

WHAT CAN READING DO? ON POSTCRITIQUE AND ‘THE NEW DISCIPLINE’

Ed Cooper

Abstract: Methods of critique fashion their possible outcomes. Rita Felski (2015) makes the case for ‘postcritique’, a method of reading in which texts are worked *with*, understood in their own right, such that a more diverse range of styles and arguments might be understood. Robert T. Tally Jr. (2022) rejects this method, contending that postcritique claims to serve the text under analysis but, in adopting a standpoint of placid agreement, facilitates a mode of reading that diminishes the potency of the text itself and critical dialogue more generally. This article argues that postcritique has dominated the discourse surrounding ‘The New Discipline’, a manifesto of sorts written by composer Jennifer Walshe. The article offers an alternative critical reading of ‘The New Discipline’, arguing that the text is itself a Jennifer Walshe piece. The composer performs the role of a musicologist who falsely declares newness, inconsistently includes and excludes artists, and deploys a vague, if not contradictory, definition of bodies. The manifesto is addressed to an undisclosed but seemingly specific audience. I argue that these apparent shortcomings evoke themes of performance, irony and fictionalisation that are found elsewhere in Walshe’s work and make such a reading licit.

Composers who write about their own music create a sort of filter through which their work might be encountered, a body of text that shapes a body that listens. Such texts take many forms: the composer-cum-author could provide an account of their music in quasi-analytic terms; they might take the opportunity to reflect, confessing what they think is or is not successful in their music; perhaps there is a creation or exposition of a narrative that accompanies the compositional process, offering ‘extramusical’ insights to their music; others might offer contextualisation amongst additional composers and thinkers, accurate or misleading, deliberately or not. In any case, such writing insists itself upon the composer’s musical work.

Within the realm of what might be called contemporary music, one of the most well-known texts of this nature is Jennifer Walshe’s

'The New Discipline'.¹ First published in January 2016 in the Borealis festival catalogue, the text emerges out of an artistic practice that engages with performance, pop culture and identity.² For example, her marionette opera *XXX_LIVE_NUDE_GIRLS!!!* (2003) uses Barbie dolls as the protagonist puppets to stage sexual violence. In a lecture given nearly 20 years later, Walshe notes that the staging of such brutality was often misconstrued by other composers and reviewers as mere sex scenes that some even found funny.³

This potential for a work to be read incorrectly – whether intentionally laid as a trap in which others may be confronted by their own values or not – is utilised in a very different manner in her project *Grúpat* (2007–). Here Walshe adopts numerous alter egos, fictional artists who work across media, from music composition to photography and fashion, all of them drawing on shared Irish heritage, and this work of parody has been exhibited internationally.⁴ Notions of fictionalisation and national identity are even more evident in the composer's ongoing project *Aisteach* (2015–), 'The Avant-Garde Archive of Ireland', covering nearly 200 years. All of the cited composers and artists are fictional, however, created by a range of individuals and curated by Walshe.⁵

'The New Discipline' reflects and consolidates these artistic endeavours and reads as something between a manifesto and an attempt at categorisation, making claims about and to an artistic practice, describing and beckoning 'a way of working'.⁶

Walshe's text has received much attention, been translated into five other languages and widely distributed. The growing body of texts that decipher 'The New Discipline' includes those authored by artists who are tied to, but sometimes resistant to, the term 'composers', who contextualise their own practice and/or research, and other texts authored by musicologists who adopt a less personally involved approach. These responses congregate around two main ideas in Walshe's original text: first, that 'The New Discipline' changes the role of the composer, from someone who might previously have been limited to creating music in traditional ways to an artist who is far more involved in the creative process and who takes on other artistic roles; second, that bodies are of fundamental importance to the creation of this sort of music, and that this has been previously overlooked by contemporary music and by culture more broadly.

In May 2016, just five months after Walshe's initial publication, an issue of *MusikTexte* was published which included short texts responding to her manifesto, written by numerous prominent composers, several of whom she names in 'The New Discipline'.⁷ Matthew Shlomowitz notes the function of automation within the context of 'The New Discipline' and suggests that bodies might break away from

¹ Jennifer Walshe, 'The New Discipline', *Milker Corporation* <https://milker.org/the-new-discipline> (accessed 4 February 2025).

² More recently, Walshe's practice has extensively explored AI but had not by 2016, hence its omission here.

³ Jennifer Walshe, 'XXX_LIVE_NUDE_GIRLS!!!', *Parse* 15, no. 1 (Autumn 2022) https://parsejournal.com/article/xxx_live_nude_girls/ (accessed 17 February 2025), paras. 34–35.

