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JOHN BRACKETT

Some Notes on John Zorn's *Cobra*

The year 2009 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of John Zorn's celebrated game piece for improvisers, *Cobra*. Without a doubt, *Cobra* is Zorn's most popular and well-known composition and one that has enjoyed remarkable success and innumerable performances all over the world since its premiere in late 1984 at the New York City club, Roulette. Some noteworthy performances of *Cobra* include those played by a group of jazz journalists and critics, an all-women performance, and a hip-hop version as well!¹ At the same time, *Cobra* is routinely played by students in colleges and universities all over the world, ensuring that the work will continue to grow and evolve in the years to come. In addition to being fun to perform, *Cobra* is fun for audiences as they watch the performers wave their hands wildly to get each other's attention and then quickly perform a series of seemingly disconnected and disjointed sounds.

Zorn's *Cobra* takes its name from a simulation game originally published in 1977 by the popular war-game magazine *Strategy & Tactics*.² As shown in figure 1 (the cover of the *Strategy and Tactics* issue that included *Cobra*), the game is subtitled "Patton's 1944 Summer Offensive in France." According to the introduction to the rules, "*Cobra* is a regimental division/divisional scale simulation of the Allied break-out from the Normandy peninsula in the summer of 1944, which culminated in the encirclement of some 160,000 German troops in the 'Falaise Pocket.'"³ The rules—spread out over eight, tricoloured pages—describe permissible moves and strategies available to the various British, American,

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and German infantry, air, and tank (Panzer) divisions and units who fought in this decisive European battle. An eleven-page military-historical overview of the battle by John Prados (complete with detailed maps describing the position of various forces at different points in the summer campaign) can be used as an aid to players who wish to recreate as closely as possible the actual maneuvers by the Allied and German forces during Operation Cobra.⁴ *Cobra* was so popular with gamers that an expanded version was released by TSR—the gaming company best known for publishing and producing *Dungeons & Dragons*—in 1984, the same year that Zorn was creating his musical version of *Cobra* (the box cover of the TSR version is reproduced in fig. 2).⁵

For many players, the game *Cobra* remains one of the most popular World War II–simulation games ever produced. Similarly, the game piece *Cobra* has become Zorn's most recognizable piece of music. In fact, it could be argued that *Cobra* has become *the* defining piece of music associated with the “Downtown scene” of New York's Lower East Side. Howard Mandel has compared *Cobra* to Terry Riley's *In C* and has remarked that if “*Cobra* is not Zorn's greatest lasting achievement, it is [a]

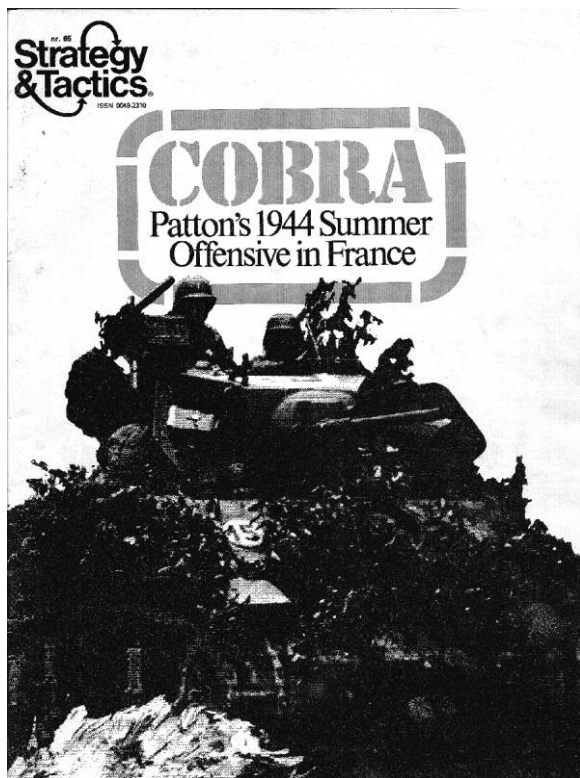


Figure 1. Cover of *Strategy & Tactics* magazine (November/December 1977).

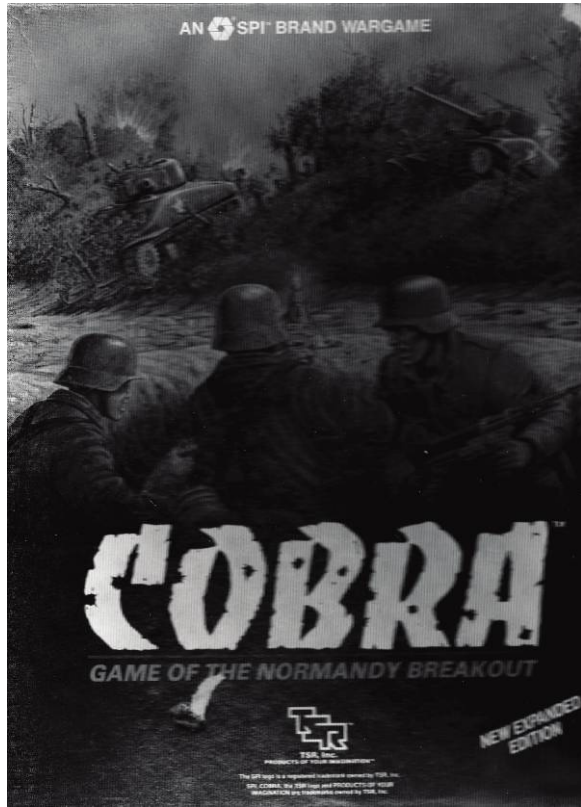


Figure 2. Box cover of the TSR version of *Cobra* (1984).

wondrously original work. Through it, and by constantly touring Europe and establishing himself in Japan, Zorn came to represent Lower East Siders' audacity, and their utter resistance to the imposition of musical limits."⁶ *Cobra's* stature as the representative piece of the Downtown scene came about quickly. Writing only ten years after its premiere, jazz journalist Peter Watrous urged concertgoers to attend a performance of *Cobra* at the Knitting Factory, his reason being "it's a good way to find out what the early 1980s [in New York] were about."⁷

As a way of celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Cobra*, the present article will consider the work from a number of perspectives. The first part will describe how the musical game is "played." Next, I will consider the type of community imagined by Zorn in his game pieces in general and *Cobra* in particular followed by a consideration of the commercially available recorded versions of *Cobra*. Finally, I will situate *Cobra* in relation to works composed by Zorn in the late 1970s through the late 1980s.

Playing the Game

Zorn: This is going to be very complicated. Is this very important for your article, to talk about this?

*Edward Strickland: I would just like to get some idea—all the articles talk about your games but never explain anything. I think it's important so we know what you're doing.*⁸

Asked to describe John Zorn's overriding compositional concern in the mid- to late 1970s through the 1980s, many people would instantly say "games" or "game structures." However, despite the many descriptions and accounts of the various "game pieces" constructed during this time, it is nearly impossible to fully reconstruct what the rules are for any given piece. And, of course, you can't play the game if you don't know (or fully understand) the rules. Edward Strickland's frustration at not knowing the rules probably reflected the feelings of a number of fans, musicians, and composers who were gradually becoming familiar with Zorn's music through his many self-produced (and self-financed) recordings.⁹

Some of the mystery surrounding these pieces (and *Cobra* in particular) began to clear away in 1991 with the publication of the "score" to *Cobra* in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* and a brief description of some of the rules in Edward Strickland's published interview with Zorn (an interview originally conducted in 1988).¹⁰ Three years later, Kevin Whitehead's "A Field Guide to *Cobra*" expanded upon some of the information presented in Strickland's interview by providing more details relating to the rules of *Cobra*.¹¹ However, even with the information included in Lange, Strickland, and Whitehead, it was still difficult—if not impossible—to adequately reconstruct in 1994 what *Cobra* was all about. For instance, interested parties who had access to *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* only had the "score" with no way of interpreting it (they had the playing pieces but not the rules). At the same time, those who read the accounts in Strickland and Whitehead knew *some* of the rules (but not all of them) but had almost no information on how these rules played out as part of the game (they had the rules but not the playing pieces—the score).

Even with the scattered and incomplete information relating to *Cobra* that began to appear in print in the early and mid-1990s, the work has remained somewhat of an enigma. The enigmatic aura surrounding *Cobra* is, I believe, intentional and can be traced back to Zorn's reluctance to publish a complete and detailed account of the work, preferring instead a desire for *Cobra* (and his other game pieces) to exist and persist as part of an oral tradition. In a published interview with Christopher Cox, Zorn explains his wishes regarding the ontological status of *Cobra* in particular and the game pieces in general:

Many people have wondered why I have deliberately chosen not to publish (or even write down) the rules of these pieces, preferring to explain them myself in rehearsal as part of an oral tradition. The reasons are many. There is a lot more to these pieces than just the rules. For one thing, choosing the players has always been a crucial part of the performance process and the art of choosing a band and being a good bandleader is not something you can impart on paper in a written preface to the score. . . . These pieces can go where anyone wants to take them, and since they live on in the underground as part of an oral/aural tradition, this becomes one of the dangers as well as part of the fun.¹²

While my decision to publish a more expansive description of *Cobra* may seem to go against the composer's wishes, I would point out that annotated copies of the score (reproduced as fig. 3) along with detailed notes compiled by the pianist Stephen Drury (including handwritten annotations by Zorn) have been available in "the underground" for close to fifteen years. Privy to this "public secret," teachers and musicians wishing to perform *Cobra* have known about the existence of these materials (faxes, photocopies, photocopies of faxes, faxes of photocopies, and so on) for some time.¹³

While any rendition of *Cobra* obviously depends upon a complete and thorough understanding of the rules involved, at least two other factors must be kept in mind if any ensemble wishes to realize the potentialities associated with the piece: choosing the performers and selecting a prompter. While the instrumentation for *Cobra* is entirely open, Zorn has explained how he prefers to perform the piece with a minimum of ten and as many as twenty players.¹⁴ *Choosing* the performers is an integral aspect in preparing *Cobra*. Zorn has described how:

You want to pick someone not just because they can play well, but because they have a good sense of humor, or they get along with the guy across the room; because they believe in democracy, or because they don't believe in it; because they want to subvert the shit or because they just want to sit back and do what they're told; because they have a lot of compositional ideas (and maybe play awful) but they're going to make good calls. There's a lot of reasons to call someone into the band in a game piece.¹⁵

Just as important as deciding upon performers is choosing the prompter. The prompter should not be thought of as a conductor who leads performers through a piece of music but as a guide who (most of the time) responds to the performers and the musical directions they wish to follow. The prompter responds to requests made by the players by relaying information to the other members of the ensemble and while the prompter

Figure 3. Score of *Cobra*.

