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To cite this article: Ryan Dohoney (2019) 'Élan Vital ... and How to Fake it': Morton Feldman and Merle Marsicano's Vernacular Metaphysics, *Contemporary Music Review*, 38:3-4, 229-246, DOI: [10.1080/07494467.2019.1596632](https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2019.1596632)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2019.1596632>



Published online: 11 Apr 2019.



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# ‘Élan Vital ... and How to Fake it’: Morton Feldman and Merle Marsicano’s Vernacular Metaphysics

Ryan Dohoney 

*Scholars have explored the relationship between US experimentalism and vitalist philosophy largely through John Cage’s reception of Henri Bergson. Recent scholarship has shown the importance of vitalism to the wider New York School. Evidence from Feldman’s archive suggests he too absorbed Bergsonian philosophy. Feldman signalled this when he wrote of ‘Henri Bergson’s élan vital ... and how to fake it’ in his unpublished lectures, New York Style. He borrows vitalist vocabulary for piece titles (Extensions and Durations) and, in an early sketchbook, describes his open-form Intermission 6 as ‘an outline of becoming’. These interests are also apparent in his collaborations. His nearly-lost dance piece Figure of Memory, written for choreographer Merle Marsicano, is Feldman’s only other open form piece (along with Intermission 6). Marsicano employed similar vitalist language to Feldman and applied it to her dance. Feldman’s collaboration with Marsicano signals a shared vernacular metaphysics mingling Bergsonism, self-abnegation, and aesthetic form.*

*Keywords:* Morton Feldman; élan vital; vitalism; Bergson; Intermission 6; Figure of Memory; Merle Marsicano

In the years that I have been working with the Morton Feldman Collection at the Paul Sacher Stiftung, I have grown attached to particular objects. Those I am most fond of provide portentous clues to Feldman’s musical world but to some degree remain recalcitrant to investigation. One such artefact is a notebook titled ‘Four Lectures: New York Style’ (Feldman 1968) containing drafts and anecdotes for a series of talks given at the New York Studio School in the 1967–68 academic year. The content of the lectures ranges widely, and Feldman references Claude Debussy, psychoanalysis, Zionism, Søren Kierkegaard, the Marquis de Sade, Pierre Boulez,

Luciano Berio, John Cage, and Norman O. Brown et al. The lectures develop the themes of artistic anxiety and existentialist thinking explored in Feldman's published writing. Other traces evince concurrent, if somewhat mysterious, intellectual commitments. At the beginning of the notebook we find a list of phrases that appear to be mnemonic devices for stories Feldman might tell during his talks. Some are elaborated in the pages that follow, others not. Among these statements is the inspiration for my title: 'Henri Bergson's *élan vital* ... and how to fake it'. Feldman leaves the phrase largely undeveloped, save as an aside from a discussion of feeling and fantasy couched in largely Freudian terms. There he writes:

Because the overall feeling of art was the belief in the immortality of its soul or the Jewish equivalent which is really Bergson's *élan vital*. The creative ghost that reappears in every age—not unlike the ancient Hebrew myth that as long as Jews survive—there will always be 10 just men ... who carry on the Law. (Feldman 1968, n.p.)

Feldman interprets *élan vital* as a generative force. It is a 'creative ghost' ensuring the continuity of art and the survival of the world. In a typical rhetorical gesture, he finds an analogy for artistic practice in a religious idea likened to metaphysical concept. Bergson's vitalism is placed in dialogue with a Jewish parable—the story of the ten just men whose righteousness sustains humanity.<sup>1</sup> This passage from 'Four Lectures' betrays Feldman's at least glancing familiarity with the philosophy of Bergson. I have found no earlier named reference to the philosopher in any of Feldman's writings, published or unpublished.<sup>2</sup> Sebastian Claren has cautioned against making too much of Bergson's role in Feldman's thinking. He notes that,

Although a certain correspondence between Bergson's train of thought and Feldman's purpose is obvious, it would go too far to apply Bergson's theory to Feldman's understanding of the instrumental image, especially since Bergson's image plays only a subordinate role as mediator between reality and perception. (Claren 2000, 119)<sup>3</sup>