⁴ Jennifer Walshe, 'An Introduction to Grúpat', *Milker Corporation* <https://milker.org/anintroductiontogrupat> (accessed 17 February 2025).

⁵ 'Disclaimer', *Aisteach* https://www.aisteach.org/?page_id=306 (accessed 25 February 2025). The URL that Walshe gives through her own website is inactive at the time of writing: aisteach.net

⁶ Walshe, 'The New Discipline', paragraph 3.

⁷ See 'MusikTexte 149 – Mai 2016', *MusikTexte: Zeitschrift für Neue Musik*, <https://musiktexte.de/MusikTexte-149/en> (accessed 4 February 2025).

traditional musical concerns, the discipline of music-making being relocated in a broader, non-musical context. This notion of something other than music underlying music is also found in James Saunders' contribution, in which he states that such an approach results in music that 'embodies the world rather than represents it'. François Sarhan combines concerns of the everyday and bodies in the discussion of his 'little piece' *Situations*. These compositions are conceived through gesture and comprise found phrases and particular, yet common, configurations of performers and performance spaces, inviting accomplished musicians to reassess their embodied habits of instrumental playing.

Josh Spear of the ensemble *Bastard Assignments* frames his doctoral research around a reading of 'The New Discipline', exploring the consequences for the creative process of identifying as a composer-performer rather than only a composer.⁸ He acknowledges the merit of Walshe's recognition of past traditions and practices but perceives the artists' efforts as 'building a preexisting area of investigation', continuing ideas that John Cage, for example, began in the 1960s.⁹ For Spear the adjective 'new' captures something that is happening right now, that explains the positioning of 'composer-performer' as something without a long-standing history, despite countless composers playing their own music for centuries.

Marko Ciciliani enacts and expands on this dissolution of traditionally exclusive roles within music-making. Borrowing Rosalind E. Krauss's phrase 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' from 1978, the composer claims that music is now, too, in an expanded field, such that musicians might work with several disciplines to realise their ideas, as Walshe does.¹⁰ Ciciliani makes it clear from that the seemingly new, interdisciplinary art form that emerges from 'The New Discipline' is, however, still music; he notes that those practising it 'are working from the understanding that sound alone is no longer sufficient to express their musical ideas'.¹¹

Musicologist Monika Voithofer provides a context for 'The New Discipline'. She cites the *Untitled Event* of 1952 at Black Mountain College as the beginning of the lineage for Walshe's artistic project. This recital was a kind of mixed-media performance, including a reading from John Cage, a prepared piano performance from David Tudor, and Robert Rauschenberg spinning recordings through a gramophone.¹² Voithofer maps a path from *Untitled Event* to 'The New Discipline' via Fluxus, Dick Higgins' 'Intermedia Art' and digitisation, and argues that these sorts of 'intermedia and performative works of contemporary music' cannot be understood as 'autonomous musical works' and, consequently, the field of musicology must be expanded: if what might be called 'performance' changes, then so, too, should the tools used to analyse such instances.¹³

⁸ Josh Spear, 'The New Discipline', in *Composing Together and Not Together – Intimacy as a Condition for Collaboration*, Norwegian Academy of Music, 7 (2022) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1377266/1386400/0/0> (accessed 4 February 2025), para. 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, para. 20.

¹⁰ Marko Ciciliani, 'Music in the Expanded Field: On Recent Approaches to Interdisciplinary Composition', in *Darmstädter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik, Band 24*, ed. by Michael Rebhan and Thomas Schäfer (Mainz: Schott Verlag, 2016), pp. 23–35 (p. 24).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Monika Voithofer, '"That it's not too late for us to have bodies": Notes on Extended Performance Practices in Contemporary Music', *Music and Practice*, 6 (2020), pp. 1–13 (2)

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Sanne Krogh Groth argues that the way of working encouraged by 'The New Discipline' has consequences for the roles of composers altogether. Through performing in their works themselves, a 'doubleness' is created: the figure of a composer is both represented and presented, and the idea of a composer as an auteur or conceptualist is present alongside the physical presence of them acting as, say, a producer or performer.¹⁴ As such, in works of 'The New Discipline', Romantic notions of the genius composer still operate but have somehow become ambiguous, as if, to use Roland Barthes' image, the author lies somewhere between death and resurrection.¹⁵

The relationship between these texts and 'The New Discipline' is both complementary and complimentary. There is a general agreement with and expansion of the ideas in Walshe's manifesto: that some composers now no longer want to write *only* music, and that the discourse surrounding 'The New Discipline' offers details of the history and creative ramifications of such a claim. These authors work *with* 'The New Discipline' rather than attempting to read 'against the grain'.¹⁶ But perhaps it would be strange to imagine that they should or might do anything else. If Walshe's ideas resonate with music-makers and writers alike, then that inspiration should be followed rather than dissected or extinguished unnecessarily.