Cobra

- MOUTH**
1. **P** POOL
 2. **R** RUNNER
 3. **S** SUBSTITUTE Δ
 4. **SX** SUB CROSSFADE
- NOSE**
1. **D** DUOS
 2. **T** TRADES
 3. **E** EVENTS 1, 2 or 3
 4. **B** BUDDIES
- EYE**
1. **CT** CARTOON TRADES
 2. **CO** ORDERED CARTOON TRADES with guests
- EAR**
1. **M Δ** G=G M Δ
 2. **G Δ** M=M G Δ
 3. **V** VOLUME Δ
- HEAD**
1. **1** SOUND MEMORY 1
 2. **2** SOUND MEMORY 2
 3. **3** SOUND MEMORY 3
- PALM**
1. **CUT**
 2. **CODA**
 3. **HOLD & FADE**

GUERRILLA SYSTEMS
Squad Leader + 2 Spotters

TACTICS

- ∂ 1. Imitate
 - \leftrightarrow 2. Trade
 - 3. Hold
 - \circ 4. Capture
 - \curvearrowright 5. Switch/crossfade
- } to next downbeat


OPERATIONS (Squad Leader ONLY)

- I DIVISI Memory drone, squad leader tactics and systems control
- II INTERCUT Locus Unit return to same sound
- III FENCING Unit with alternates

G. UNIT LIFE SPAN: 7 Downbeats

SPY may cut unit during OPERATIONS ONLY if unidentified.

Unit members and alternates may cut at any time.

 end of Divisi superimposition

Some Locus Hand Cues

- ∂ thumb=stop
- \curvearrowright hand=rhythm
- \circ finger=pip
- hand=drone
- \curvearrowleft back and forth=trade
- \circ one=intercut
- \curvearrowright cut=change

John Zorn © Oct 9 1984 NYC

often functions as a conduit of information, she/he can choose to ignore requests by the players.¹⁶ In an interview with Zorn, Cole Gagne has observed that in earlier pieces such as *Track & Field* “the role of the prompter [goes] to different players over the course of the piece, but in some of its later performances, there’d be a full-time prompter. With *Cobra*, that job [of the prompter] is always done by one specific person.” He then asks Zorn if he had “found in playing these works that it was better to have one person stick to being the prompter?” Zorn responds:

I think it’s best that way. Ultimately, I’m the best prompter there can be, because then I can be a complete fascist! Only someone who really knows the rules can be a good prompter; someone who is extremely hyper, omniattentive, and can make split-second decisions when three people are raising their hands and each one wants something different. A lot of times, people make calls that I know are going to end up in a train wreck, and I have to know when to say no. It’s like a coach. Someone who does it again and again will get better at it, but some people are naturally born to it and some people are not. . . . The prompter’s role requires a specific kind of talent. . . . You’ve got to pick the right person for the job [of prompter]. It’s crucial. The prompter can make or break a performance, no matter how inspired the band is. The prompter is a direct source of energy and inspiration for the entire group.¹⁷

Figure 3 reproduces the “score” for *Cobra*. Although I have used the description on a number of occasions already, this is not really a “score” in the traditional sense of the word. Instead of specifying content, this page is more like a key that lists all of the possible “cues” available to the performers. What happens during these cues is entirely up to the performers.¹⁸ Nineteen different cues are included on the left-hand column of this page. These particular cues—associated with “Operation 1”—describe an event or action that can be called by a player (“caller”) through a specific bodily motion (e.g., hand signals, pointing) that is relayed to the prompter who can either accept or decline the cue. If the event suggested by the caller is accepted, the prompter holds up a color-coded, rectangular card with the relevant cue and shows it to the entire ensemble (the prompter may also initiate cues). The cue is activated when the prompter lowers the card, an action constituting a “downbeat.” Zorn has described a scenario comprised of a series of cues initiated by downbeats:

[When a] downbeat starts, everyone can do one event. When you’ve done your event, you can’t play anymore until someone makes another cue. And then at that downbeat, people who are performing have to stop; people who aren’t performing have to come in. Then

another downbeat, when only the people who are pointed to can come in. And another downbeat, where whoever's playing loud has to play quiet, and whoever's playing quiet has to play loud. And another downbeat . . . You get the idea.¹⁹

A performer can delay downbeats at any time (except in special circumstances as described below).

Referring now to figure 3, the first set of cues are "mouth cues" (which the prompter displays to the ensemble on yellow cards).²⁰ In general, mouth cues all involve some sort of change: a change involving performing forces, the number of performers, or volume, for example. By pointing to the mouth and holding up one finger, a caller is requesting a "Pool" (P) cue which means that performers not playing at that time may enter while performers currently playing either stop or drastically change the quality of what they are currently playing. By pointing to the mouth and holding up two fingers, a caller requests "Runner" (R). Here the caller points to any number of players who all enter (if the call is acknowledged by the prompter) once the downbeat is initiated and all other performers currently playing stop. A "Substitute" or "Substitute Change" (S) signifies that those performers currently playing stop and those not playing have the option of entering (they are not compelled to play). Finally, by pointing to the mouth and holding up four fingers, a caller requests a "Substitute Crossfade" (SX) where everyone—regardless of whether they have or have not been playing—must fade in or out at a rate cued by the prompter.

Nose cues (the next group on the left-hand column of fig. 3) are displayed to the ensemble on white cards. By pointing to the nose and holding up one finger, a caller is requesting a duo (D). If accepted, the caller makes eye contact with someone else in the ensemble and—at the downbeat—they perform a duo (initiated by the original caller). Once the called duo begins, other performers have the option of engaging with others in their own duos. Depending upon the length of this particular cue, performers also have the option of changing duo partners. (T) means that a caller (or the prompter) has requested "Trades" whereby—beginning with the caller—music/sounds are passed along a chain of players, each playing one after the other. Silence as part of the overall improvisational game is possible within Trades as players may decide to stop the chain at any time. At the same time, any player can decide to start the chain once more, provided that that the "Trades" cue is still in effect. By pointing to the nose and holding up three fingers, a caller is requesting "Events 1, 2, or 3" (E). If this cue is accepted, the caller specifies how many events he or she wishes each performer to play. Everybody in the ensemble plays this number of events at any time (although this might get cut short if a different cue is put in play

by a downbeat). Finally, “nose-4” signifies “Buddies” (B), which is similar to “Duos” except that partners cannot change (which is possible in “Duos”). Performers engaged in a buddy duet only play one duo and then “die”—stop playing.

The next set of cues is the eye cues (on orange cards). “Eye-1” is a call for “Cartoon Trades” (CT) where “single notes/sounds/events [are] passed extremely quickly from one player to another.”²¹ The passing of these cartoon trades is accomplished by eye contact: one player performs an event, looks at another player in the ensemble who plays an event, and so on. This is in contrast to “Eye-2,” “Ordered Cartoon Trades” (CO), where short events are passed around the ensemble in terms of the seating/arrangement of performers.²² The original caller decides in which direction the trades will be passed. In “Ordered Cartoon Trades,” performers have the option of forming duos and even trios with other members of the ensemble (formed through eye contact). As these trades continue to circle around the ensemble, duos and trios from earlier cycles can be maintained, changed, or dropped altogether.

The ear cues (on blue cards) are the only cues that deal specifically with group “music.” Here, “music” may be interpreted as styles but—more often than not—it will refer to “concatenation of sounds/events.” “Ear-1” (MA) means that the group that is currently performing remains the same but, when the downbeat associated with “Ear-1” lands, they must play radically different music. “Ear-2” (GA) is the inverse of MA in that—at the downbeat—the group currently playing stops and others (chosen by current performers by pointing) enter playing the same music.²³ “Ear-3” (V) indicates a change in volume. If called, the prompter shows the performing ensemble cards indicating crescendos (<) and decrescendos (>) (both of which impact the entire ensemble) and “faders” (V) which tells players who are playing loudly to diminuendo and those playing softly to crescendo (creating volume swells and crossfades throughout the performing ensemble). The prompter determines the rate of volume change during this cue.

The three red cards (with the numbers 1 through 3 on their faces) indicate head cues, all of which are associated with “sound memories.” At any time within the improvisation, a caller may ask the prompter to “lock in” the material currently being performed for (possible) future use. For instance (and my apologies in advance), if the drummer is playing dum-da-dum-dum, and the saxophonist is playing eeeeeeeek, and the French horn is playing a low frrrrrt, a caller may signal “Head-1” (“Sound Memory 1,” or “1”) which means that he or she wishes to, in a sense, “record” the current ensemble and what it is playing at that moment. Later in the improvisation, a caller may request “Sound Memory 1” and, if accepted, the drummer’s dum-da-dum-dum, the saxophonist’s

eeeeeeek, and the French horn's frrrrrt will return at the next downbeat. As indicated by the cards, there can be up to three sound memories for each improvisation.

The cues just described form the core operations/rules of *Cobra* and are identified as "Operation 1" (except for the "Palm" cues described below). On the upper-right of figure 3 are the "guerilla systems" permissible within Operation 1. Zorn has explained how the guerilla systems "are ways of fucking up the structure" and where

people can sneak in a downbeat, people can become guerillas and have squads, get people to imitate them, capture people, switch them . . . so it really becomes a game that's fun to play. It creates real excitement on stage. The musicians are into it. They want to create a situation where they can be in control, where they're the guerilla leader with their squad telling this guy to stop and this guy to play.²⁴

At any time, any player can choose to become a guerilla by motioning to the prompter and putting on a headband. If the prompter acknowledges the guerilla, he or she also puts on a headband at which point the guerilla's "powers" are activated. As a guerilla a player has the freedom to do almost anything he or she wishes (identified as "tactics") to nonguerilla performers. As a guerilla, a player can ignore the rules (directions signified by downbeat calls from other players) and play anything he or she wants, sustain a drone ("Hold"), imitate other players, engage with other players in "Trades" (or telling other players to engage in Trades), make any calls he or she wishes, and "capture" other players (order them to stop playing). All of these tactics persist until the prompter initiates the next downbeat. Any player at any time can cut a solo guerilla.