My goal is not to apply Bergson's vitalist philosophy to Feldman's musicality directly, but to approach vitalism comparatively as part of the musician's community of friends and collaborators. Claren is certainly correct that attempting the former would shoe-horn Feldman's idiosyncratic metaphysics into something far too limiting, or expect him to maintain a philosophical consistency to which he did not aspire. Yet, Bergson's presence in *New York Style* and the evocation of *élan vital* sparked my interest in exploring vitalist discourse in Feldman's work prior to 1967. In light of Branden Joseph's studies of John Cage's reception of Bergson in the 1950s (Joseph 2003, 2016), it seemed plausible to consider the ways in which Feldman also drew upon Bergson specifically and vitalist metaphysics more generally. Joseph has made a strong claim on the importance of Bergson to Cage, arguing that 'Cage's mature understanding of silence as formulated in [1951] can be related to (if it did not, in fact, derive from) Bergson's critique of non-being as expressed in *Creative Evolution*'

(Joseph 2016, 146). No such causal claim can be made for Bergson's presence in Feldman's thought. We do find circumstantial evidence of his awareness of Bergson in the titles of various composition series: *Extensions* from the early 1950s and the *Durations* series from 1959 to 1961. Both 'extension' and 'duration' are fundamental concepts in Bergson's *Time and Free Will* (Bergson 1910).

In the wake of Joseph's Bergsonian reading of Cage, there has been a broader reconsideration of vitalism's importance to the intellectual history of New York School modernism.<sup>4</sup> Art historians including Ellen Landau (2007), Jonathan Katz (2007), and Valerie Hellstein (2014) have shown that Cage's interest in vitalism was more the rule than the exception among the interdisciplinary community of the Eighth Street Artists Club. Katz notes that, 'Vitalism . . . was one of many competing early-twentieth-century attempts to detect deep structuring first principles, the array of invisible forces that shape and determine all creation. . . . All living things possess a life force that can be sensed intuitively'. He also notes that it was 'less a systematic philosophy than grab bag metaphysics' (2007, 61). More pointedly, Hellstein argues that Zen, Transcendentalism, Bergsonism, et al. comprised a sensibility held in common by figures as supposedly divergent as Harold Rosenberg and John Cage:

Vitalism, although popular in the early part of the twentieth century, diminished as an influential discourse after 1930, but after World War II, with the disclosure of the horrors of the Holocaust, the building of atomic weaponry, and the mass destruction caused by two atomic bombs, many began to feel acutely that individuals were increasingly objectified. Vitalism's acknowledgment of a pervading, connecting rhythm, an *élan vital* in Henri Bergson's terms, throughout all of existence that cannot be reduced to mechanistic or chemical explanation made it particularly attractive at this moment, offering an alternative worldview in which relatedness and connectivity are as fundamental as individual autonomy. (Hellstein 2014, 60)

Bergson's immense impact in the U.S. in the early years of the twentieth century was felt both in elite intellectual publics and popular culture (Quirk 1990). His concepts of becoming and creativity were profoundly influential on the British-born Harvard professor Alfred North Whitehead who developed a metaphysics of creative novelty in his process philosophy (Whitehead [1929] 1978). Whitehead's importance to New York School modernism is hardly inconsequential (Belgrad 1998, 120–141); Robert Motherwell studied with Whitehead at Harvard and credited his teacher—as well as Bergson—with a powerful impact on his painting and aesthetic theories (Milz 2016). Feldman was friends with Motherwell, but the case for any transmission of these ideas between them must remain speculative at present. Feldman does reference Whitehead in the 1980s (Feldman 2005b, 137, 144), but it is difficult to say when he first read him. It is plausible that Motherwell mediated these ideas in the 1950s; the tenor of Feldman's language suggests some familiarity with the spirit if not the letter of Whitehead's metaphysics.

Hellstein, Katz, and Landau recognise a communal vitalism suffusing the New York avant-garde which suggests that sharp distinctions between Cagean indeterminacy and

abstract expressionism may be less pronounced than scholars such as Joseph and Caroline Jones (1993) have argued. I do not deny such distinctions were salient from the 1960s on, especially with the turn in Cage's work towards theatre and anarchy. Yet, such distinctions cannot be made on the grounds of one's supposed fealty to Bergson. Indeed, as Hellstein notes, if one turns towards the matter of artistic experience—particularly the de-centred, relational encounters proffered by Cage, Feldman, and Abstract Expressionist painting—one finds a remarkably similar mode of reception. Recovering Feldman's vitalist interests and the broader circulation of such ideals among his friends may go a long way to sharpening our understanding of the shared metaphysics of this community, and the socio-political situation of the 1950s New York art world.

