Sample!

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1.

On a Sunday morning in 1988, producer and songwriter James Mtume was having a conversation with Nelson George about the emerging hip-hop culture. "Mtume—George recalls from a recent article, titled "Sample This"—spent much of this morning blasting hip-hop record production for its slavish reliance on record sampling. He charged that "this is the first generation of African-Americans not to be extending the range of the music" and that the resulting recordings "were nothing but Memorex music." To further illustrate his creative disdain, Mtume made a bold analogy: sampling James Brown's drum beats in a hip-hop album was like me sticking chapters from James Baldwin in my books and claiming the words as mine."

If the practice of sound sampling started in the *musique concrète* of the vanguards (and among the first experiments we find electronic musician Ḥalīm al-Ḍabʿ in Cairo in the 1930s), from the 1950s producers started to sample mainly to disguise the absence of a live instrument: if a "horn was needed or a particular keyboard line was missing, a pop producer might sample it from another record, trying to camouflage its artificiality in the process."i The hip-hop culture is the first culture that explicitly makes use of the sample, not simply as a tool, but as a pillar of its practice. By reclaiming the possibility of recontextualizing someone else's sounds, hip-hop became the first popular music genre based on the art of sampling.

Often the sample is analyzed in relation to what it produces, but what is the sample in itself, and how might investigating its essence be crucial for us today? If we take the short moment after it has been extracted from a song, and before being part of the new one, what is the peculiarity of that which we have in our hands? And if the sample is different from simply a fragment, from an example, from a trailer, and from a teaser, what is it? Can we build an ontology of the sample?

Far from aiming at reconstructing the history of sample, this text uses the sample like a sample: it acknowledges its history, but extracts it from this perspective to situate it in an unknown territory from where a new song might emerge.

2. Cutting the Iceberg

The first definition of what a sample is, is an extract, a portion taken out from a larger set: a small quantity that gives us information about a whole. The sample is like the tip of an iceberg that floats above the surface of the visible, announcing the presence of a larger part beneath. It is not a fragment: it tells us about the whole it belongs to. The sample is hence like a synecdoche, the figure of speech in which a term for a part

of something is used to refer to the whole. A *pars pro toto,* such as "Wall Street," used from the 1970s to synecdochally describe the US financial and corporate sector, or "new wheels," recurrently used in hip-hop songs to reference a brand new car. A sample is a small part or quantity intended to show what the whole is like.

For this reason, the term is used in geological extractions; mineral samples are extracted to detect the presence of petroleum, gas, or mineral deposits indicating the potential for exploration or production, or to determine physical or chemical properties to ensure that products meet quality standards. To this extent, the sample has a relation with the space it belonged to. It speaks about the moment it was part of a whole; it has a relation with the past it belonged to. But does not the sample have a more complex relation with time?

By walking in New York in the 1970s, one would have had the chance to see the works of Gordon Matta-Clark—extracting samples and cutting through the walls of abandoned buildings. In a short interview given in May 1976, in relation to his previous project *W-Hole House*, Matta-Clark explains that beyond the information that it gives about the time of construction of the building, "the act of cutting through from one space to another produces a certain complexity . . . that reveals the autobiographical process of its making. There is a kind of complexity which comes from taking an otherwise completely normal, conventional, albeit anonymous situation and redefining it, retranslating it into overlapping and multiple readings of conditions past and present."ii Two temporalities are embedded in the act of extracting: the sample delivers some information about the past it belonged to, but at the same time it speaks about the time and labor of its extraction. Its sharp margins are the autobiographical space that reminds and exposes the process of its making.

It was in these same years in New York that the emerging hip-hop scene starts sampling songs from the past, and while thinking about it, a further temporality emerges. Let us imagine a music sample freshly extracted from its original context. It is there in our hands, referring to the song it

originally belonged to, as to the present moment of its extraction. Nevertheless, once there, does it not allude already to the possibility of becoming something else, something other than its original song?

Music sampling makes more complex the relation between sample and time, announcing in the present of the sample an incompleteness that exceeds the present time, and in an investigation of the ontology of the sample, this becomes a crucial question: is the sample in its autonomy a complete element, or is it ontologically incomplete, alluding in its present status not only to the past that is no more, but also to the future it is not yet?

3. Vibrating Edges

Just a decade before hip-hop emerged in the New York scene, Italian intellectual Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote a short article titled "The Screenplay as a Structure That Wants To Become Another Structure*,"* analyzing a singular relation between incompleteness and completeness that might be useful here for understanding the complex ontology of the sample. In the second half of the 1960s Pasolini wrote: "The screenplay presents itself as a *structure in motion*, namely a structure endowed with the will to become another structure."iii The screenplay constitutively alludes to something more than itself, something other than itself—the movie—that will complete its ontological nature. Caught in this structural dynamic, the screenplay seems apparently to be included in the sphere of incompleteness; yet, it is a peculiar form of incompleteness. Indeed, while announcing its incompleteness, the screenplay could not be more complete than what it is; otherwise it would be something other than itself. The screenplay can be complete only in the form of its incompleteness, exactly like a sketch is complete as sketch just if—while announcing a future work of art—it is not that work of art.