This mode of interpretation is captured and enacted by literary theorists such as Sharon Marcus, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and, notably, Rita Felski, who names the style 'postcritique'. In *The Limits of Critique*, she argues that traditional critique, as exemplified by the Frankfurt School and Michel Foucault, mistakenly assumes that the text under consideration is 'withholding something of vital importance', such that the critic's role is to expose and interrogate these elusive truths.¹⁷ This style of militant reading inherently involves 'draw[ing] out unflattering and counterintuitive meanings that others fail to see' and presumes a sort of 'inherent rigor or intrinsic radicalism', but, Felski argues, it fails to be either oppositional or transformative owing to the pre-existing manner of critique.¹⁸

Sedgwick makes similar claims, arguing that the traditional practice of critique engenders paranoia, a consequence of which is a way of managing such suspicion that anticipates what the text might do: 'There must be no bad surprises'. In other words, the critique presupposes any possible conclusions.¹⁹ As a response to such a way of reading and with the aim of allowing literary studies to embrace a wider range of styles and arguments, Felski makes the case for 'postcritique'. Drawing together Bruno Latour's actor-network theory and the view that traditional critique unconstructively contains texts within their historical periods, she arrives at a new sort of reading that declines to 'subject a text to interrogation; diagnose its hidden anxieties; [...] read a text as a metacommentary on the undecidability of meaning; score points by showing that its categories are socially constructed; brood over the gap that separates word from world'.²⁰

¹⁴ Sanne Krogh Groth, 'Composers on Stage: Ambiguous Authorship in Contemporary Music Performance', *Contemporary Music Review* 35, no. 6 (2016), pp. 686–705 (687; 694).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 703.

¹⁶ Spear claims to discuss the text's shortcomings, but it is unclear what these are, hence their omission here.

¹⁷ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1; p. 3.

¹⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 130.

²⁰ Felski, *op. cit.*, p. 154; p. 173.

These denials, inherent to postcritique, are evident across the current body of textual work that reads 'The New Discipline'. None of the texts suggest that there might be a sleight of hand at play that could require close questioning. Walshe's text is read at face value, as a manifesto that is straightforwardly didactic and, consequently, there is nothing to suggest that it should not be worked with or interrogated as a default standpoint.

Robert T. Tally Jr. is unrelentingly disapproving of postcritique. In *For a Ruthless Critique of All That Exists: Literature in an Age of Capitalist Realism*, he argues that the surface-level readings of postcritique are symptomatic and supportive of the rise of neoliberalism in both academic institutions and broader society: it is precisely this mode of reading that maintains 'capitalist realism', a term borrowed from Mark Fisher, in which an alternative to capitalism cannot be imagined.²¹ Tally notes that Felski received a 'multimillion-dollar grant, a sum virtually unheard of for research in the humanities' to study the uses of literature,²² and that Felski was awarded the money because her approach was a 'soft' reinforcement of the status quo: she told the institutions what they wanted to hear.

Tally argues that the proper critique of literature can enliven the mind to 'imagine alternatives to our intolerable circumstances', but postcritique 'serves to constrain our imaginative abilities and to make us accept those limits as natural, or even as desirable'.²³ Postcritique claims to serve the text under analysis but, in adopting this standpoint of comfortable agreement, facilitates a mode of reading that diminishes the interest and potency of critical discourse more broadly. If there must be no bad surprises, the meaning of the text in this postcritical framework is also predetermined, recalling Sedgwick's paranoia of traditional critique.²⁴ In the opening sentence of his introduction Tally points out that, despite his seemingly more combative approach, critique is still done with 'deeply felt love for the work'.²⁵

Tally's ideas are themselves the subject of critique. In his review of *For a Ruthless Critique of All*, Robert Scott notes that, although Tally criticises Felski for rarely citing any specific examples or writers, Tally is hardly better, using the same handful of quotations from *The Limits of Critique*.²⁶ Indeed, Tally makes vague, rhetorical generalisations about readers through the use of collective pronouns, the phrase 'human experience' or a suggested understanding of collective imagination. His first chapter concludes with a typical call to arms: '[Postcritique] is also intellectually stultifying, as it serves to constrain our imaginative abilities and to make us accept those limits as natural, or even as desirable'.²⁷ Such rhetoric invokes Elin Diamond's 'The Violence

²¹ Robert T. Tally Jr., *For a Ruthless Critique of All That Exists: Literature in an Age of Capitalist Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2022), p. 6.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 7; pp. 38–39.