In what follows, I home in on a particular rarity in Feldman's oeuvre—his use of open-form notation in which performers craft the continuity of a performance from a cluster of small gestures or musical fragments. There are only two extant works in such notation—the much-discussed *Intermission 6* (1952) and the little-known *Figure of Memory* (1954) written for the dancer-choreographer Merle Marsicano (1903–1983) which accompanied her solo dance of the same name. I will consider the annotations that accompany Feldman's first version of *Intermission 6* in his sketchbook from 1952 to 1953, which attest to his absorption of vitalist ideas from the arts and philosophy. I will then explore Feldman's collaboration with Marsicano on *Figure of Memory*. Marsicano herself developed through dance the vitalist concerns of the New York School, and echoed many of Feldman's values. Their shared sentiments offer evidence of a vernacular metaphysics circulating among their friends. By vernacular metaphysics, I mean the heterodox and pragmatic development of concepts through artistic practice—a kind of loose talk used for self-understanding. The resonances of Feldman and Marsicano's vitalism extended into the broader milieu of the Eighth Street Artists Club, especially in the genre of the artist film (Jones 1996). I will conclude by briefly noting that films such as Herbert Matter's *Works of Calder*, Hans Namuth's *Jackson Pollock Painting*, and Nathan Boxer's *Sculpture by Lipton* thematised the connectedness of abstract gesture (sound, paint, movement) to natural, energetic forces as representation of *élan vital*. It is no coincidence that these films were sound-tracked by Feldman (for *Pollock* and *Lipton*) and Cage (for *Calder*). These events suggest that by 1954 Feldman was well-versed in vitalist ideas and was actively assimilating them into his musical aesthetics. Moreover, his music was by then already iconic of the sound of the communal vitalism shared by New York School modernism and bodied forth in Marsicano's dance.

### '... Just an Outline of Becoming': *Intermission 6*

Besides 'Four Lectures: New York Style', another evocative object within the Sacher's Feldman collection has long fascinated me. It is a sketchbook (designated *Skizzenbuch 3*) containing a number of works, drafts, and writings from mid-1951 through 1953. These include the soundtrack score for Hans Namuth's *Jackson Pollock Painting*,

notations for the graph score *Marginal Intersection*, bits of *Extensions 1, 3, and 4*, incidental music for a production of Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, and the first version of *Intermission 6*.<sup>5</sup> *Skizzenbuch 3* is among the earliest sources of Feldman's writing about his own music. A contemporaneous source is the statement Henry Cowell published in his 'Current Chronicle' (Cowell 1952) which was republished in *trans/formation* that same year (Feldman et al. 1952). *Skizzenbuch 3* offers a number of insights into Feldman's early years of friendship with Cage as well as his participation in the Eighth Street Artists Club. It also provides evidence for his early involvement with dance as we find references to collaborations with Katherine Litz and Jean Erdman (Feldman, 1953).<sup>6</sup> As a document of his interdisciplinary community, it is invaluable, showing us the range of his involvement across the arts and the interpenetration of each discipline into others by means of aesthetics and friendship.

Feldman shades his writings in *Skizzenbuch 3* with a vitalist vocabulary shared by Cage, Pollock, Lipton, Marsicano, and Rosenberg, and many others. Feldman captures this in a note from 10 March 1953:

Yet one could think of each sound as a mov[emen]t of sensibility and in a Proustian way investigate its countless juxtapositions for experience. But to see 'things as they are' requires a vision of style which transcends detail and becomes the now moment, the experience rather than the fruits of experience. This is so much that conditions and shapes ourselves. My desire is to find what in myself can recreate myself as to alienation in my art as well as life. One thing [is] certain. I must move, move. I must act regardless the action. Live regardless the living. (Feldman, 1953. n.p.)