However, a guerilla can enlist two other players ("spotters") to form a "squad," or "unit," all of whom possess the same powers described above. At the same time, if a full guerilla unit of three performers is formed, the original guerilla (now the "Squad Leader") has the option of initiating a different set of operations known as "Operations 2" as a subset of the "guerilla systems." These operations are indicated in the middle of the right-hand column on figure 3 and "are cued by the *squad leader only* using *FIST plus [a] number hand signal*" at which point the original prompter holds up a green card to the entire ensemble identifying the specific cue associated with Operation 2 and all nonguerilla unit players quit performing.²⁵ "Fist-1" indicates a "Divisi" where the squad leader becomes the prompter. During "Divisi," the squad leader essentially takes over the game and can make any calls he or she wishes including any of the nineteen cues associated with "Operation 1." The squad leader can order any player or players to perform alone or solo over a

“memory drone” (from the “Head” cues), or order players to perform/interact according to the tactics described above (“squad leader tactics”). To end a “Divisi” operation, the squad leader raises his or her fist and makes the “cut throat” sign and another signal to indicate the next cue/downbeat (remember that the squad leader is the original guerilla and still functions as such even after squad operations are discontinued). The (original) prompter holds up a card that alerts the entire ensemble that the divisi superimposition is ending along with a card indicating the next cue.

Other operations available to the guerilla unit include an “Intercut” (“Fist-2”) where the leader and the two spotters perform as an unaccompanied trio. This trio can go on for any length of time and where performance directions (directed toward the trio) are indicated by a set of “Locus Hand Cues” (shown at the bottom of the right-hand column in fig. 3). When a trio’s “Intercut” is completed, the performance returns to the same material that was being performed immediately prior to the trio’s interpolation. The final cue associated with Operation 2 is “Fencing” (“Fist-3”) which is also referred to as an “Ivesian Trio.” Here, the squad leader plays in a clearly recognizable musical style or genre while the two spotters superimpose musical material associated with a *contrasting* style/genre. Any member of the unit may choose a player from outside of the guerilla squad to act as an alternate to perform in place of that unit member. As shown in figure 3, the “life span” of a guerilla unit is seven downbeats.²⁶ While anyone can cut a solo guerilla, a guerilla squad or unit cannot be cut except by a member of that unit (at any time) or by an alternate chosen during the “Fencing” operation. One final way a guerilla unit may be “cut” during operations is through the presence of a “spy.” If one is present, the prompter holds up a sign that has a question mark on its face and if the squad correctly identifies the spy, the guerilla operations continue.²⁷ If the spy is not correctly identified, Operation 2 is terminated and Operation 1 resumes with the squad leader still acting as a guerilla.

Returning to the left-hand column of figure 3, the palm cues (at the bottom) all involve ways of ending a “version” of *Cobra*. “Palm-1” (on an all-black card) indicates a quick and sudden stop while “Palm-2” (on a half-white, half-black card) signifies a “Coda” that lasts for approximately six to ten seconds after the downbeat (and that includes only those performers who had been playing during the previous downbeat). “Palm-3” (a card with black bars at the top and bottom) calls for a “Hold and Fade” of “whatever activity you’re engaged in at call.”²⁸ Palm cues can be vetoed by the prompter as many as two times during a single game of *Cobra*.

Cobra and/as Community

[*Cobra is*] a psychodrama where everybody's personality comes out in very exaggerated ways.²⁹

To my mind, the types of improvisations realized by performances of *Cobra* exist at the boundaries connecting two types of jazz practices: those of "free jazz" and jazz improvisations that take place over chord changes. In "free jazz" (typically associated with the group improvisations arranged by Ornette Coleman and later) very few, if any, formal or harmonic constraints are present that guide the individual performers and the overall shape of any given improvisation. When soloing over "changes" (often associated with bebop), jazz improvisers are bound by the formal design of the tune at hand and the specific chord changes. Put simply (perhaps simplistically), the difference is between an improvisation that realizes "anarchic" tendencies (no rules, complete freedom) and another that realizes democratic ideals (freedom within constraints).³⁰ These conflicting tendencies are integral to the overall design of *Cobra*, ranging from the freedom for players to choose any cue they desire and to play anything they wish all according to the particular rules of the game. Extending the political metaphors even further, it is also possible to perceive "fascist" strains in *Cobra*, from the guerilla units' ability to "take control" of other players to the prompter's ability to ignore requests from the ensemble.

To fully realize all of the musico-political potentialities of *Cobra*, the selection of performers is crucial (as described above). As with all of Zorn's game pieces, *Cobra* was "originally created to harness the personal languages of a new school of improvisers working together in the East Side of Lower Manhattan."³¹ The game pieces provide an outlet for a group of "improvisers who had developed very personal languages" within a context where Zorn "could harness those languages in ways that made the players feel they were creating and participating."³²

To do this music properly is to do it with a community of like-minded musicians and an understanding of tactics, personal dynamics, instrumentation, aesthetics and group chemistry. It's about cooperation, interaction, checks and balances, tension and release and many more elusive, ineffable things both musical and social.³³

For Zorn, a successful performance of *Cobra* consists not only of players "following the rules," but also the ways in which the ensemble stages a variety of musical and social tensions and their ability to convey these tensions to the audience. "What you get on the stage, then," Zorn writes, "is not just someone reading music but a *drama*. You get a *human* drama. You get *life itself*, which is what the ultimate musical experience is: it's

life. Musicians relating to each other through music."³⁴ Elsewhere, Zorn has been more explicit about the type of *drama* he imagines in *Cobra*, referring to the piece as a *psychodrama*. In an interview with Derek Bailey, Zorn explains how:

Every society has rules that people deal with in different ways. What I basically create [in the game pieces] is a small society and everybody kind of finds their own position in that society. It really becomes, like, a psychodrama. It's like scream therapy, or primal therapy. People are given power and it's very interesting to see which people like to run with that power, which people run away from it [and] who are very docile and just do what they're told [and those] who try very hard to get more control and more power. . . . It's very much like the political arena, in a certain kind of a sense. . . . [where performers] are having a little carrot dangled in front of them. And it's interesting to see who tries to grab the carrot and who doesn't. And a lot of times the people who try to grab the carrot, it's pulled out of their hands by someone else in the band. So, it becomes kind of a scary, frightening thing to be in front of that band to see these people blossom and become the assholes that they really are.³⁵

Cobra on Record

*[The game pieces] shouldn't be put on tape. Looking back on the records I've made, I don't feel I made a mistake, but these situations weren't made for record—you had to be there.*³⁶

While there is no doubt that Zorn is proud of his game pieces, he recognizes the ambiguous ontological status of recordings of these works, including *Cobra*. As is clear from the excerpted quote above, Zorn privileges the unfolding (psycho-) dramatic narrative of these performances as experienced by both performers and audiences over and above, it seems, the reification of such experiences brought about by recordings. In the same interview, Edward Strickland sums up the many questions posed by recordings of the game pieces—what are they? what do they represent? what purpose do they serve?—when he observes that, with different recordings of the same game piece, “we’re not talking about two different versions of [Bartók’s] *Concerto for Orchestra* or even a jazz standard.”³⁷ Zorn considers each performance as being analogous to playing a game or attending a sporting event by explaining how the “live concert is not a record, it’s a game, a play of personalities. It’s not just music, it’s an event. Sports, I think, is the same way. You don’t want to put the World Series on video tape and then watch it over and over again.”³⁸ It seems that, in an effort to elevate the “being-in-the-momentness” of each performance (“you had to *be* there”) over the fixedness of

a recording, Zorn ties himself up in knots, for aren't recordings of these games just like videotaped recordings of sporting events?

Setting aside sticky ontological issues, there are, at this time, four recordings of *Cobra* commercially available to recordbuyers.³⁹ The first recording was a double album produced by Zorn and released in 1987 on the Swiss label HatHutRecords. This recording includes a studio version of *Cobra* (recorded on May 9, 1986, at Radio City Studios in New York City) and a live/concert version (recorded on October 21, 1985, at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, approximately 150 miles north of New York City).⁴⁰ Two recordings of *Cobra* were released in 1995: *John Zorn's Cobra: Tokyo Operations '94* on the Japanese label Avant and *John Zorn's Cobra: Live at the Knitting Factory* on Knitting Factory Records.⁴¹ Finally, a recording of *Cobra* on Zorn's own label, Tzadik, was released in 2002. Except for, perhaps, the Knitting Factory release, each recording is significant for various historical/musical reasons.⁴²

The original HatHut release is noteworthy for a number of reasons. First, and most obviously, this is the first recording of the piece and includes a performance (the live version) that took place approximately one year after *Cobra* was completed. Second, both versions of *Cobra* that appear on this release include many of the performers/improvisers with whom Zorn was playing with at the time and undoubtedly assisted in helping to shape and mold Zorn's overall conception of the work. Zorn has explained:

Improvising with other people is a source book for ideas for me, a workshop where I learn new ideas for composing pieces. I see things that *can't* happen in improvisation that I want to *have* happen, so I go and write a piece around it. Players' languages attract me, whether they have a highly personal language [or] a very wide vocabulary or very narrow vocabularies; it's what they *do* with their vocabularies that makes them interesting.⁴³

The improvisers who appear on the HatHut release of *Cobra* are some of the most well-known performers associated with the "Downtown Scene" in the mid-1980s, including Jim Staley (trombone), Carol Emanuel and Zeena Parkins (harp), Bill Frisell, Arto Lindsay, and Elliott Sharp (guitars), Anthony Coleman, Wayne Horvitz, and David Weinstein (keyboards and samplers), Guy Klucevsek (accordion), Bob James (tapes), Christian Marclay (turntables), Bobby Previte (drums and percussion), and Zorn as the prompter.