²⁴ Sedgwick, pp. 130–131.

²⁵ Tally, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

²⁶ Robert Scott, 'Postcritique; or, The Cultural Logic of Capitalist Realism', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 14 September 2022 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/postcritique-or-the-cultural-logic-of-capitalist-realism/> (accessed 13 February 2025), para. 11. In the fourth chapter of his book *Reading Hegel*, 'Après la Lettre: Hegel in a Postcritical Era', Scott develops a substantial criticism of postcritique through the philosophies of Hegel and Gillian Rose, while also developing a different model of reading which is critical but without pretensions of mastery or detachment. See Robert Lucas Scott, *Reading Hegel: Irony Recollection Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2025), pp. 121–165.

²⁷ Tally, *op. cit.*, pp. 38–39.

of “We”, in which she notes that collective pronouns create identification that ‘surreptitiously reinforces (even if it argues with) the social arrangements of society’.²⁸ By speaking of imaginative abilities and their limits in generalised terms, Tally infers critique’s potential through identification with an anonymous collective and thus cannot enact the suturing from capitalist realism that he claims for critique. It is not clear who ‘we’ is in Tally’s text, because it is very clearly not actually everyone.

This discourse on the method and purpose of critique suggests that there have been omissions from the readings of ‘The New Discipline’. The current body of work may adopt an approach that aligns with postcritique, but there are alternative approaches to reading Walshe’s manifesto that might recall Tally’s advocacy of close reading. The belief that a diversity of approaches is fundamental to any discipline is the stimulus for Felski’s own line of argumentation, but might be fittingly reappropriated here: ‘There is, after all, something perplexing about the ease with which a certain style of reading has settled into the default option’.²⁹ Indeed the fact that Felski’s aphoristic remark might be used to justify different, even contradictory, points of view only reinforces the suggestion that there are other, possibly productive, ways of reading ‘The New Discipline’.³⁰ In what follows, I offer an alternative reading of ‘The New Discipline’ that is different from its postcritical predecessors yet also wary of the shortcomings of critique proper. I read against the grain of ‘The New Discipline’, resisting authorial intention and assuming that Walshe’s manifesto need not be taken at face value, a fitting approach to a composer who is evidently interested in performance, parody and manipulations of the truth.

Critiquing ‘The New Discipline’

The adjective ‘new’ puts Walshe’s ideas in dialogue with similar classifications: it is part of ‘New Music’, which also houses ‘New Complexity’ and ‘New Simplicity’.³¹ The roots of these terms are grounded, predominantly, in musicological criticism. Paul Bekker’s 1920 text ‘Neue Musik’ deploys the term to capture trends in Western classical music of the era that had been largely ignored by the music press, despite similar trends being reported in other art forms.³² In his final paragraph, Bekker notes how a critic or musicologist is entangled with music that is still in the process of emerging. Recalling Beethoven, he asks: ‘Das Neue und Originelle gebiert sich von selbst, ohne dass man danach sucht?’ (Does something new and original arise by itself without one searching for it?).³³ The nature of the newness (and its relationship to the past) that Bekker posits is a lens through which a critic might view a composer’s work: the categorisation of novelty is a collaborative process, the result of a dialogue.

²⁸ Elin Diamond, ‘The Violence of “We”: Politicizing Identification’, in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007 [1992]) pp. 403–412 (407).

²⁹ Felski, op. cit., p. 5.

³⁰ I wonder what a postcritical reading of postcritique might look like, and what would happen if that line of inquiry were continued time and time again.

³¹ A more recent and relevant example might Cat Hope and Louise Devenish’s ‘The New Virtuosity’. It has not been cited here as it was published in 2020, therefore after Walshe would have written ‘The New Discipline’.

³² Paul Bekker, ‘Neue Musik’, *Tribüne der Kunst und Zeit: Eine Schriftensammlung*, ed. by Kasimir Edschmid (Berlin: Erich Reiß Verlag, 1920), pp. 7–80 (7–9).

³³ Ibid. [my translation], p. 80.

