploring both noise music and other entangled cultural spaces, the artists produce a finalized practice embodied in a public performance, recording, or some other musical artifact. Taken as a whole, this produces what I define as a process model of artistic practice in noise (see Figure 1), one that describes how artists develop their musical knowledge over time within the situated context of the noise scene. However, this process does not occur in a linear fashion. Mirroring the iterative nature of the design process (see Razzouk & Shute, 2012), the participants often transitioned back and forth between not only the exploration phase and blown mind moments but also from a finalized practice to the previous phases. August Traeger illustrates this process when explaining how he recorded a recent album: “A lot of it came from improvisations that were recorded while I was developing the live set that I played. It’s some early bits of the live set that I was playing.” In this instance, the finalized practice embodied in the album was not the projected end point for Traeger. Instead, it represented one step along the way toward a live performance, documenting a moment or benchmark within an extended exploration phase. In doing so, Traeger (along with others in the study) challenge the finality of a finalized practice, instead conceptualizing this part of the model as an element of a cyclical process.

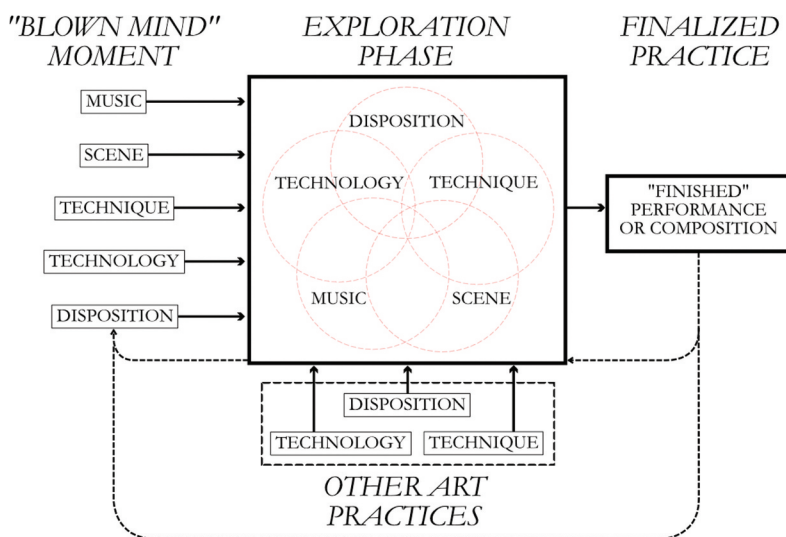


Figure 1. Process model of artistic practice in noise.

From novice to noise musician

To further explore the validity and nuances of this model, I now turn to interviews with audience participant Jack Hietpas. In doing so, I construct a narrative of how Hietpas developed his debut performance and, in turn, his own artistic practice (see Figure 2).

Blown mind moments and explorations

Discussing how he first became interested in noise music, Hietpas nominates a single origin point: “The big discovery was listening to this one [radio] show called ‘Blurred and Obscured.’ He would play psychedelic and experimental electronic and free jazz.” For Hietpas, this becomes the blown mind moment as he suddenly gains awareness of and a deep interest in experimental music. This then translates into an exploration of noise music through the same radio program: “They would broadcast from three to six AM. I would set an alarm so I could wake up and listen.” Hietpas’ expands on this interest by attending his first noise concert:

The first show that I went to was the Milwaukee Noise Fest. I remember that I met Alex. I remember talking to Dan [and] Amanda. I just discovered all those people at that event ... then I started going to shows more regularly.

Importantly, Hietpas does not just discover the music being made by people in his local scene, he discovers the people themselves. This situates the experience as another blown mind moment which leads to Hietpas exploring the local noise scene.

It is worth noting that, at this point in his process, Hietpas has not started performing. Instead, he only engages the scene as classroom (Thomson, 2007) through LPP, attending shows and acting as an audience member (see Perry, 2011). However, he did aspire to perform:

From my first experience at the noise fest, I was like, “I should get a setup together.” But I didn’t know where to start. There’s so many people that are doing really cool stuff in Milwaukee that I didn’t know what I could really add to it.