All of the recordings of *Cobra* released thus far are comprised of multiple tracks. On the HatHut release, for example, the studio version ends with an epilogue, which might suggest that the entirety of the studio version is a single (very long) performance of *Cobra*. However, Zorn has explained that the separate sections on the original HatHut release

(and all subsequent releases) are “separate pieces. ‘Versions,’ if you will. *Cobra* is something that can end at any time. What we did was walk in the studio and say, ‘Let’s do various lengths of pieces: some one minute, some six minutes.’ So we did a lot of five-minute pieces, I’d say, ‘Let’s do something much shorter’; if we did a lot short ones, I’d say, ‘Let’s try for a long one this time.’ Everything on the *Cobra* CD are complete pieces that I ordered after the fact.”⁴⁴ The titles of the versions of *Cobra* that appear on this release are generally descriptive in nature, often referring to the tempo (e.g., “Allegro,” “Largo”) or the character of a particular performance (“Violento,” “Maestoso Meccanico”).

Given the overview of *Cobra*’s rules described above, it is possible (to a certain extent) to follow the narrative of cues in individual performances by focusing on performing forces, lengths of events, forms, and so on. While this would certainly be one viable way of listening to these recordings, another would be to focus on the particular sounds themselves and how they realize Zorn’s compositional concern about the primacy of *structure* over musical *content*. This distinction is foregrounded most clearly, I believe, by the use of sounds that could be described as “nonmusical” as well as the use of quotations from pre-existing musical works. In the studio version, “nonmusical” sounds are present in the chicken clucks in “Fantasia” along with the ringing of a telephone and the taps on a typewriter in “Allegro.” With these and other instances, it is possible to see how compositional practices typically associated with *musique concrète* have entered the realm of real-time improvisation. Along with examples of nonmusical sounds, a number of musical quotations are present in individual versions of *Cobra* included on this recording, including the opening motive from Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony played by a tremolo guitar in “Largo,” Christian Marclay’s use of an excerpt from a recording of Wagner in “Moderato,” and the flute tune from an easy-listening, smooth jazz recording in “Adagio Maestoso.” While the inclusion of quotations is often cited as a stylistic marker of Zorn’s music in general, it is worth considering the *function* of quotations in a piece such as *Cobra*. In an effort to understand the purpose and meaning of these quotations, Edward Strickland has asked Zorn about the Wagner quote in the “Moderato” movement:

STRICKLAND: What’s the function of the “Für Elise” in *The Big Gundown* or the Wagner in *Cobra*? . . .

ZORN: It’s just another tool. It’s something that’s out there, part of the world that’s out there. I didn’t say, “Use Wagner.” Christian Marclay wanted to use it. Everything he does is quotations because his instrument is the turntable and he’s using records as his material.

STRICKLAND: Is it a way of deflating the pomposity of Wagner by transposing it to an alien context?

ZORN: No, I'm not interested in anything like that. That particular piece was chosen by Christian right then. He wanted to use it, he used it. I had nothing to say about it. In *Cobra* the musical materials are completely up to the performers. I have nothing to say about it. I make no musical decisions. I set the situation up, I set the rules up. *They* [the performers] make the decisions.⁴⁵

In terms of how a piece such as *Cobra* is both perceived and conceived, Zorn's explanation on the use and function of musical quotations in *Cobra* is instructive. There is no question that the appearance of particular quotations can be heard and interpreted as a sort of ironic, postmodern commentary. In its conception, however, the inclusion of musical quotations function as possible sound resources in the ever-changing progression of sound blocks according to the rules of the game.

While Zorn does not act as a prompter on the *Tokyo Operations '94* release, this recording highlights the ability for *Cobra* to be realized by any instruments. On this recording, the guitars and percussion familiar from the HatHut release perform alongside a variety of traditional Japanese instruments, including the shamisen, shakuhachi, and koto. Jazz journalist Art Lange has written how *Tokyo Operations '94*

offers an unfamiliar sound world with its own distorted points of reference, contrasting traditional instruments like shamisen and shakuhachi with electric slash and crash noisemongers, graffiti artists wielding guitars and samplers instead of spray paint cans. Like much of Zorn's best work it relocates us from our own aesthetic perspective into a moveable feast of possibilities—that awkward, uncomfortable, exhilarating, ambiguous area between the sublime and the ridiculous.⁴⁶

In general, the cues heard on many of the performances of *Cobra* on *Tokyo Operations '94* are significantly longer than those on the HatHut release. "Tomobiki" (*Cobra* 2), for instance, opens with what can be described as an introduction that leads into an extended passage of heterophony built over a steady pulse in the percussion. In passages like these, musical ideas are developed and expanded in ways not typically heard on the HatHut release.⁴⁷ At the same time, many of the performances utilize recurring blocks of sound material ("Sound Memory"?) that create a formal framework that can be described as ritornello-like, a practice that stands in marked contrast to the almost constant sense of formal difference typically heard in other performances (a good example of this ritornello-like formal design can be heard in *Cobra* 1, "Sensyo").

The Tzadik release of *Cobra* (2002) brings together several generations of improvisers. With Zorn as the prompter, the performances on this recording feature improvising veterans such as the British guitarist Derek

Bailey (a long-time practitioner of “nonidiomatic free improvisation”), Ikue Mori on laptop, and percussionist Cyro Baptista. Complementing these veteran performers, this recording also features more recent arrivals on the “Downtown Scene” including improvisers such as Jamie Saft (keyboards), Jennifer Choi (violin), Susie Ibarra (drums), and Trevor Dunn (bass). Recorded eighteen years after *Cobra* was completed, certain performances on this recording reveal how the musical languages of individual performers have been affected by pieces such as *Cobra*. For instance, on “Tabanan,” the recurring trio block of piano, cello, and violin sounds “composed,” almost as if it is a notated piece by, for instance, violinist Mark Feldman, or cellist Erik Friedlander, or pianist Sylvie Courvoisier.⁴⁸ The recording’s closing track—“Goa Gajah”—is another good example of where the boundaries between “improvised” and “composed” are aurally indistinguishable and where discrete sound blocks (a hallmark of the work’s original design and conception) are replaced by a formal design that can be described as “undulatory.” The Tzadik recording reveals not only how *Cobra* (not to mention other game pieces) has impacted a generation of composers/improvisers who arrived on the scene after it was composed, but also the ways the piece is able to accommodate the various tendencies, strengths, and languages of these performers. Much like certain eras in baseball—some of which are dominated by pitching, others by hitting—the rules to *Cobra* remain the same even as the players change. (Makes you wonder what the steroid-era of *Cobra* will sound like.)

Zorn Before Cobra

*Everything I learned in my old pieces got incorporated into the next piece and so on. Cobra is like the sum total of working with these game pieces.*⁴⁹

Zorn has explained how “the music that I loved from maybe age fifteen on . . . was the music of the maverick composers like [Edgard] Varèse and [Charles] Ives and [John] Cage and [Harry] Partch, [Mauricio] Kagel and [Karlheinz] Stockhausen; these composers were all on the cutting edge of what they were doing, and it was *that* tradition that attracted me.”⁵⁰ The composers mentioned here all helped in shaping Zorn’s image of the *type* of composer he wanted to be. In regards to his game pieces in particular, Zorn believes that he is “tying together loose strings left dangling by composers such as Earle Brown, Cornelius Cardew, John Cage, and [Karlheinz] Stockhausen.”⁵¹ In terms of specific works, Zorn has mentioned Stockhausen’s *Plus-Minus* (1963) and *Kurzwellen* (1968), Earle Brown’s *Available Forms* (1961), and Kagel’s *Improvisation Ajoutée* (1961–62) and *Der Schall* (1968).⁵²

Along with the composers mentioned above (all of whom are associated—albeit loosely—with the Western concert tradition), Zorn

also drew inspiration from a number of composers and performing groups working at the margins of a jazz/improvising/experimental tradition.⁵³ On a number of occasions Zorn has described how musical experiments by members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) and the Black Artists' Group (BAG) in St. Louis have shaped his compositional career, from his early game pieces onward. Speaking of his time in the American Midwest during and following his brief college career at Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri, Zorn has explained to Edward Strickland how his decision to remain in the region for some time was something he needed to do. "I needed," Zorn remarks, "to be exposed to the black jazz scene in Chicago, AACM, and BAG in St. Louis: Anthony Braxton, Leo Smith. BAG was mixing improvisation with set structures in a very interesting way then."⁵⁴ Citing specific performers/improvisers and works, Zorn has frequently mentioned Anthony Braxton's 1969 recording *For Alto*, the Art Ensemble of Chicago's *Bap-Tizum* (1973), and recordings by Roscoe Mitchell, Leo Wadada Smith, and BAG members/cofounders Oliver Lake and Julius Hemphill. Citing works often associated with jazz, Zorn has also pointed to Cecil Taylor's *Unit Structures* (1966), Ornette Coleman's double quartet recording *Free Jazz* (1961), John Coltrane's *Ascension* (1965), Albert Ayler's *Bells* (1965), Sun Ra's *Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy* (1963), and *Communications*, a double-album released in 1968 by the Jazz Composer's Orchestra featuring saxophonist Pharaoh Sanders, pianist Cecil Taylor, trumpeter Don Cherry, and trombonist Roswell Rudd.⁵⁵

Building upon the compositional possibilities related to such a diverse list of influences and inspirations, Zorn's earliest game pieces seek to exploit the improvisational talents of performers within the logical structures ("rules") associated with games. Describing his overall compositional aesthetic, Zorn considers composing in terms of "problem solving" explaining how he tries "to go new places [in his compositions] by setting myself parameters and trying to solve the problems they present. How can I create a piece of music that has only three sounds in it? Or a piece where every bar is a different genre of music?"⁵⁶ The problems posed in Zorn's game pieces, in particular, aren't solved by the composer but by the improvisers who play the games. Zorn has explained that his earliest ideas for the game pieces arose through his interactions with improvisers and seeing what would and would not happen in any given improvisation.