Such trends are found in the origins of 'New Complexity' and 'New Simplicity'. Richard Toop's article 'Four Facets of New Complexity' introduces four British composers – Richard Barrett, Chris Dench, James Dillon and Michael Finnissy – whose approaches to style, micro-tones and tradition congregate around an aesthetic of complexity.³⁴ This label is not one that the named composers readily accepted: 'It horrifies me that people say the music is complex', said Finnissy.³⁵ 'New Simplicity', or 'Neue Einfachheit', has less clear roots but maintains the role of musicologists set out by Bekker. The term first appeared on a radio broadcast in 1977 as part of *Musik der Zeit* that included pieces by John Cage, Erik Satie and Earle Brown.³⁶ However, when the term appeared again, in a 1979 article by Aribert Reimann, it referred to a different grouping of seven German composers who had adopted a way of working that recalled the gestural and tonal language of late Romantic German music.³⁷

Each of these classifications of musical practice was made by people at a distance from the phenomenon they were categorising. Richard Toop was not a composer of 'New Complexity', nor Aribert Reimann of 'New Simplicity', and Paul Bekker had given up his performance career long before he coined 'New Music'. But it is Walshe herself who declares newness, although the use of 'new' may already suggest some sort of acknowledgement of its earlier use. Perhaps there ought to be a suspicion of 'newness' in general, since it is a repetition of the particular ideology of 'newness' that underpins 'New Music'.

In 'The New Discipline', Walshe suggests that this is a practice 'located in the fact of composers being interested and willing to perform, to get their hands dirty, to do it themselves, do it immediately' (yet this too is a claim that is demonstrably not new: there have always been composers who performed their own music).³⁸ Given the composer's previous interest in the performance of roles adjacent to composer in works like *Grúpat* (2007–) and *Aisteach* (2015–), it is feasible that 'The New Discipline' is an instance of Walshe performing the role of a musicologist. The key difference is that she contextualises – perhaps even attempts to canonise – her own music, rather than this being done by someone else with a musicological background.

The impact of such a performance is manifest in the discourse around 'The New Discipline'. Josh Spear dismisses Walshe's claim to novelty, stating that the 'New Discipline' was first used, by musicologist Nicholas Cook in 2014 in *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance*, to describe a movement where 'responsibility for production of meaning has shifted from the author to the interpreters including performers'.³⁹ This is not true, however: 'New Discipline' does not appear in Cook's text.⁴⁰ The two words appear next to one another in a single sentence that speculates on a chance conversation between Richard Schechner

³⁴ Richard Toop, 'Four Facets of *The New Complexity*', *Contact*, 32 (1988), pp. 6–8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁶ 'Neue Einfachheit', *SWR Kultur*, 23 June 2009, <https://www.swr.de/swrkultur/programm/article-swr-11824.html> (accessed 26 February 2025), para. 1.

³⁷ Aribert Reimann, 'Salut für die junge Avantgard', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 1 (1979), p. 25. Christopher Fox, 'Neue Einfachheit', *Grove Music Online*, 20 January 2001 (accessed 18 February 2025).

³⁸ Walshe, 'The New Discipline', paragraph 4.

³⁹ Spear, 'The New Discipline', para. 10.

⁴⁰ I initially believed Spear and did not check Cook's text. As a result my article about 'The New Discipline' for *Positionen* makes the same assertion about the origins of 'The New Discipline': I was wrong. Spear's adoption of postcritique has created a scenario in which I cannot straightforwardly believe published doctoral research, it seems.

and Victor Turner which might pinpoint the inception of performance studies as a discipline.⁴¹

Cook does, however, make two references to 'a new discipline' in another 2014 publication, 'Between Art and Science: Music as Performance'. On its first appearance the term is used in relation to Cook's overarching argument about what an understanding of performance might offer musicology, given the discipline's historic prioritisation of music as text.⁴² On the second, Cooke does not call for a totally new discipline, but rather for a 'broader musicology in which writing and playing are both understood as integral dimensions of music's existence and meaning'.⁴³ The postcritical discourse facilitated by Walshe's approach to scholarship, then, is both supportive and symptomatic of 'The New Discipline', recalling Tally's warnings.⁴⁴

Walshe explicitly aligns 'The New Discipline' with other artistic practices. She writes:

The New Discipline thrives on the inheritance of Dada, Fluxus, Situationism etc but doesn't allow itself to be written off merely as Dada, Fluxus, Situationism etc. It's a music being written when Dada, Fluxus, Situationism etc have aged well and are universally respected.⁴⁵