He conveys an energetic urgency—'I must move, move'—and aspires to 'live regardless the living'. Two literary references tie Feldman's desire to vitalist matters. First, he imagines sound as 'a movement of sensibility' via the excavation of memory performed by Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Feldman's desire to see 'things as they are' points up an anti-conceptualist and an anti-representational impulse that gets to the truth of things by dissolving illusion. His quotation marks around 'things as they are' indicate Feldman was borrowing the line. Gertrude Stein's novel of the same name (published in 1950) is one possible source. However, Wallace Stevens's 'Man with the Blue Guitar' is somewhat more likely, given the relatively limited circulation of the Stein novel at the time. In Stevens's poem, his refrain insists upon a renewed attention to the world and 'the rhapsody of things as they are' (Stevens 1937, 69).<sup>7</sup>

Each of these writers (Proust, Stein, Stevens) was impacted by turn of the century vitalism emergent in the nineteenth century via Bergson, Whitehead, and Stein's teacher William James. Proust drew on Bergson's philosophy of memory (Gunter 2013) while Stein's anti-representational aesthetics were inflected by her studies in psychology and automatic writing with James (Meyer 2001). Stevens was himself a devotee of Bergson (Quirk 1990, 189–91).

As Susanne K. Langer noted, Bergson's 'nearness to the problems of art has made him pre-eminently the artists' philosopher' (1953, 114). Bergson himself—in 'The

Perception of Change’—argued that artists had a special role in expanding our perceptions of reality:

It will be said that this enlarging is impossible. How can one ask the eyes of the body, or those of the mind, to see more than they see? Our attention can increase precision, clarify and intensify; it cannot bring forth in the field of perception what was not there in the first place. That’s the objection.—It is refuted in my opinion by experience. For hundreds of years, in fact, there have been men whose function has been precisely to see and to make us see what we do not naturally perceive. They are the artists.

What is the aim of art if not to show us, in nature and in the mind, outside of us and within us, things which did not explicitly strike our senses and our consciousness? ([1946] 2007, 133–134)

Bergson praises artists and glorifies their expansion of our capacities for feeling. This resonates with Feldman, who conceived of sound as emotionally energetic—a ‘movement of sensibility’ akin to Proust’s affective and involuntary memory. This takes on a more Bergsonian sheen when Feldman distinguishes between ‘experience’ and the ‘fruits of experience’ that remain in the wake of an authentic encounter with the absolute. Such encounters allow us to experience things—sounds—as they are. Feldman describes this as ‘the transcendence of detail’ which ‘becomes the now moment’. His valorisation of immediacy shares more than a superficial relationship to Bergson’s notion of experience that we find in *Creative Evolution*:

Let us then concentrate attention on that which we have that is at the same time the most removed from externality and the least penetrated with intellectuality. Let us seek, in the depths of our experience, the point where we feel ourselves most intimately within our own life. It is into pure duration that we then plunge back, a duration in which the past, always moving on, is swelling unceasingly with a present that is absolutely new. But, at the same time, we feel the spring of our will strained to its utmost limit. We must, by a strong recoil of our personality on itself, gather up our past which is slipping away in order to thrust it, compact and undivided, into a present which it will create by entering. Rare indeed are the moments when we are self-possessed to this extent: it is then that our actions are truly free. (1941, 218–219)

The movement into the ‘now moment’ as Feldman calls it echoes Bergson’s plunge into ‘pure duration’ in which we overcome alienation and achieve freedom. The artists films on Pollock, Calder, and Lipton, for which Feldman and Cage composed music, each dramatised the act of creation and situated it within such a vitalist imaginary. Feldman’s comments follow on his work on Namuth’s Pollock film in 1951 (also in *Skizzenbuch 3*) and show him developing a feeling for sound in terms of the vitalism coursing through his community.

Most salient to my argument is the co-presence in *Skizzenbuch 3* of the piano piece *Intermission 6* with statements quoted above (Figure 1). We are most familiar with the version published in 1963 by Edition Peters, which first appeared in the counterculture magazine *Kulchur*. The most recent engraved edition by Edition Peters gives the date of



composition as 1953, though I am in agreement with Alistair Nobel (2013, 111–13) that 1952 is the correct year based on its place between other dateable works in the sketchbook. *Intermission 6* is one of two examples of Feldman's experimentation with 'open form' or 'mobile' notation, versions of which Cage, Earle Brown, Pierre Boulez, and Karlheinz Stockhausen also developed in the 1950s. In the version published in 1963 by Edition Peters, as well as in the little magazine *Kulchur*, a pianist is confronted with a page sparsely covered with fragments of notation. <sup>8</sup> She is free to move between any of the fragments and improvise the continuity of the piece. There are no time constraints, and a performance can continue as long as desired.