This quote points to the importance of thoroughly exploring all five musical components. Although Hietpas wanted to assemble a setup, similar to the interconnected system of electronic music devices described by Novak (2013), he did not have the opportunity to explore these technologies in part

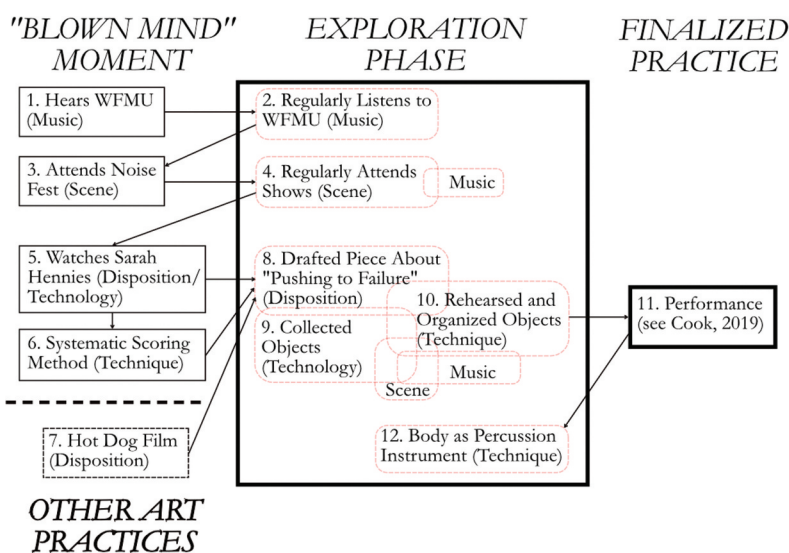


Figure 2. Mapping Hietpas’ development onto the process model of artistic practice in noise.

because he “didn’t know where to start.” Hietpas also reveals the importance of exploring the scene in partial opposition to Green’s (2002) focus on copying others. Although he may have copied some techniques or used similar technologies, Hietpas still did not feel as though he had an artistic practice because he had not found his own unique creative practice that would “add to” this community.

From LPP to cultural production

However, Hietpas rapidly develops his craft after attending an early event in the Noise Knowledge Consortium. During this event, Hietpas has another blown mind moment, this time centered on the dispositions and technologies employed by Sarah Hennies in her piece *Falsetto* (see Herting, 2017): “seeing that video was really awe inspiring. Just the idea of taking something to failure, a performance that goes to the point of failure.” In connecting with the disposition of pushing a performance to failure, Hietpas also draws from the experimental film “Degrees of Limitations” (Stark, 1982) where the film maker repeatedly tries and fails to run to the top of a hill before the film in his camera runs out: “I remade that film but with eating hot dogs instead of running. I think there are similarities: a repeated gesture, an element of failure or physical challenge.” In discussing this work, Hietpas draws a connection between his practice as a filmmaker and a musician, engaging in this disposition through two different contexts.

Additionally, Hietpas extends the blown mind moment from the workshop to include two pieces of technology. The first comes from the video of Hennies: “The other thing that inspired me was that it’s entirely acoustic. It’s very repetitive, but it’s never exactly repeating the same sound because it is human operated.” Notably, watching the performance opens up an entire new realm of instrumentation to explore by expanding Hietpas’ previous framing of instrumentation within noise as solely electronic to include acoustic instruments. Hietpas also found inspiration in the Systematic Scoring Method, a tool I designed for scoring live noise performances (see Woods, 2016): “I really was inspired by the Systematic Scoring Method. That was something that I found really useful as a tool for thinking about any work of art.” In this quote, Hietpas draws a bridge between the blown mind moment and the exploration phase, nominating this tool as a means to think about (and eventually compose) new performance pieces, intrinsically engaging an exploratory process moving forward.