This contextualisation is puzzling for several reasons. The 'etc.' suggests either that this list is unfinished or that the subtle collapse of these three artistic movements implies 'You know, all that whacky performance art stuff'. One might wonder why these three movements have been selected, but the etc. covers any seeming exclusion without offering any detail. Why, for example, is John Cage not named? He appears in both Spear and Voithofer's texts, the latter endorsed as 'excellent' by Walshe herself.⁴⁶ Cage's *Water Walk* (1959) would seem to meet the criteria of 'The New Discipline': the composer gets his 'hands dirty' by performing in a TV broadcast of his own piece, utilising everyday objects to invoke theatrics that are, in Cage's oeuvre, still considered music rather than music theatre, and creating the sort of eccentric humour common to the work of the composers that Walshe cites.⁴⁷

Implicit exclusions occur elsewhere in Walshe's text. Many composers 'draw on dance, theatre, film, video, visual art, installation, literature, stand-up comedy' and perform in their own works, many producing music that is very different from that of the composers explicitly associated with 'The New Discipline'. For example, Richard Barrett's *Opening of the Mouth* (1992–97) takes its title from the poet Paul Celan, its premiere staging took place in an installation dominated by rotten fish and rusted metal and Barrett performs on the studio recording distributed by ABC Classics.⁴⁸ This piece seems to meet more of Walshe's criteria than the work of Steven Takasugi who is, however, listed

⁴¹ Nicholas Cook, *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 25.

⁴² Nicholas Cook, 'Between Art and Science: Music as Performance', *Journal of the British Academy* 2 (2014), p. 6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁴ Tally, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Walshe, 'The New Discipline', paragraph 5.

⁴⁶ Walshe, 'The New Discipline', paragraph 12 of the section 'Links to Articles, Books, and Translations (Norwegian, German, Polish, Spanish, Korean)'.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, paragraphs 2–3.

⁴⁸ 'Richard Barrett', *Elision* <https://www.elision.org.au/soundhouse/richard-barrett/> (accessed 25 February 2025); 'Richard Barrett, Elision, Opening of The Mouth', *Discogs* https://www.discogs.com/release/1194062-Richard-Barrett-Elision-Opening-Of-The-Mouth?srsltid=AfmBOooEyHMsVaL-LvYx7zP9n_v2-6Owr5yOjyGiyilziqGQvhlilew (accessed 25 February 2025).

in 'The New Discipline': yet his *Die Klavierübung* (2007–9/14) requires only that a single, skilled pianist play on the keys of the instrument alongside audio playback.⁴⁹ The piece may question ideas of originality and presence but does so in a way that is distinct from those in 'The New Discipline'. Perhaps there is a particular sort of commitment to performing, a way of 'getting one's hands dirty', to which one must adhere to qualify as a composer of 'The New Discipline', but it is not something that Walshe discloses. In which case, whom is Walshe talking about through her subtle use of etc.? Or whom is Walshe *not* talking about? Walshe claims that these three practices, and whatever is covered by etc., are 'universally respected'; but just who is respecting just what, then?

Walshe names nine composers who have adopted the way of 'The New Discipline', including herself and Object Collection (who are a performance group).⁵⁰ There is no suggestion that this list is either exhaustive or exclusive, and Walshe offers another list of the sorts of things that interest these composers, including MTV, the Internet, Stewart Lee and the supremacy of YouTube documentations over performances, to name but a few. The explicit injections of the everyday in all these composers' works often draw on irony or humour and this invites stylistic similarities; perhaps the foregrounding of the everyday and of pop culture would be difficult, if not impossible, without irony and humour. Walshe's listing of these nine composers complicates the question of inclusion: it would seem that there is a 'New Discipline' style even though Walshe is adamant that there is not; the similarities of the articulation of subject matter pertaining to the poetic, recall Allan Moore's definition of style.⁵¹ 'The New Discipline' is 'a way of working', but one that is far more specific than Walshe's text acknowledges.⁵²

Issues of style can also be read into Walshe's description of bodies. In the opening paragraph, she writes that 'The New Discipline' is rooted in a concern of the physical, pieces that 'invoke the extra-musical, which activate the non-cochlear', such that 'we understand that there are people on the stage, and that these people are/have bodies'.⁵³ Well, which is it? The distinction is paramount to creating an understanding of exactly who is on stage: are these 'bodies with minds' or 'minds with bodies'?