Feldman's spatialised conception of the piece is a far cry from its original notation in *Skizzenbuch 3* as well as the second iteration held in the Tudor archive at the Getty. Most interesting is the instruction that accompanies the notation: 'THIS PIECE IS



**Figure 1** Morton Feldman, *Intermission 6*, first version. *Skizzenbuch 3*. Morton Feldman Collection. Paul Sacher Stiftung. Used by permission.



JUST THE OUTLINES OF BECOMING. IT CAN START ANYWHERE, GO ANYWHERE WITHIN THESE REFERENCES OF SOUNDS AND MAY BE ANY LENGTH' (Feldman 1953, n.p.) (Figure 2).

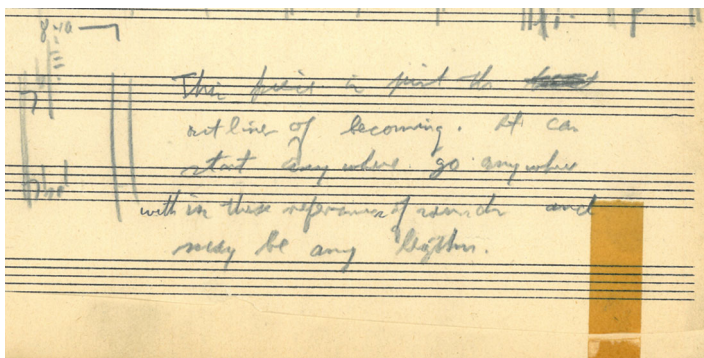
A further direction instructs performers to 'hold each measure until completely inaudible'. None of the previous commentary on this piece has noted the particular metaphysical charge of Feldman's language. To call this notation 'just the outline of becoming' suggests that the performance would be becoming itself. Thus, Feldman's attempt to fake *élan vital*. Furthermore, the anti-conceptualism foundational to Bergson's philosophy and—as Kevin Volans (2014) insists—to Feldman's musical practice is evident only a few pages following *Intermission 6* where we find Feldman writing:

Time as time; texture as time; texture as a plastic image creating itself only in execution. The happening in time is the reality. Space in music is Illusion. An image created by intuitive relationships defining itself in all degradation of this Illusion. Starve the Illusion and feed the energy that made it visible will then become an experience as yet unknown to me. (Feldman 1953, n.p.)

Intuition is a method that allows him to 'starve' the illusionary power of spatial representation in music in favour of an energetic surge that will produce new, unknown experiences. What we can glean from Feldman's thinking documented in *Skizzenbuch 3* is that, at least in part, the open-form indeterminacy of *Intermission 6* was a way of experimenting with becoming. This novel notation might make audible his burgeoning metaphysics of sound itself.

### 'My person is a protean being': *Figure of Memory*

Little more than a year after its composition, Feldman returned to a variation of its open-form notation with the piano solo *Figure of Memory*. It was written for dancer-choreographer Merle Marsicano (1903–1983) and premiered on 3 April 1954 with David Tudor at the piano.<sup>9</sup> In Feldman's lifetime, *Figure of Memory* was



**Figure 2** Morton Feldman, *Intermission 6*, first version. (detail of performance instructions). Morton Feldman Collection. Paul Sacher Stiftung. Used by permission.

performed extensively, likely more than *Intermission 6*. Marsicano performed it regularly for twenty-five years, first with Tudor and then with pianist Edwin Hymovitz. We have Hymovitz to thank for a reconstruction of the score which Marsicano had lost by 1976. Hymovitz was able to reproduce it from memory and gave a photocopy of it to the Sacher Foundation, along with a number of materials related to Marsicano's career.<sup>10</sup> Tragically, her husband Nicholas Marsicano threw out the vast majority of her archive after her death.

Marsicano—more than even Merce Cunningham—should be credited as Feldman's most important choreographic collaborator. His music was used for at least four of her dances, and was included in many recitals she gave from the 1950s through the 1970s. She too was deeply enmeshed within the broader community of New York School modernists and present at the Eight Street Artists Club. Her work with Martha Graham made her a colleague of Jean Erdman and Merce Cunningham. Her husband was a painter and member of the Club (Pavia 2007) and she encountered Feldman in this community of painters, dancers, and musicians (Figure 3).