The final product and beyond

After this experience, Hietpas begins working on his first performance: “I literally went home after the workshop and I think it was the same night that I wrote that score.” This score (see Figure 3) is the first iteration of the final performance, collecting ideas Hietpas goes on to explore. One of them was the instrumentation he slowly assembled: “That was the long term lead up to the piece. These are just the objects, a lot of them, that were in my immediate environment.” As Hietpas begins to collect the array of instruments, he does so by exploring available objects in his immediate surroundings (cookie tins, bells, planks of wood, etc.) that together form a desired sound. This finally leads into an exploration of his performance technique, which centers on Hietpas hanging objects around his neck and running in place:

I didn’t know what order I wanted the objects to be in. I wanted to start with small bells and get towards the louder and larger objects. But I also wanted to space things out. Once I figured that out, I made a score.

Hietpas then spends time rehearsing the performance, trying out different combinations until he solidifies a progression of objects. Furthermore, Hietpas abandons the use of the Systematic Scoring Method in favor of his own invented score (see Figure 4). In doing so, Hietpas aligns this work with the design thinking process (Kolodner & Wills, 1996): he used one technology as he was developing ideas, tried something else based on feedback from the original technology, and made the choice to leave the original technology behind.

After exploring all five musical components leading up to this performance, Hietpas finally lands on a finalized practice in the form of a public performance (see Cook, 2019). Restating the importance of iteration, however, Hietpas had already begun to think about ways of exploring technique a few weeks

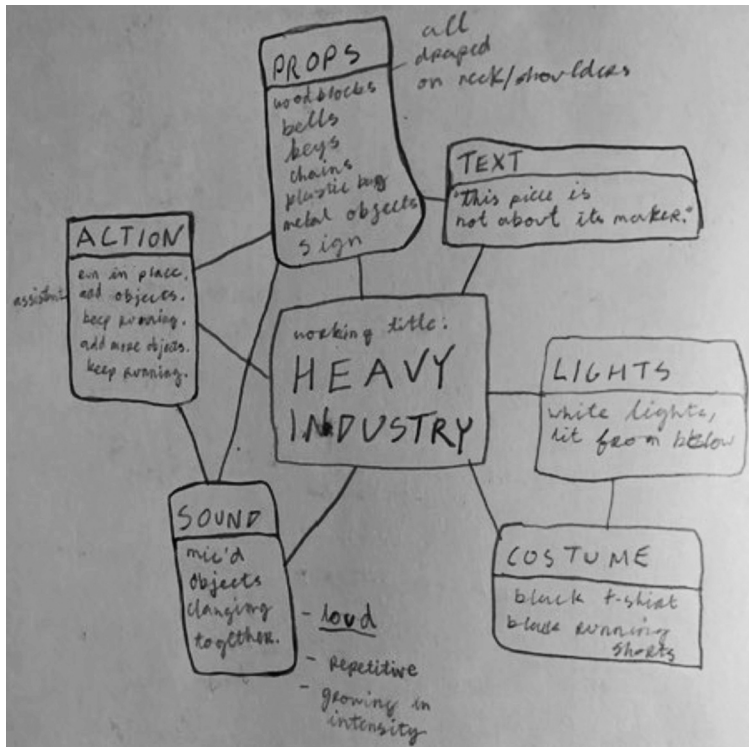


Figure 3. Hietpas' initial score.

after his debut: “There are ways to build off of it, having objects hanging off of me and using the motion of my body. I think there is more to explore that doesn’t mean doing the same thing.” Rather than performing the same piece again, Hietpas engages the iterative nature of this process by exploring similar or related techniques in the development of a future performance.