Walshe makes a decision as to the ontological status of bodies in an assertive final sentence: 'it's not too late for us to have bodies'.⁵⁴ But just who is it that might have forgotten that 'we' have bodies? Performances of the most 'classic' of classic new music – Ferneyhough's *Time and Motion Study II* (1973–76), say, or Helmut Lachenmann's *Pression* (1969) – foreground the performers' bodies such that it is difficult to hear this as 'mere', abstracted sound. Or if composers working with 'The New Discipline' acknowledge that 'Kagel et al are clear ancestors' to their practice (and, as before, it is unclear who might be 'et al.') then it is unclear why these individuals might need reminding of the

⁴⁹ 'Audio', Steven Takasugi <http://www.steventakasugi.com/audio.html> (accessed 25 February 2025).

⁵⁰ 'About', Object Collection <https://objectcollection.us/about/> (accessed 24 February 2025).

⁵¹ Walshe, 'The New Discipline', para. 3.

Allan F. Moore, 'Categorical Conventions in Music Discourse: Style and Genre', *Music & Letters* 82, no. 3 (August, 2001), 432–442 (441).

⁵² Walshe, 'The New Discipline', paragraph 3.

⁵³ Ibid., paragraph 1.

⁵⁴ Ibid., paragraph 6.

importance of bodies in *Staatstheater* (1970), which ‘situat[es] the body as the central site for musical action’ such that the body is presented ‘as a spectacle offering both curiosity and astonishment’.⁵⁵ More broadly, if a criterion for ‘The New Discipline’ is to look beyond and include what might traditionally not have been considered music, often focusing on aspects of pop culture, who could have omitted bodies from a discourse that includes supermodels, diet culture, Ziggy Stardust, RuPaul’s Drag Race or WWE. It would seem that Walshe does not mean all bodies, but just bodies that *are* a certain style or *do* a certain style of actions.

What Can Reading Do?

Adopting this alternative to postcritical discourse, my reading unearths much vagueness in ‘The New Discipline’. It is unclear to whom this apparent aphoristic call to arms is directed. The number and degree of its assumptions suggest that a particular audience is in mind, perhaps those with a personal involvement in this particular form of music-making, and it is not unlikely that they already knew what Walshe might write and might be able to resolve my confusions.

Within the context of Walshe’s oeuvre, however, ‘The New Discipline’ takes on a rather different meaning. Themes of performance, fictionalisation and irony are common to Walshe’s work. For example, *Aisteach* (2015–), the fictional account of Irish musical and artistic avant-garde practices, looks and sounds credible enough, but Walshe is explicit that it is not a history but rather a performance of history. More recently, Walshe’s practice has utilised and explored artificial intelligence. Her 2020 album *A Late Anthology of Early Music, Vol. 1: Ancient to Renaissance* ‘uses AI to imagine an alternative early history of Western music’ and this may well have informed the writing of *13 Ways of Looking at AI, Art & Music*, a text first published in 2023 that uses AI to suggest ways of engaging with works created with AI.⁵⁶

‘The New Discipline’ appeared in 2016, between *Aisteach* and the AI works, and so it would be unlikely for themes of performance and identity to be totally absent from the manifesto; the difference being that in this case Walshe does not make such fictionalisation explicit. I would argue that ‘The New Discipline’ appears *like* a manifesto or categorisation, but does not perform the functions of either because it does not call for anything that is not already firmly established. The text performs the form of a manifesto, but is actually a Jennifer Walshe piece in and of itself, a piece that performs criticism and the narration of history. In declaring newness and attempting to canonise a phase of ‘New Music’, Walshe performs the role of a musicologist, the key difference being that she is a composer.

My argument is supported by the postcritical discourse that has arisen around her text. It remains unclear, however, just who is and is not part of ‘The New Discipline’. Yet if Walshe were to answer questions of inclusion and exclusion more directly, it might disrupt her

⁵⁵ Bethany Younge, ‘Seeing and Hearing Disability in Mauricio Kagel’s Repertoire from Staatstheater’, *Tempo* 75, no. 296 (April 2021), pp. 7–20 (9; 18).

⁵⁶ Jennifer Walshe, *A Late Anthology of Early Music, Vol. 1: Ancient to Renaissance*, *Milker Corporation* <https://milker.org/a-late-anthology> (accessed 21 February 2025); Jennifer Walshe, *A Late Anthology of Early Music, Vol. 1: Ancient to Renaissance* (Tetbind Records/Jennifer Walshe: 2020); Jennifer Walshe, ‘13 Ways of Looking at AI, Art & Music’, Unsound Festival, 15 December 2023 <https://unsoundfestival.substack.com/p/unsound-dispatch-13-ways-of-looking> (accessed 21 February 2025).

performance as a musicologist: providing a more rigorous contextualisation of the newness of her 'way of working' might diminish its apparent innovation. Walshe approaches bodies in a similar fashion. On the one hand, Walshe claims that 'The New Discipline' is primarily concerned with bodies but, on the other, those bodies should be doing everyday 'non-new musicky' activities if they are to count. 'We' are being asked to remember that 'we' have got (or are) a body but the body 'we' ought to recall seems to be rather specific. It is these sort of misleading shortcomings that necessitate a re-evaluation of how discourse about a composer's musical work may be read.

