

*detritus I* (2009)

for counter-tenor, ensemble, and electronics

The classic & long unavailable argument for good taste, common sense & human involvement composed for anyone remotely interested...— Eric Gill, *An Essay on Typography*

As the penultimate installment in my *Noumenal* cycle (5 pieces for various chamber formations and electronics), this piece exists as a culminating point (or perhaps a sort of vortex). The abiding incompatibility between rigid structural categories established and the irrational material constellations upon which constraints are imposed is magnified in *detritus I*. The two central texts of the cycle, namely the fifth strophe of Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* and a chapter of Eric Gill's *An Essay on Typography* entitled "The Procrustean Bed" exert generative influence upon several crucial dimensions of the piece, and are themselves projected (the former by the counter-tenor, the latter by distorted computer voices in the electronics). Besides employing a vocabulary overlapping with composition (e.g., "composer" or "compositor" as typesetter, dividing the page into "measures") and prescribing a set of typographical rules (namely, the equal spacing of lines of text), the Gill chapter contains an embedded critique of streamlined industrial type-setting practices. The Lautréamont, by contrast, deals with often violent collisions of textual images, registers and proportions, often producing a sort of semantic *indecidable* (e.g., the notion of "the intermittent annihilation of human faculties").

On a global level, the structure of the work abides by Gill's principles. Moreover, resolutely "low-fidelity" quality of the electronic component exploits and abuses digital technology, rather than exhibiting conformity to its "intended" uses. The kernel material consists of residues of elements proper to preceding pieces within the cycle (hence "detritus"), disposed in rather absurd juxtapositions. Consequently, a fair degree of tension emerges from the mapping of formal boundaries and processes onto the tendencies of the "flesh" of the piece. Such an unmitigated tension percolates to the surface of *detritus I*, as is made manifest by the blatant ensemble imbalances, the layer of distortion (produced by the amplified cello, electric guitar, and electronics), the "chalk and cheese" pairing of the French text and trombone, and the explosively unintelligible text in the electronics. Furthermore, the "theatrical" component of the vocal part both makes reference to the theme of typography, and externalises the latent violence/cruelty inherent in the Lautréamont (besides effectively inserting a percussion trio into the fabric of the piece). The resignatory/self-critical conclusion functions as a transition into *detritus II*, for electronics and video projection.

*detritus I* was premiered in May 2009 by Ensemble Ascolta and Neue Vocalsolisten counter-tenor Daniel Gloger at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart.

-Alexander Sigman