Discussion

Learning to make noise

In response to the research question “how do noise musicians develop their artistic practice?,” I have developed a model of artistic practice within noise music and explored that model both through the lens of veteran performers and a narrative reconstruction of one novice performer’s debut performance. In placing this model in conversation with extant literature, this project subsequently provides novel insight into how noise musicians develop their musical practice. Although multiple distinctions exist between the model of learning presented in this paper and the pedagogical approaches employed within previously investigated formalized experimental music curricula, the self-directed and individualized nature of this process seems especially striking. While mentors and collaborators were not completely absent from the lives of these artists, many of the participants intentionally developed their practice by engaging the experiential pedagogies described by Sordahl (2013) independently and reimagining the role of the teacher through non-anthropocentric terms (i.e. Rammel “learning from the saw”) (see Woods, 2021). Rather than relying on teacher-student relationships (see Hickey, 2015; Kanellopoulos, 2021) or learning through collaborative music making practices (see Thomson, 2007; Wright, 2013), moments of social and material interaction between developing artists, established community members, and music technologies served as a bridge toward new spaces of exploration. For example, Mueller’s shifted identity and understanding of the guitar allowed him to begin

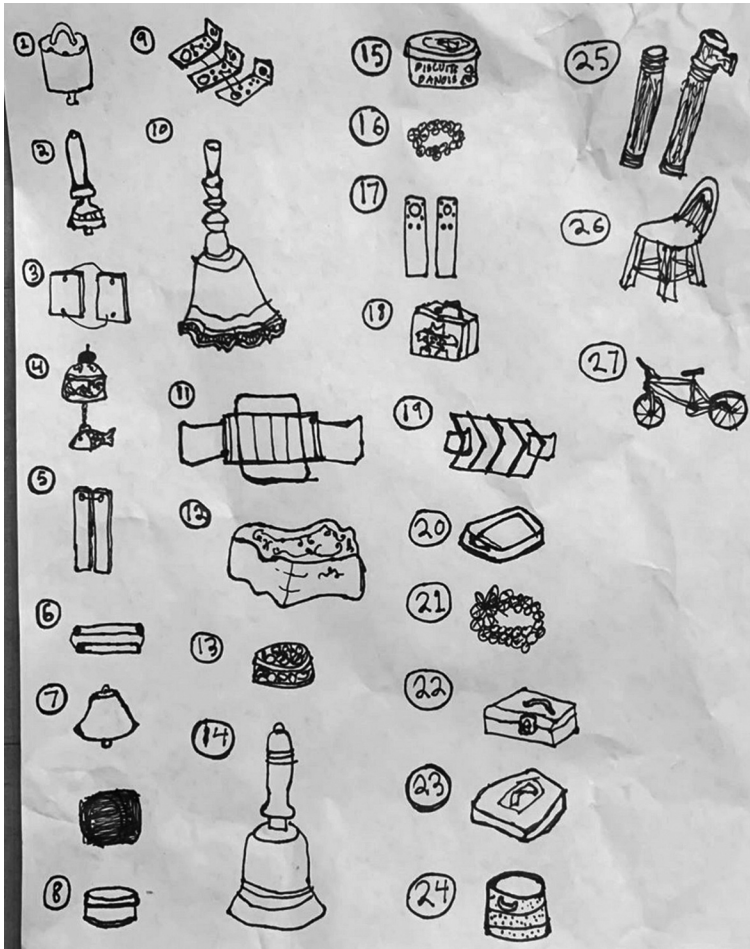


Figure 4. Hietpas' final score.

developing his artistic practice independently. This study therefore invites educators and researcher who engage experimental music education (and especially free improvisation) in formal contexts to move beyond an understanding of the practice that centers collaborative performance practice and create space for individual forms of exploration or musical tinkering that allow students to learn from their instruments and not just teachers or students.

Additionally, this model subtly distinguishes the noise scene from other informal music education contexts. For instance, the participants in this study all conceptualize learning to make noise as something other than developing the ability to recreate preexisting musical artifacts (i.e. interpreting and performing pre-written music) or even learning how to replicate and creatively deploy the techniques of established artists, as described by Green (2002) in her analysis of popular music contexts. Instead, experimental musicians embrace a punk-aligned ethos of “radical imagination” (Niknafs, 2018, p. 41) and resistance to musical authority, developing new musical knowledges in isolation rather than learning the techniques of others by playing along with recordings or mimicking live performances. Yet despite this self-directed framing, all of the participants’ creative practices formed in response to surrounding cultural contexts. To this end, the findings invoke a situated approach to creative production (see Black, 2008), one that foregrounds both Glăveanu (2014) and Clapp’s (2016) theories of creativity as individuals develop an artistic practice through their interactions with individuals, material objects, social settings, and