Marsicano was born in Philadelphia, and began her dance training in ballet with Ethel Philips and Mikhail Mordkin. She trained in Spanish dance with Angel Cansino. She received a two-year fellowship to study with Martha Graham and Louis Horst at the Neighbourhood Playhouse. Her work with Graham put her in contact with Jean



**Figure 3** Merle Marsicano. Photographer unknown. Edwin Hymovitz Collection. Paul Sacher Stiftung. Used by permission.

Erdman and Merce Cunningham, and these relationships led to her musical collaborations with Feldman as well as with Cage. She produced at least three dances in collaboration with Feldman—*Three Dances* (1952), *Figure of Memory* and *Dance Suite for Merle Marsicano* (1963). Marsicano also danced other pieces by Feldman that were not written specifically for her, such as *Christian Wolff in Cambridge* and *Chorus and Instruments II*. Recordings of both accompanied the dance *Fragment for a Greek Tragedy* in 1979. It had previously been danced to music by Cage.<sup>11</sup> Of these dance scores, *Figure of Memory* was the most frequently performed and best received by critics.<sup>12</sup>

Marsicano gave her premiere New York recital on 17 February 1952 with a programme that included Feldman's *Three Dances* for piano as well as dances with the music of Cage, Stefan Wolpe, and Jerry Petersen.<sup>13</sup> David Tudor played piano. She described her conception of dance a few years later:

By the very nature of the dance, as differentiated from any of the plastic arts, each performance recapitulates the act of creation. The concept is alive and working and confronts one as a living presence. The dance itself... confronts one as a living thing, with the mental concept and the vibrant actuality merged into one image. How could we say what living thing the dance symbolizes? (Marsicano 1957a, 1)

Marsicano here adopts a vitalist vocabulary. Through the dance, she activates living energy and recognises the powerful agency of movement itself. She insists upon prolonging discovery through 'the elasticity of a dance's duration' (Marsicano 1957b, 1). This is also a form of anti-conceptualism. One could also interpret her understanding of durational elasticity as a movement-based conception of the open-form approach Feldman took in *Intermission 6* and *Figure of Memory*. It certainly calls to mind the 'elastic form' Cowell developed in his collaborations with Graham, and suggests that the elder composer's own notational invention may have played some part in Feldman's conception of *Figure of Memory* (Figure 4).

Of *Figure of Memory*, dance critic Don McDonagh wrote:

[Marsicano's] feet are in constant motion, carrying her to all corners in her search. Her hands flicker momentarily, and then she will suddenly stretch her arms straight out, but the object of her search remains beyond her grasp. The feeling evoked is that of perennial searching without violent anxiety. ... One does not detect the familiar beginning, middle, and end development of the dance. It always seems to have been there and, when it ceases, it does not finish with a sense of resolve. It just trails away. One is not concerned with the individual moments of the dance but more with the over-all web that enmeshes the attention. (1976, 218)

McDonagh's language evokes Clement Greenberg's conception of 'all-over' painting, in which a viewer's attention cannot settle on one area of the canvas but is continually activated by a nonhierarchical field of gestures (Greenberg [1948] 1986, 222). The immediacy of the dance's image was reinforced by Feldman's music which Hymovitz recalled:

*Figure of Memory* Morton Feldman

*sempre piano* *more expressive* (*una corda*)  
 Repeat I after 10-15 seconds, then II (10-15") then III, then I, II or III  
 in random order, always about 10-15" apart, in units of 3 or 5  
 measures, avoid even phrase lengths. Visual cues may be employed  
 but avoid 'accompanying' - figures should not begin or end with  
 sequences of dance motifs.

**Figure 4** Morton Feldman, *Figure of Memory* (reconstruction by Edwin Hymovitz). Edwin Hymovitz Collection. Paul Sacher Stiftung. Used by permission.

When we used to do FIGURE OF MEMORY in concert to live music we spent a lot of time rehearsing Feldman's spare figurations so that they came in exactly the right places, not in time but at the right time. It sounded random but wasn't at all. (1976)

Through her choice of collaborators for the recital in which *Figure of Memory* premiered, Marsicano emphasized the Eighth Street Artists Club's interdisciplinary ethos and its foundation in friendship. In addition to her collaboration with Feldman, Marsicano choreographed *Jet Pears* to a recitation of Frank O'Hara's poem 'Augustus'. The sculptor Richard Lippold, another club member and friend of both Feldman and Cage, reviewed the performance. His review provides a sense of the reflexive nature of aesthetic discourse in which ideas were generated by the artists themselves. They set the terms of reception which were confirmed by an audience of artists and friends and circulated in the public sphere. Lippold wrote:

Merle Marsicano is one of a small group of highly original dancers who, like the most experimental of today's painters, sculptors, composers, and poets, have put aside the rather tired concerns with narrative psychoanalysis, social awareness, or classically-inspired forms of the recent past. (1954, 71)

Vitalism, though unnamed, is the guiding metaphysics of her work and it shares with Feldman's own thinking a stark anti-conceptualism and anti-representational bent.