Game pieces came about through improvising with other people [and] seeing that things I wanted to have happen *weren't* happening. I'd wonder, "Why aren't people leaving more silences?" So I'd write a piece for improvisers that inherently had a lot of silences. Or, "Why

doesn't everybody, all of a sudden, change at one time?" So then I'd create a little system and write a piece involving that.⁵⁷

How the "games" would turn out was never a concern for Zorn. According to Zorn, the game pieces "deal with *form*, not with *content*, with *relationships*, not with *sound*. They have musicians on the stage relating to *each other*. The improvisers on the stage were *themselves* the sound."⁵⁸ Understood this way, Zorn approaches and conceives of his game pieces much like a fan of baseball who appreciates the way a manager manages the bullpen in the late innings of a close game as opposed to the fan who goes to the game hoping to see his or her favorite player belt a three-run homer.⁵⁹

Zorn had created a number of game pieces by the time *Cobra* was completed in October of 1984. In a sense, many of the "problem-solving" ideas that were worked out in his earlier game pieces find their way into *Cobra*. As Zorn explained to Howard Mandel, "with each new [game] piece, I made up new sets of rules, sometimes incorporating similar ideas and systems from old pieces into new pieces but changing the sequences, or the overall way it was put together."⁶⁰ Given Zorn's penchant for adapting and reusing strategies and tactics from earlier works, it is worth considering aspects of some of the game pieces written prior to *Cobra* and sketching out some sort of compositional trajectory (or at least a "connect the dots").

Zorn has described his earliest game pieces as an attempt at

creating very simple structures—combinations, for example, of all the possible duets in a twelve-piece group, all the possible trios. Then I'd work them all out, order them, and the players would go through this ordering, along with another set of rules that made it a little more complicated than just going one after another—first *these* people, then *these* two people.⁶¹

Zorn has referred to this process—the idea of exploring all of the possible combinations or permutations based upon instrumentation and/or personnel—as proceeding along a "timeline." Starting with his earliest game piece *Klarina* (1974) until *Jai-alai* (1980), performers would improvise according to a timeline based on various combinations.⁶² Once all of the combinations were exhausted, the piece would conclude.⁶³ *Klarina*, for instance, involves a "complex list of all the possible combinations of three players who perform on three different instruments each" while *Archery* (1979) is based upon a "series of all the possible solo, duo, and trio combinations for 12 players, which ended up being 200 some odd combinations; and you had to complete them all to finish the piece!"⁶⁴ In short, the procession of varying combinations through these early game pieces is the *form* of the work.

What occurs within a specific combination changes from piece to piece. Again, while the musical content of any given moment within a game piece is never specified, the *shape* or *character* of these moments is determined by whatever "problem" each piece is designed to "solve." *Lacrosse* (1977), for instance, "is about concentrating ideas in short statements (sound events), as a way of stopping people from just closing their eyes and blowing, going on and on with the same idea"⁶⁵ Elsewhere, Zorn has explained:

Lacrosse [was] about making every note count. That's what that piece was about. What each person was involved in doing was creating short little events between three and ten seconds long. Playing something, concentrating completely on that one little thing, and making sure that every note counted was the best thing that you could do. And then stopping, pausing, thinking of another little event to do.⁶⁶

According to a brief description by the San Francisco-based saxophonist Bruce Ackley, the "short events" of *Lacrosse* are drawn from "a menu of four of Zorn's musical gestures that each player [juggles] independent of the group action."⁶⁷ The idea of improvising using short events reappears in *Cobra* as the "Cartoon Trades." While the "Trades" cue of *Cobra* may be realized by short events, it does not have to; there are no specific guidelines pertaining to the length of events performed in "Trades."⁶⁸ The specific permutations that occur in *Lacrosse* involve combinations of up to four players although "substitutions" of players are possible with the addition of two other performers. *Lacrosse*, in short, is a work for four players that is realized by six players.⁶⁹

Improvisational practices involving "trades" comprised of short events as well as "substitutions" as developed in *Lacrosse* found their way into *Cobra* approximately seven years later. A number of other strategies developed in earlier game pieces would later reappear in *Cobra*. *Fencing* (1978), for instance, involves "putting different genres of music on top of one another in an Ivesian way" and which would become, in *Cobra*, a cue available to guerilla units.⁷⁰ *Pool* (from 1979) develops and builds upon strategies first explored in early game pieces. Like *Lacrosse*, *Pool* proceeds according to a complex system of permutations involving four players (but, allowing for substitutions, the work is performed by five players).⁷¹ With *Pool*, the specific permutations of performers is not governed by a graphic notation (as in earlier works) but is controlled (and maintained) by a prompter. In *Pool*, the prompter keeps track of the different permutations and alerts the performers as to when the permutations are suspended (through silences or through interpolated structures suggested by the performers). The resulting block, or "modular," form of *Pool* is, of course, representative of Zorn's long-standing compositional interest in "changing blocks of musical sound" (something he attributes—in *Pool*

—to Igor Stravinsky’s *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*).⁷² *Archery* (1979) also utilizes a prompter who guides the twelve performers (never performing in groups larger than a quartet) through timed events (“clock events”), trading events, and orderings specifying duos and trio combinations.⁷³ Except for the “clock events,” much of the material associated with *Archery* would be adapted in *Cobra*, particularly the opportunity for performers to make specific “calls” or “intercuts” (in *Archery*, the ability for any performer to request a specific “divisi”) that would temporarily interrupt the progression of permutations.

The “Locus Hand Cues” available to a guerilla squad in *Cobra* are traceable to improvisational cues employed by a trio of performers in Zorn’s *Locus Solus* project from 1983.⁷⁴ Not strictly a game piece, *Locus Solus* was Zorn’s attempt at creating improvisational structures within the boundaries of traditional song forms in a trio format (the subtitle for the project is “In Search of the Improvised Song Form”). During a trio performance, players would use various hand/finger signals (thumb pointing up = stop playing, flat hand = play a drone, curved hand = perform trades) to direct the improvisation. As described above, the guerilla squad in *Cobra* can be understood as an interpolated *Locus Solus* group during Operation 2 (“Fist-2,” “Intercut”).⁷⁵

Zorn after Cobra

*In a sense, these early lessons in composing for improvisers defined my entire compositional style.*⁷⁶

According to Zorn, *Cobra* and his later game pieces go beyond the limits imposed by a timeline. In these post-timeline works, what remains are “[a] complex set of rules that, in a sense, [turn] players on and off like toggle switches to such a complicated degree that it [doesn’t] really matter what the content [is].”⁷⁷ As should be clear from the discussion of *Cobra*, Zorn’s later game systems specify a:

series of rules, like a trading system—one person plays, then the next person plays, then the next person plays—and event systems, where people independently perform events. Anybody can perform one event each, for example, but nobody can time it at the same time with anybody else. There might be a series of downbeats where at a downbeat a change will happen—if you’re playing, maybe you must stop; if you’re not playing, you may come in. That’s just one example.⁷⁸

At the same time, in post-*Cobra* game pieces “players are asked to relate more and more to sound in spontaneously constructing pieces.” He continues by describing how “abstract parameters like high, low, loud or quiet (in *Xu Feng* [1985]) were later joined (in *Beziq* [1989]) by specific

genres like blues, soundtrack, mood, classical, and jazz as moments that could be called upon by any player at any time, orchestrated spontaneously and cued at the prompter's downbeat."⁷⁹

With *Cobra*, Zorn abandoned sports as titles for his game pieces by adopting titles from war games. This practice was short-lived as Zorn soon started titling his game pieces after the names of Asian actresses such as *Xu Feng* (1985), *Hu Die* (1986), *Ruan Lingyu* (1987), and *Hwang Chin-ee* (1988).⁸⁰ *Xu Feng* was the first game piece created after *Cobra* and, according to Zorn, marks a radical shift in his game pieces. With *Xu Feng*, Zorn began moving from the "abstract to [the] concrete, [the] theoretical to [the] practical." Beginning with *Xu Feng*, Zorn "began to mold subsequent game pieces more toward specific sound worlds, giving pieces exact instrumentation and introducing sound 'modifiers'—(specifying sound parameters) into the options available in structuring form and content."⁸¹

Modifiers such as "high" or "low," "loud" or "quiet" describe *qualities* of sounds that are, for the most part, absent from Zorn's earlier game pieces (changes in volume are, as shown above, possible in *Cobra* with the "Ear-3" cue). In *Bézique* (1989)—Zorn's last game piece—modifiers are extended to include entire genres or styles. Zorn has described how, in *Bézique*,

each player in the group has a chance to completely organize an ordering of sound events—to 'compose' a piece themselves. When each player has completed their successive piece, the performance is over. We have come full circle here, with a triumphant return to both the timeline and the world of sound. Perhaps it is fitting that *Bézique* which consists entirely of sound modifiers, is one of my last explorations of the game piece medium, as in it, improvisers have themselves become composers.⁸²

Bézique employs a number of cues familiar from earlier game pieces such as "trades" (which can be passed around the ensemble in different directions), "runners," the option of playing one, two, or three "events" (EV), and to form "buddies."⁸³ All of these cues take place within a semi-organized structure comprised of modifiers. Some of these modifiers are familiar from earlier game pieces (such as *Xu Feng*) and include performance directions such as "high," "low," "loud," "quiet," "fast," and "slow." Another set of modifiers, however, involves improvised group performances in specific styles/genres such as "jazz," "blues," "rock," "pop," "classical," and "ethnic." A performance of *Bézique* begins with a precomposed "feature" comprised of varying elements corresponding to the various modifiers and other cues permissible within the game. After a performance of this precomposed piece, the audience begins to applaud while another member of the ensemble (*Bézique* is for between

nine and thirteen players) gets the attention of the prompter. If acknowledged, this performer becomes a “new” composer and begins to organize other players in the ensemble in the creation of a newly improvised piece of music comprised of various cues/modifiers (players not chosen “noodle” on their instruments as the details for the next piece are being worked out). If one of the modifiers chosen is, for instance, “jazz,” the new composer must call out a specific key or chord changes over which players will improvise once the next downbeat arrives. A performance of *Bézique* concludes once all of the players have “composed” their own piece of music.⁸⁴