ideas. This model, one that creates space for self-directed learning within a broader frame of communal interaction, then provides a potent lens to explore other informal arts contexts that generate similar tensions between collective and individual development (see Gaunt & Dobson, 2014; Powell, 2005). The model of artistic practice in this study provides not only a map of developing an artistic practice in noise, but a tool for examining independent and self-directed pedagogies (albeit pedagogies that are situated and in dialogue with surrounding contexts) within creative production.

Toward a noisier situated learning theory

In applying theories of situated learning to this project, my analysis challenges the overt humanism of this theory by raising questions about what constitutes a community member and who (or what) acts as a teacher in this process. While Lave and Wenger's (1991) original model centers the pedagogies that form between old timers and newcomers, participants in this study often centered educative interactions with instruments and other musical artifacts. In doing so, the participants expand the border of noise music's COP to also include non-human technologies. Put into conversation with informal music education research, this study then raises questions of how to define musical COPs. Thomson's (2007) framing of scene as classroom, for example, needs to contend with far more than just the people in the scene and include the technologies, spaces, and objects that contribute to the construction of that community. Broadening the scope of this critique, the findings from this study challenge researchers of informal education contexts to identify the technological members of a given COP and grapple with how those technologies contribute to both community and knowledge construction.

Similarly, findings from this study also complicate theories of LPP, and Perry's (2011) work in particular, by blurring the border of the noise scene. For example, multiple participants conceptualized their practice as noise musicians years before being aware of noise music as a genre ("I did not know noise was a thing"). In doing so, these artists provide a porous understanding of the noise scene, one in which people develop the practices of making this music (which, in turn, contributes to the community) before knowingly engaging in LPP or becoming a community member at all. In part, this complication emerges precisely because of noise music's open ended and polysemic nature (Atton, 2011; Novak, 2013). If people constantly redefine what counts as noise (which, in turn, routinely changes who counts as part of the noise scene), it follows that understanding noise music through the lens of COPs would prove just as complicated. Future research into experimental music pedagogies should explore and further define this framing while informal education research more broadly must contend with the implications of this finding. To phrase this challenge in the form of a question: when does someone become a member of a community? And when will their actions become a part of (and help construct) that community? Rather than answer this question, this study intentionally muddies the water to provide a means toward reimagining the borders of COPs, musical or otherwise.

Conclusion

Although this study intentionally focuses on the process of developing one's artistic practice in the context of noise music, I contend that the process model of artistic practice constructed through this analysis holds resonances beyond the narrow confines of the genre. Replacing "scene" with "community" and "music" with "cultural artifacts," this model could potentially describe not only the learning practices of informal arts communities but any sort of socialized tradition in which people learn informally through creative production. This model becomes especially valuable when exploring cultural spaces that do not rely on (or, as is often the case with noise music, actively reject) formal education processes because the model allows space for individuals to learn through alternate pedagogical models. Hopefully, future research will not only utilize this model to understand situated

learning practices but modify, expand, and iterate on the model itself. In doing so, researchers will better understand how people learn in all contexts or, at the very least, better understand how differences in context influence teaching and learning practices across communities.

Notes

1. While numerous definitions of experimental music exist, I rely on Gilmore's (2014) ideological definition of the term as a way to both acknowledge and challenge the ongoing problematic of genre work that codify white supremacy and sexism within experimental music (see Gilmore, 2014; Lewis, 2004).
2. Due to the unique and public nature of these series, I asked permission to use participants real names and identifying information in publications resulting from this study. All participants consented.
3. Again, participants were asked in advance if they wanted to use their real names during the interviews. All participants consented.
4. Due to the number of workshops and duration of time between events, I conducted two iterations of this interview with some of the participants.

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