Thinking the sample through the screenplay helps in defining its ontology. Once in our hands, the sample is complete as sample, but is a completeness that alludes to its incompleteness in relation to both the song it comes from and the one it is not yet. And this incompleteness is not optional, since if it were complete in a form of completeness, this would eliminate that lack of fullness that defines it as sample and it would become a autonomous and different object.

Hence, to keep itself complete in the form of its incompleteness, the sample must always have present to itself—as its ghost—that totality it did not yet achieve. It cannot isolate itself, but shall always refer to that which it is not yet.

It is important to say though, that that which it is not yet, is not a defined song, but one that is still to be composed. The sample is not simply the intermediary step in the middle of an existing line, but an open moment in which it announces its life as an incompleteness of something that does not exist yet. For this reason, Pasolini wrote that "it is a particular process, not being an evolution or a passage from a step *A* to a step *B*: but rather a process of pure and simple dynamism, a tension that moves, without leaving and without arriving. [The screenplay is] a dynamic structure, yet it is one without functionality and outside the laws of evolution."iv The tension that is present in the screenplay, as in the sample, alludes to something more, and yet it does not have only one direction: it is a moment of pure contingency that announces the multiple possibilities of what is yet to become. In its ontology of incompleteness, the sample announces that it will become *a* song, and reminds us of the open contingency of its future. Once in our hands, the edges of the sample vibrate, announcing something that it is not yet. Its margins invite us to see the contingency of its future, outside a linear idea of its life. Once there, the sample is a prophecy without content: it vibrates to announce a future yet to be written.

4. Samples, Examples, and the Pyramid

Pasolini wrote about the screenplay in a decade and a context busy redefining the possibility of writing the future, and with the emergence of a series of questions about imagining another possible world. Landing with a reflection on the sample in the middle of this decade—amid the sounds of its slogans—suddenly brings up the possibility of a new question: can one try to think of the frequently analyzed relation between the real and the possible, through the figure of the sample? What would emerge if we were to think of the present as a sample?

Far from being a concern of out time, the tension between the world in which we live and other possible worlds that could have emerged has its root in the Middle Ages.

In his main work, the *Summa Theologica* of circa 1265–74, Thomas Aquinas describes the time before creation. Different possible worlds were lying within the limits of the same matter, similar to countless shapes preserved by a marble block, all of which had the same probability of being created. According to Aquinas, starting from this undifferentiated matter that contained countless possible shapes, divine creation brings a single shape to the surface. In doing so, the abyss of possible worlds appear: countless equally likely worlds could have been created, and in the instant in which a single reality is shaped, all other possibilities suddenly are labeled as possibilities, as what could have been but was not—but is still present in the same matter of the world. From a political perspective, we can say that, far from being necessary, the reality in which we live is simply *one among others*, a portion of what could have been imagined, a sample extracted from an indeterminacy full of other possibilities. The margins of the visible vibrate, announcing the existence of something else beyond its limits, reminding us of the existence of another possible configuration.

Almost five centuries later, in 1710, Gottfried Leibniz imagines an architecture in which to visualize both the actual world and other possible configurations that the worlds could have had. In one of the pages of *Theodicy* that certainly exerts more charm within the perspective of travel in all possible worlds (and that constitutes an eighteenth-century imagination of virtual reality), Leibniz describes a pyramidal architecture made of endless rooms, inside which take place the endless variations of a single world placed at the top, which is, according to Leibniz, the outcome of the divine creation, namely the world in which we live. "The apartments, arose in a pyramid; they became ever more beautiful as one ascended towards the apex, and they represented more beautiful worlds. One arrived at the last in the supreme apartment that completed the pyramid, and which was the most beautiful of all; for the pyramid had a beginning, but one did not see the end; it had an apex, but no base; it went on increasing to infinity. Is it because among an infinity of possible worlds there it the best of all; otherwise God would not have decided to create any of them. But there is not any of them which does not have yet less perfect worlds beneath it: that is why the pyramid descends forever to infinity."v
Leibniz imagines the priest Theodore walking in the rooms of the pyramid of the Palace of Fate, in which he encounters other worlds that could have emerged but were not (it would be equivalent to think today a world in which animals speak; a world without plants).

Yet, if there is nothing melancholic in this *flânerie* within the not-actualized worlds, it is precisely because Theodore's task is to find out exactly how each not-actualized possible is a bad copy of the world in which he lives: his walking through them feeds his faith—and possibly our faith in Leibniz's perspective—in the actual world, as the single possible one, without alternatives. The *Theodicy* reminds us of the transformation of the conception of the possible in modernity: something that is presented as a projection in the future (as the idea of progress),

more than the presence of other configurations that reality might have had, and still have in the matter of the present.
Nevertheless, what is even more interesting in this architecture is the strange and yet clear absence of doors and windows between one room and the other. If one might have the temptation to see the connections between the iceberg and the pyramid, in the architecture of Leibniz there is no continuity between what emerged and what did not. The visible world isolates itself and almost makes one forget that it is *one among others,* refusing to admit the possibility of being different. It but presents itself as a world without alternatives, and its isolation becomes a gesture of protection, since each window would question the limits of its uniqueness.
For this reason, one might say that in the relation between the visible and the possible imagined by Leibniz, the world shifts from being a *sample* to an *example*. The example is etymologically a sample that has taken out (*ex*) and disconnected from that totality, that it now looks at from afar, negating its alternatives.
Through the pyramid of Leibniz one can grasp the ontology of the sample in respect to that of the example: the sample is separated from the totality but still virtually immersed in it, it belongs to the matter of Thomas Aquinas, a provisory shape announcing itself as *one among others*. This is where, going back to thinking the present through or as a sample invites to question the modern idea of a present without alternatives. It invites us to hear again the vibration of its wall and to be invited by its vibrating edges.