In Zorn’s game pieces, changing blocks of sound arise through specific decisions and choices made by the improvisers. In *Cobra* and other game pieces, a temporal succession of radically different sound blocks is typically achieved through “Pool” downbeats or cues. Beginning in the mid-1980s (shortly after the completion of *Cobra*), Zorn adapted the formal potentialities of “Pool” downbeats. Originally designed to exploit the improvisational capabilities of individual performers within the constraints imposed by the specific rules of a particular game, “Pool” downbeats became the basic unit of musical content in Zorn’s “file card” pieces. Works such as *Godard* (1985), *Spillane* (1986), and *Forbidden Fruit* (1987) are “composed” of individual file cards (index cards) each of which contain some sort of musical (or extra-musical) information. In the case of *Spillane*, Zorn has described how

each card relates to some aspect of [Mickey] Spillane’s work, his world, his characters, his ideology. Sometimes I wrote out only sounds: “Opening scream. Route 66 intro starting with a high-hat, then piano, strings, harp.” Other times I thought of a scene from a movie like *Year of the Dragon*, and I wrote: “Scene of the crime #1—high harp harmonics, basses and trombone drone, guitar sonorities, sounds of water dripping and narration on top.”⁸⁵

In a work such as *Spillane*, a certain amount of freedom is allowed to each performer in terms of how he or she might realize the information in a particular card. However, there is a qualitative difference between the “freedom” allowed by the performers of one of Zorn’s file card compositions and that of the fully improvised game pieces. A major distinction, of course, is the fact that—in a game piece—no one knows where the improvisation will go or how it will end. Once Zorn has determined an ordering of his file cards, however, that ordering becomes the form, a form that is fixed in the studio. The recordings of the game pieces represent one version of the game while the piece *Spillane* and the recording of *Spillane* are the same thing. While the narrative trajectory of *Spillane* proceeds much like a typical plot of a Mickey Spillane/Mike Hammer novel, Zorn’s piece is a sort of distillation of all of those

elements common to a Spillane novel: an initial crime, Hammer taking the case (probably at the behest of a mysterious and seductive woman who probably knows more than she is letting on), Hammer pursuing leads throughout the city (bars, strip clubs, and so on), Hammer pursuing the criminals in a car chase, Hammer solving the crime (following a shootout) as the rain falls over the city (while the jazz/blues meta-soundtrack fades into the night).⁸⁶

Other file card compositions lack a clear relation to the "imaginary soundtrack" of a piece like *Spillane*, yet still trace their form(s) to the block structures of Zorn's earlier game pieces. With *Forbidden Fruit* (string quartet, vocalist, and turntablist), Zorn recalls how he began with a set of cards of

maybe twelve musical themes—all the players staccato, all the players performing glissandos, or *col legno*—twelve themes and variations on those themes, which is what I would call harmonic counterpoint, where each of the four musicians is given a different theme to play. First violin plays glissandos, second plays pizzicato, viola maybe plays *col legno*, and the cellist improvises. I worked out twelve different combinations of variants on those twelve themes that combine them harmonically so that they're working simultaneously. Then I added twelve scenes from the movie [*Kurutta Kajitsu*] and orchestrated them as if I was writing the music for the soundtrack.⁸⁷

Like *Spillane*, *Forbidden Fruit* is a product of the recording studio.⁸⁸ Around this same time, however, Zorn was also creating a number of file-card compositions that are fully notated and can exist as "works" apart from their respective recordings. The notated scores to pieces such as *Cat O' Nine Tails* for string quartet (1988) and *Carny* for solo piano (1991) almost look as if individual file cards have been taped to large pieces of paper!⁸⁹ Constructed in a manner that is similar to *Forbidden Fruit*, *Cat O' Nine Tails* is composed of five basic sound blocks identified as noise, cartoon, collage, interludes, and sound improvisations. In this work, "noise" refers to notated scrapes, scratches, or crunches, while blocks of "sound improvisation" are generally not notated and where the actual content is left up to the players. For the collage sections, Zorn borrowed and manipulated material from the "great string quartet composers" while the interludes are "slow and melodic kinds of pieces" composed entirely of original music. The cartoon sections are generally tonal and include quick scalar passages and/or clear cadences in addition to numerous "bonks," "boings," "bangs," and "cracks." In the early stages of composition, Zorn composed twelve examples of each group totaling sixty blocks. Zorn's original idea was to arrange the blocks into twelve groups where each group would be ordered noise-collage-sound improvisation-cartoon-interlude. Unhappy with the pacing and flow of

Figure 4. Zorn, *Cat 'O Nine Tails*, measures 61–72.

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 61-65) includes a 'sp crazy' section with a tempo of quarter note = 136, followed by a 'cartoon' section with a tempo of quarter note = 60. The second system (measures 66-72) includes a 'Xenakks' section with a tempo of quarter note = 60, followed by an 'Ives' section with a tempo of quarter note = 60. The score includes various performance instructions such as 'fast coil legato battuto', 'jeté', 'low bow scrape', 'super vibrato pizz.', 'bong!', 'arco', 'pizz. glass.', 'sul pont.', and 'pppp'. It also includes dynamic markings like 'ff', 'mf', 'f', 'pp', and 'pppp', and articulation like 'accid.'

this rigid ordering, Zorn rearranged the blocks. While all of the sixty original blocks are present in the finished form of *Cat O' Nine Tails*, the ordering was abandoned.⁹⁰ A progression through blocks of noise ("go crazy"), cartoon ("cartoon"), followed by two collage blocks ("Xenakis" and "Ives") can be seen in measures 61 through 72 of *Cat O' Nine Tails*, reproduced in figure 4.

Without question, *Cobra* is Zorn's most well-known and oft-performed composition. At the most basic level, *Cobra* is a fun game to play and is one that performers wish to play over and over again. Given *Cobra's* ability to accommodate performers from diverse musical backgrounds and capabilities, it is quite possible that it will become *the* piece that future generations of performers will turn to when honing their improvisational skills and that teachers and historians will focus on when considering certain moments in New York's "Downtown Scene." Therefore, given its rich and multilayered existence, it has been my wish to write an essay that celebrates John Zorn's *Cobra* on the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary that has a place not only in seminar rooms but also on music stands as well.

NOTES

1. Jazz critic and author Howard Mandel participated in a version of *Cobra* organized by Kevin Whitehead and performed by members of the Jazz Journalists Association at New York's Knitting Factory club in the early 1990s. See Howard Mandel, *Future Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 170. See also Kevin Whitehead, "A Field Guide to *Cobra*," *Pulse!* (November 1994): 46–48, 112. On the all-women version organized by harpist Zeena Parkins, see Ann Powers, "All-Girl *Cobra*," *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 1993, C19. In 2000 a hip-hop version of *Cobra* was organized by Yuka Honda and Miho Hatori of Cibo Matto. For information see http://www.vh1.com/artists/news/1122441/07252000/cibo_matto.jhtml.

2. *Strategy & Tactics* was the main competitor to *The General*, a magazine distributed by the gaming company Avalon Hill from 1964 to 1998. While *The General* was used primarily as a tool for promoting Avalon Hill's own games, *Strategy & Tactics* distinguished itself by publishing new games in each issue (a practice begun in 1969 when the magazine was taken over by Simulated Publications, Inc., or SPI). When discussing Zorn's early game pieces, Howard Mandel observes the influence of "complex board games like those produced in the '60s by the firm Avalon Hill" (Mandel, *Future Jazz*, 169). In an interview with Zorn from 1985, Peter Watrous describes a bookcase in Zorn's Lower East Side apartment overflowing with a "shelf of strategy books" (Peter Watrous, "John Zorn: Raw, Funny, Nasty, Noisy New Music from a Structural Radical," *Musician* 81 [July 1985]: 17).

3. "Cobra," *Strategy & Tactics: The Magazine of Conflict Simulation* 65 (November/December 1977): R1. The "Falaise pocket" refers to a town in northwestern France in the Calvados département of Lower Normandy.

4. John Prados, "Cobra: Patton's 1944 Summer Offensive in France," *Strategy & Tactics: The Magazine of Conflict Simulation* 65 (November/December 1977): 4–14.

5. As seen in figure 2, the full title of the TSR version is *Cobra: Game of the Normandy*

Breakout. Faced with mounting financial difficulties, SPI turned over all of its games and associated rights (including the publication of *Strategy & Tactics*) to TSR in 1982. The original SPI version of *Cobra* chronicles the conflict from July 16 to August 23, 1944 while the expanded version released by TSR allows for the game to commence on June 6 (the D-Day invasion).

6. Mandel, *Future Jazz*, 174.

7. Peter Watrous, "Cobra," Sounds Around Town section, *New York Times*, Sept. 23, 1994, C26.

8. From an interview with Zorn in Edward Strickland, *American Composers: Dialogues on Contemporary Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 136.

9. In an interview from 1985, Zorn describes how "all these records are made by the musicians themselves. When I make a record I put the money up myself to produce it." Jürg Solothurnmann, "New Sounds from the Lower East Side: An Interview with John Zorn," *Jazz Forum* 95 (April 1985): 35. The early game pieces—including *Lacrosse*, *Pool*, *Hockey*, and *Archery*—were all released on guitarist/improviser Eugene Chadbourne's record label, Parachute.

10. Art Lange, "Der Architekt der Spiele: Gespräch mit John Zorn über seine musikalischen Regelsystem," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 152 (Feb. 2, 1991): 33–37. A reproduction of the score appears on page 36. See Strickland, *American Composers*, 135–37. A color reproduction of the score was also included on the double-LP release of John Zorn, *Cobra*, HatHut Records hatART 2034 (1987). More recently, the score can also be found underneath the CD tray to John Zorn, *Cobra*, Tzadik TZ 7335 (2002).

11. Whitehead, "A Field Guide to *Cobra*." Accounts by Zorn of some of the rules to *Cobra* can also be found in Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 76–77.