Once this perspective has been adopted, numerous supporting 'Easter eggs' – a term used in digital media for unexpected features included as a joke or bonus – emerge. At the end of 'The New Discipline' Walshe lists things that have happened since the 1970s that distinguish her practice from 'music theatre', and mentions British comedian Stewart Lee.⁵⁷ The presence of Lee as the stand-up of choice provides an interpretive lens through which to consider what 'The New Discipline' might mean if Walshe is not 'breaking character'. One of Lee's best-known routines is a monologue in his 2009 show *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask For One* about the car show *Top Gear*. Lee makes unsettling quips about which of the show's three presenters he hates the most, joking that he wishes that Richard Hammond had actually died in his 2006 jet-powered car crash and inventing a fictional account of a time when Jeremy Clarkson kicked a homeless man to death during the show as a joke to offend the 'old loony left, political correct nutters'. In the last minute of the routine, however, Lee looks directly into the camera and states:

I don't really think that ... And what I was doing there, as everyone here, now, in this room understands, just in case there's anyone from The Mail on Sunday watching this ... Is I was using an exaggerated form of the rhetoric and the implied values of *Top Gear* to satirise the rhetoric and implied values of *Top Gear*. And it is a shame to have to break character and explain that. But hopefully it will save you a long, tedious exchange of emails.⁵⁸

If one were to replace *Top Gear* with 'New Music', then Lee has more or less summarised my reading of 'The New Discipline'. Walshe exaggerates the rhetoric and values of 'New Music' to satirise the rhetoric and implied values of 'New Music'. Indeed, the defensive tone and use of bold font in the preamble to 'The New Discipline' on Walshe's website might be read as a doubling down on this performance, and one must assume that these statements, of what 'The New Discipline' is not, were written in response to criticisms; although whether these were real or otherwise is left open in my reading.⁵⁹

Another Easter egg emerges at the very beginning of 'The New Discipline', in an abbreviated quote from Richard Maxwell's *Theater for Beginners*, which reads in full:

Theater provides the unique experience of watching the body in real time, inside a story. Because it is live, theater allows us to get closer to each other. The melodrama, the kitchensink drama, the restoration comedy, the avant-garde play, the musical comedy, all have something separating them from television, for example.

⁵⁷ Walshe, 'The New Discipline', paragraph 6.

⁵⁸ 'Stewart Lee and Top Gear', *YouTube*, 6 February 2011 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7CnMQ4L9Pc&ab_channel=richardc1975, 13:09–14:00 (accessed 25 February 2025).

⁵⁹ Walshe, 'The New Discipline', under 'Background'.

There is reality occurring in front of viewing eyes, and what is being presented on stage is enticing and electric.⁶⁰

Walshe omits the central two sentences, removing the suggestion that theatre might cultivate intimacy. There is an irony in this omission: 'The New Discipline' only complicates, perhaps even pushes 'us' away from, Walshe's ideas. To make such a general point might also be read as a momentary break of character, as if to say 'I know that you know this', and quite close to the diction of the 'For Dummies' publication series.

The title of this article may seem offhand: what can reading do? Different registers of reading have suitably different outcomes: they might serve to propagate what is already there or they might attempt to reinterpret what had been implicitly accepted. More specifically, reading might demonstrate a dissatisfaction with a singular approach to an author or composer's work, not least when they have themselves added a filter through which it should be understood. Walshe concludes 'The New Discipline' with the assertion: '[...] it's not too late for us to have bodies'. If that is the case – in whatever sense one might take it – then I might also remember that my corporeality is shaped through critical reading, that I am a body that is wary of being misled in the name of artistic practice.

The ideas that underpin this article have been developed from a short text, 'Jennifer's Jokes: Contextualising "The New Discipline"', that I wrote for the issue of *Positionen* published on 29 February 2024. The online version can be found at <https://www.positionen.berlin/post/charm-offensive-jennifers-jokes>.

⁶⁰ Richard Maxwell, *Theater for Beginners* (New York, NY: Theater Communications Group, 2015), p. 9.