5. Cutting Through History

Suddenly, I see a crack in the floor connecting two rooms of the pyramid.
(I just sampled the figure of Gordon Matta-Clark and played it inside the Palace of Fates, connecting—in an irrespective way—two times).

I see a crack in the Palace of Fates. Its borders vibrate, alluding to the possibility of something beyond the wall, alluding to a song that is not yet. In front of the crack, a last perspective emerges: more than being a room, is not the sample exactly this crack? If the crack connects different space, the sample connects multiple temporalities and invites us there, in a present that exceeds the linearity of time. I am there, in the time of the sample, where the present and the possible coexist, where the different spaces of the pyramid merge, recreating for an instant the image of an iceberg. The sample is this crack, inviting us to pass from one room to the other: a crack in the (dance) floor, from where other times emerge. They do not appear in an archeological or chronological way, but rather as springs of other temporalities that invade the time of the present, extending it—and maybe for the sample one may use the expression "cutting through history," created to describe the work of Matta-Clark. This is the crack of the sample: something that extends the present, by opening a window that allows a multiplicity of time.

Suddenly this sentence travels back in time, towards the first lines of this text, and on that Sunday morning of 1988, wishing to enter in conversation with Mtume: at the end, maybe it is not true that sampling is not extending the range of music. It does so; simply it is not extending it according to a linearity of time, but opening the possibility of a temporality beyond linearity, like to the presence of quotes in a text, convoking other temporalities in the present of my writing, and in the one of your reading. This is the ultimate invitation of the sample, while it brings us already into another room and in another time.

6. The Sample as Form of Life

The sample moves in time and brings us from one room to the other, in a space that interconnects times, and whose margin vibrates announcing the possibility of something that is yet to be written. Maybe there is a

final shift: perhaps at the end the sample is not a room, nor a fixed crack, but the inviting gesture that travels from one room to the other—in different rooms, in different songs. Perhaps it is an invitation that circulates, like a ghost, in the Palace of Fates. Similar to Theodore's story, the sample is the one that circulates in the different apartments and accompanies us from time to time. This is the life of the sample. It circulates as an element among the songs, as Theodore circulates in the rooms in which he appears, and this circulation suggests the possibility of a life.

Here is where introducing the notion of sample in dance might suggest a different perception of movement. More than being an expression of a body, can we see now movement and gesture as elements that circulate among bodies and throughout time? As elements that have their own lives, rendered visible from time to time by the bodies that host them? Dancing might then be seen as a moment of circulation of the life of movement among bodies (and a circulation of bodies into the life of movement): an encounter between human and non-human lives, suggesting a space beyond anthropocentricism.vi

Maybe at the end, movement and gesture do not belong to the body, as Theodore does not belong to the rooms nor to the architects who built them; maybe the body hosts them, as this text hosts different quotes. The sample as form of life demands this shift from property to use and questions the limits of the notion of copyright, an aspect that—as Nelson George says in the article mentioned at the beginning of the text—has been a problematic issue in music sampling relatively late, and that, as George notes, has an evident racial aspect.

For this reason there might be (or maybe not) a hidden quote of James Baldwin in the middle of this text, and an unquoted one at the beginning, that I would like to however quote here; a sample from a text of Jalal Toufic for a book he published in New York in 1991, and that now lives the room of my text, as it probably lived in previous rooms, and will probably live future ones; a crack in the vibrating walls of this text that reminds us that this text is one among others and could have been

different; a vibrating sound, which I would like to use to go to the exit room of this text, to see its unwritten future: "The whole of this book or any parts of it can be created by others and hence may be produced by them without permission from the author and the publisher."vii

i Nelson George, *Sample This*, in Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, *That's The Joint! The Hip Hop Study Reader,* Routledge, New York, 2004 , p.437

ii Gordon Matta-Clark, interview by Donald Wall, 1976, Arts Magazine 50 n.9, May 1976, 74-79

iii Pier Paolo Pasolini, *La sceneggiatura come 'struttura che vuole essere altra struttura'*, in *Empirismo eretico*, Garzanti, Milan, 1972. pp. 188–97

iv Ibid.

v Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Essais de Théodicée*, 1710, paragraph 416

vi this part is developed in the forthcoming article, Daniel Blanga Gubbay, *The Movement as Living Non-Body*, Performance Journal – Movement Research New York, 2018

vii Jalal Toufic, copyright notice to *Distracted*, Station Hill Press, New York, 1991

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