12. John Zorn, "The Game Pieces," in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2005), 196–97. This passage is also included in the liner notes to the (as of right now) two recordings released on Zorn's Tzadik label as part of a series dedicated to his game pieces: volume 1 is John Zorn, *Xu Feng*, Tzadik TZ 7329 (2000) and volume 2 is *Cobra*.

Zorn has admitted that the idea of an oral tradition for *Cobra* stems from the types of simulation/war games that inspired the work. "The rule books [of these games]," he explains, "were intense, so thick, you know, and if you write the rules out for the game *Cobra* they are impossible to decipher. But when someone explains the practice of it, it's very simple. These games, like *Cobra*, have a kind of oral tradition. I was very influenced by these complex war games" (Zorn, quoted in Bailey, *Improvisation*, 76).

Elsewhere Zorn has expressed a more pragmatic reason for not publishing a score to the game pieces, explaining how he "would rather be there to tell [the performers] the details, because there's always a few mistakes on paper." See the interview with Zorn in William Duckworth, *Talking Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), 462.

13. Zorn obviously knows about the existence of these materials and how they disrupt his ideal regarding the tradition of orality/aurality that he imagines for his game pieces. In the same interview with Cox, Zorn clarifies that he does not have a "problem with people doing this music (after all, music is meant to be played), as long as [the performers] realize the difference between amateur/outlaw versions (without my presence) and the more 'authorized' versions I organize myself" (Zorn, "The Game Pieces," 197). Although handwritten clarifications by Zorn appear on Drury's explanatory notes to *Cobra*, it is not certain that Drury's notes should be considered "authoritative" or in any way "sanctioned" by the composer.

14. Lange, "Der Architekt der Spiele," 35. In the list of compositions compiled by Cole Gagne, *Cobra* is listed as being for "ten or more players." See Gagne, *Soundpieces 2: Interviews with American Composers* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1993), 535. Whitehead claims

that the work "calls for eight to 12 players" ("A Field Guide to *Cobra*," 112). The number of performers is not indicated on either the score or Drury's notes.

15. Gagne, *Soundpieces 2*, 521. Elsewhere, Zorn has expressed similar thoughts on choosing the "right" performers for *Cobra* in Bailey, *Improvisation*, 77.

16. The composer Norman Yamada remembers how, in a performance of *Cobra* in which he participated and which Zorn prompted, "I signaled the first call, and John threw me the [middle] finger, and blew me off." Recounted in Whitehead, "A Field Guide to *Cobra*," 112.

17. Gagne, *Soundpieces 2*, 520–21. Without going into any further detail, William Duckworth understands the role of the prompter in Zorn's game pieces as being "very much in the Earle Brown tradition" (Duckworth, *Talking Music*, 464). A more contemporary model for the role of the prompter in Zorn's game pieces is Lawrence D. "Butch" Morris's technique of conducted improvisation, or "conduction." For Morris's description of conduction, see the liner notes to his ten-disc collection *Testament: A Conduction Collection*, New World Records, New World 80478–2 (1995). These notes can also be accessed online at <http://www.newworldrecords.org/linernotes/80482.pdf>.

18. In game pieces such as *Cobra*, Zorn has explained how the rules "don't talk about information. Content is left to the performer. So I have a whole series of different relationships, like trading games—when the card comes down you can do duos with whoever you want, etc. The cards act as dividers to set the improvisation up into little sections . . . [but] what happens in these blocks is completely up to [the performers]. How these blocks are ordered is completely up to them. I don't make decisions, saying, 'Now it's this, now it's that.' The musicians make signs to me [the prompter] telling me what they want to happen and I just act as an intercom device" (Strickland, *American Composers*, 135). Elsewhere, Zorn has explained how one of the earliest decisions he came up with as a composer "was never to talk about language or sound at all. I left that completely up to the performers. What I was left with was *structure*. I can talk about *when* things happen and when they *stop*, but not *what* they are. I can talk about *who* and in what *combinations*, but I can't say what goes on. I can say 'A change will happen *here*,' but I can't say what *kind* of change it will be" (Zorn, quoted in Mandel, *Future Jazz*, 172; emphasis in original).

19. Duckworth, *Talking Music*, 463. In 1992 a four-part series on improvisation written and narrated by the legendary English guitarist/improviser Derek Bailey entitled *On the Edge* was broadcast on Channel 4 in the United Kingdom. The first part—"Passing It On"—included an interview with Zorn as well as excerpts from a rehearsal of *Cobra*. These clips give a good idea as to the pacing and flow of a *Cobra* performance and provide the viewer some idea as to how the performers interact with one another (and the prompter) and the manner in which different cues/events are signaled through cards and downbeats. Parts 1 and 3 of this series can be viewed online at <http://www.ubu.com/film/bailey.html>.

20. While I will be describing the various cues as they appear in figure 3 (by reading down the left-hand column), the opening call may come from anywhere on this page (except the "palm cues," which describe ways of ending).

21. From Stephen Drury's typed notes to *Cobra*, personal collection. Edward Strickland has asked Zorn if there is "any relationship between 'Cartoon Trades' and cartoons, which you've mentioned as being another big influence?" to which Zorn replies, "No. 'Cartoon Trades' just means one player plays one sound and passes it to another player" (Strickland, *American Composers*, 136). Elsewhere, Zorn refers to the "cartoon idea" simply as "an ordering of events that are very different from one another—like the cartoon trades in *Cobra*" (Gagne, *Soundpieces 2*, 514).

22. Kevin Whitehead refers to the performance of "Ordered Cartoon Trades" as a type of "round-robin" (Whitehead, "A Field Guide to *Cobra*," 47).

23. According to Zorn's handwritten directions included on Drury's notes (personal collection), once the Δ call is made, players who aren't currently playing raise their hands.

Players currently playing choose any of these other performers at which point they lower their hands and prepare to play the same music/sounds/events once the Δ downbeat is lowered.

24. Strickland, *American Composers*, 136–37. Also see the discussion of the role of guerillas in Whitehead, “A Field Guide to *Cobra*,” 48.

25. From Stephen Drury’s notes to *Cobra*, personal collection.

26. Downbeats that occur during Operation 2 do not count as part of these seven downbeats. According to Zorn’s handwritten directions that appear on Drury’s notes, “after a successfully completed operation [Fist-1, -2, or -3] the count starts over.”

27. It is not clear from the materials I have relating to *Cobra* how a spy is identified. Does a non-guerilla squad performer who wishes to be a spy identify him- or herself to the prompter? If so, how? Does the prompter choose a spy? If so, how does the prompter let that person know that he or she is a spy? Can the prompter be the spy?

28. From Stephen Drury’s notes to *Cobra*, personal collection.

29. Zorn describing *Cobra* in Gagne, *Soundpieces 2*, 515.

30. Edward Strickland has described Zorn’s game pieces as “admirably democratic or quasi-anarchic schemata” (Strickland, *American Composers*, 126).

31. Zorn, “The Game Pieces,” 197.

32. Ann McCutchan, *The Muse That Sings: Composers Speak about the Creative Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 164.

33. Zorn, “The Game Pieces,” 197.

34. *Ibid.*, 198; emphasis in original.

35. Transcribed from Derek Bailey’s *On the Edge* documentary on improvisation (the quoted excerpt from Part 1—“Passing It On”—can be heard at 25:55–27:16). A slightly different transcription of this same excerpt appears in Bailey, *Improvisation*, 78. Zorn refers to *Cobra* as a “psychodrama” in a number of interviews. See Duckworth, *Talking Music*, 462; Gagne, *Soundpieces 2*, 515; Lange, “Der Architekt der Spiele,” 35; Solothurnmann, “New Sounds from the Lower East Side,” 36.

36. Zorn, quoted in Strickland, *American Composers*, 135.

37. Strickland, *American Composers*, 135.

38. *Ibid.*, 134.

39. In addition to the commercially available recordings, a number of noncommercial (i.e., “bootleg”) recordings of various performances of *Cobra* are also available.

40. The original double-LP has been reissued as John Zorn, *Cobra*, HatHut Records, hatOLOGY 2–580 (2002). In 1985 a cassette accompanying the German magazine *Bad Alchemy* included excerpts of *Cobra* from a live performance led by Zorn at the Moers Festival from May 25, 1985. The first track on side A of the cassette is labeled “Cobra, Exercise Nr. 1.”

41. John Zorn, *John Zorn’s Cobra: Tokyo Operations ’94*, Avant AVAN 049 (1995). Before founding Tzadik in 1995, Zorn curated the Avant record label (an imprint of DIW, a Japanese label) from 1992 until 1995. John Zorn, *John Zorn’s Cobra: Live at the Knitting Factory*, Knitting Factory Works, KFW 124 (1995). The fourteen performances of *Cobra* on this release are drawn from various live performances at the Knitting Factory in 1992.

42. While Zorn plays saxophone on the Knitting Factory release, this is the only commercially available recording of the work that does not feature Zorn as the prompter and/or receives production credit. Anthony Coleman and Norman Yamada are listed as producers while club-owner Michael Dorf is identified as executive producer.

43. Mandel, *Future Jazz*, 173; emphasis in original.

44. Gagne, *Soundpieces 2*, 521–22.

45. Strickland, *American Composers*, 133.

46. Originally from Lange, “John Zorn: What’s in a Name?,” *Fi 2*, no. 1 (January/February 1997): 142–45; available online at <http://www.jazzhouse.org/library/?read=lange1>.

47. The titles given to the six performances of *Cobra* included on *Tokyo Operations '94* are from the Japanese Rukuyō calendar that signify the fortune/luck of a particular day.

48. The titles of all of the versions of *Cobra* on the Tzadik release are all locations in Indonesia.

49. Zorn, quoted in Bailey, *Improvisation*, 76.

50. Zorn, quoted in Mandel, *Future Jazz*, 170–71; emphasis in original. Although Zorn is not included in the discussion, the idea of a “maverick” tradition in American music is discussed in Michael Broyles, *Mavericks and Other Traditions in American Music* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004). More recently, I have described Zorn in relation to a “tradition of transgression.” See my *John Zorn: Tradition and Transgression* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

51. Zorn, “The Game Pieces,” 196. Zorn provides a similar list (expressed in very similar language) in Gagne, *Soundpieces* 2, 517. In addition to composers such as Brown, Cage, and Cardew, Zorn also cites Christian Wolff and the composers/improvisers affiliated with the MEV group (Musica Elettronica Viva) such as Frederic Rzewski, Alvin Curran, and Richard Teitelbaum.

52. Zorn, “The Game Pieces,” 199. Zorn also mentions Stockhausen's *Plus-Minus* in Derek Bailey's *On the Edge* documentary; *Kurzwellen* is identified in Solothurnmann, “New Sounds from the Lower East Side,” 32. Brown's *Available Forms* is cited in Duckworth, *Talking Music*, 463; the works by Kagel are mentioned in Gagne, *Soundpieces* 2, 516, and Lange, “Der Architekt der Spiele,” 35–36. Zorn discusses the influence of Kagel in more detail in Ruggero Bianchi, “Incontro con John Zorn: New York, 19 marzo 1979,” in *John Zorn. Sonora: Itinerari Oltre Il Suono*, ed. Carla Chiti, Walter Rovere, and John Zorn (San Giovanni Valdarano: Materiali Sonori, 1998), 108–9.

53. George Lewis has convincingly demonstrated how most press accounts of Zorn and other contemporary composers/improvisers active on New York's Lower East Side in the 1970s and 1980s (including Shelley Hirsch, Fred Frith, Eugene Chadbourne, Elliott Sharp, Wayne Horvitz, Anthony Coleman, and many others) would often connect their compositional intentions/aesthetics to a pan-European tradition. Such a lineage, Lewis has argued, privileges a white, avant-garde tradition over and against a tradition represented by a number of jazz and experimental composers and improvisers that is predominately black (and American). See George Lewis, “Afterword to ‘Improvised Music After 1950’: The Changing Same,” in *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, ed. Daniel Fischlein and Ajay Heble (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 163–72.

54. Strickland, *American Composers*, 138.

55. Gagne, *Soundpieces* 2, 511. On Zorn's time in St. Louis and his introduction to these and other artists, see Mandel, *Future Jazz*, 171; Duckworth, *Talking Music*, 452–53; McCutchan, *The Muse That Sings*, 162. See also Solothurnmann, “New Sounds from the Lower East Side,” 32; Watrous, “John Zorn,” 19; David Ilic, “John Zorn: The Art of Noise,” *Wire* (September 1986): 31; Gene Santoro, “Music: John Zorn,” *The Nation* 246, no. 4 (Jan. 30, 1988): 138; Graham Lock, “Hard Core Zorn,” *Wire* (March 1989): 36. Zorn discusses many of his early influences and his time in the American Midwest in the first installment of a four-part documentary originally broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on July 1, 2000 (available in many music-trading circles).

56. McCutchan, *The Muse That Sings*, 164.

57. *Ibid.*, 163. See also Duckworth, *Talking Music*, 460–61.

58. Zorn, “The Game Pieces,” 199; emphasis in original.

59. This analogy resonates, I believe, with Zorn's oft-quoted remark from the score to *Pool* that his “concern is not so much with how things SOUND as with how things WORK.” Reproduced in the liner notes to John Zorn, *Pool*, Tzadik TZ 7316–3 (2000).

60. Mandel, *Future Jazz*, 172.

61. *Ibid.*

62. Until about 1983 (with the game pieces *Darts* and *Rugby*), all of Zorn's game pieces took their titles from sports. Edward Strickland has asked Zorn about possible "relationship[s] between the [actual] sport archery and the composition" to which Zorn answered how "there's no relationship specifically. The pieces have game structures but not those of the games in the titles. I tried to pick games that had names that had another meaning. Architectural archery, a pool of water, a snake" (Strickland, *American Composers*, 134). See also Watrous, "John Zorn," 21.

63. Duckworth, *Talking Music*, 460; Lange, "Der Architekt der Spiele," 34.

64. Zorn, "The Game Pieces," 200. In this same interview, Zorn relates his concept of the timeline to works and practices developed by Stockhausen as well as Earle Brown's "open form" pieces.

65. Zorn, "The Game Pieces," 199. In this interview, Zorn dates *Lacrosse* from 1976. According to Gagne (Gagne, *Soundpieces 2*, 535) and the information included on John Zorn, *Lacrosse*, Tzadik TZ 7316-1 (1997), the work is from 1977. Whatever the actual date of composition may be, Zorn has identified *Lacrosse* as his first game piece (Gagne, *Soundpieces 2*, 533).

66. Duckworth, *Talking Music*, 460.

67. Liner notes to *Lacrosse*. Ackley performed on the earliest recording of *Lacrosse*—the so-called "Twins Version" included on disc 2 of the Tzadik release—from June of 1977.

68. Which is just one way of saying that events performed as part of "Trades" can be short, long, or anywhere in between as opposed to "Cartoon Trades" where they *must* be short. On the topic of lengths of events, Zorn has described how on *Curling*—a game piece also from 1977—the "improvisational language was restricted to only to long tones of varying lengths, focusing in on the 'micro differences' in vibrato and intonation" (Zorn, liner notes to *Lacrosse*).

69. As seen on the Tzadik release of *Lacrosse*, the "Twins Version" involved only four players while the version from June 1978 (and that was released on the Parachute label) utilized six performers.

70. McCutchan, *The Muse That Sings*, 163.

71. See the liner notes to the Tzadik release of *Pool*.

72. Zorn, liner notes to *Pool*. On Zorn's fascination with block designs (often linked to Stravinsky and cartoon soundtracks), see Lange, "Der Architekt der Spiele," 37; Mandel, *Future Jazz*, 170; Strickland, *American Composers*, 127-28.

73. See Zorn's explanation in the liner notes to John Zorn, *Archery*, Tzadik TZ7316-4 (1997). Along with his explanations, this recording also includes (nearly microscopic) reproductions of the "score" to *Archery*, fifteen pages of sketches relating to the piece, and a guide relating the recording to the information included on the score.

74. John Zorn, *Locus Solus*, Tzadik TZ 7303 (1997). *Locus Solus* was originally released as a double-LP on the Rift label (Rift 007, 1983). Along with Zorn, this recording also includes Ikue Mori (drums) and Arto Lindsay (guitar and vocals), both from the seminal New York "No Wave" band DNA, turntablist Christian Marclay, vocalist Peter Blegvad, and drummer Anton Fier (Pere Ube, the Lounge Lizards), and others. On the *Locus Solus* project, see Carla Chiti, "John Zorn," in *John Zorn*, ed. Chiti, Rovere, and Zorn, 14-17.

75. Some of the hand cues associated with *Locus Solus* can be traced back to early game pieces such as, for instance, the "pip" downbeats in *Hockey* where everyone in the ensemble plays a short, single event. (Say it out loud—"pip.") See Anthony Coleman's comments in the liner notes to John Zorn, *The Parachute Years, 1977-1980*, Tzadik TZ 7316-7 (1997).

76. Zorn, "The Game Pieces," 199.

77. *Ibid.*, 200. Zorn often uses an analogy suggestive of toggle switches when describing his post-timeline game pieces. Speaking of *Cobra*, for instance, Zorn has referred to the

piece as a "series of on/off switches, really; when to play and when not to play. But it's very complex, like a computer" (Duckworth, *Talking Music*, 460).

78. Mandel, *Future Jazz*, 172.

79. Zorn, "The Game Pieces," 200.

80. Strickland, *American Composers*, 137.

81. Liner notes to John Zorn, *Xu Feng*.

82. Zorn, "The Game Pieces," 200.

83. The following information related to *Bézique* is drawn from the score and Stephen Drury's explanatory notes for the piece (personal collection). Astute readers will realize that with *Bézique* (a card game) Zorn abandons the practice of naming his game pieces after Chinese actresses (although there is "Chinese" version of the game).

84. More compact examples of the genre/style-hopping strategies associated with *Bézique* can be heard in many of the "hardcore miniatures" written for Zorn's Naked City project. See, for instance, the tracks on *Torture Garden* included on *Naked City, Black Box*, Tzadik TZ 7812-2 (1996). Although *Torture Garden* was originally released in 1990, most of the tracks that appear on this record were written in 1989, the same year Zorn created *Bézique*. Two of these "hardcore miniatures"—"Speedfreaks" and "Osaka Bondage"—are examined in Brackett, *John Zorn*, 24–29.

85. Liner notes to John Zorn, *Spillane*, Elektra/Nonesuch 9 79172-2 (1987). See also Duckworth, *Talking Music*, 468. In this quote, Zorn refers to the 1985 film *Year of the Dragon*, directed by Michael Cimino and starring Mickey Rourke.

86. On *Spillane*, Susan McClary notes that it is "as though we are listening to the soundtrack of a film that doesn't—but easily could—exist." See McClary, *Conventional Wisdom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 146–47. See also Eric Dries, "Postmodern Narrative and John Zorn's *Spillane*," *Contemporary Music Forum*, Proceedings of the Bowling Green State University New Music and Arts Festivals 14 and 15, vols. 5–6 (1993–94): 23–28.

87. Strickland, *American Composers*, 131.

88. These works are also related in that they have some sort of narrative structure built into their design: the "plot" of *Spillane* and the text of *Forbidden Fruit*.

89. On *Carny*, see Tom Service, "Playing a New Game of Analysis: John Zorn's *Carny*, Autonomy, and Postmodernism," *BPM Online* (June 2002): <http://www.bpmonline.org.uk/bpm5-playing.html>; Stephen Drury, "A View from the Piano Bench or Playing John Zorn's *Carny* for Fun and Profit," *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 194–201.

90. This description of the work comes from conversations I had with the composer. Zorn discusses aspects of *Cat O' Nine Tails* in Duckworth, *Talking Music*, 473–74. In this conversation, Zorn collapses the blocks of noise and sound improvisation into blocks of "improvisation." In this same interview, Duckworth appears to have misheard Zorn as he writes that there are only sixteen—and not sixty—sections.