Lippold went on to make connections between Marsicano's dance and abstract painting explicit:

Some of Miss Marsicano's dances such as *Jet Pears* and *Green Song*, two group works, suggest more than a casual relationship to painting with their dependence on color and on choreography which uses individualized dancers to describe a complex space of independent, though overlapping shapes. (1954, 72)

Lippold describes a situation markedly similar to Cage's compositional values of unimpededness and interpenetration that marked most of the composer's works from the mid-1950s until the late 1970s. In Lippold's description, the tension of 'independent' yet 'overlapping' forms allows Marsicano's conception of dance merging into 'one image'. Her taught, gestic movement operates on stage in a manner similar to the new abstract painting. Indeed, Lippold presaged McDonagh's description of Marsicano's dance as an 'over-all web'. Lippold elaborated in his description of Feldman's *Three Dances*:

These are a somewhat moody group, full of a continuous flow of movements, rich in invention, always surprising, yet seldom rising or falling to either side of a rather turgid line, making a complex and rich design, like the surface of a de Kooning or Pollock painting. (1954, 72)

This pseudomorphic logic transposes the social basis of these collaborations to the level of form.

Of Marsicano's dances, Lippold singled out *Figure of Memory* for special recognition:

Of the solo dances, *Figure of Memory* is undoubtedly the richest of Marsicano's efforts. It sustains a magical quality throughout, and succeeds best in accomplishing what seems to be her intent in all her works: a convincing emotion, compactly stated with such expert abstraction that the presence of the performer is forgotten and the audience is transported by the experience of pure movement. (1954, 72)

As an experience of pure movement, Marsicano's dance was capable of overcoming symbolisation and returning to flux and flow and—much like Feldman—attempted to fake *élan vital* through the production of an abstracted, affecting image in *Intermission 6*.

Marsicano echoes the decentred, all-over experience favoured by Feldman and Cage in draft writings that eventually became her essay 'Thoughts on the Dance' which was published in the house magazine of the Eight Street Artists Club, *It is*. She writes,

I think of music as an art of untouched white upon which I must breath for my very existence, yet leave untouched, just as the music must pass through and around me without discoloring the white of my being. We must become one and yet retain the separateness of our souls. (Marsicano 1957a, 3)

This reflects to some extent Cage's dialectic of unimpededness/interpenetration but also suggests the more generalised, non-hierarchical relationship of music and dance

in the post-Graham era of the New York avant-garde. Whiteness here figures as a kind of distinctness or independence from other aspects of the performance event. She is concerned with making not faking *élan vital*, of producing an art that *is* becoming and resists being:

The dancing figures is the person and becomes in the next moment, the wind. Arrest the dancer anywhere on stage—her condition is flux. In stillness I change. And the composed shape of my figure suddenly explodes in a riot of configuration. My person is a protean being. (Marsicano 1957b, 3)

Other passages from Marsicano's unpublished writings express stronger vitalist sentiments, and emphasize notions of intuition and anti-conceptualism found in Bergson's writing:

The innocence, the irrational, the inspiration and the improvisation of a living art such as the dance are lost when we attempt to rationalise [*sic*] the construction. The consciousness makes for self-conscious questioning, to which available answers can be supplied. The art suffers from rationalization. (Marsicano 1957c, 4)

Her choreography hoped to escape such rationalising strictures of the known:

I find myself subjected to the most critical exposures of analytical sophistication in our sciences, histories, and physical probings and communications. How can we find again mysterious motivations and the innocence of no memory—reason to the point of being unreasonable? sense that makes no sense? How to blindfold my ability to construct a dance? How to render speechless the common instinct for taste? How to create a jungle, to find again the hopeless situation [in] which only a magnificent failure could be acceptable. To confuse the known! and then have to depend again upon inspiration or desperation. (Marsicano 1957c, 4–5)<sup>14</sup>

As with Feldman's desire to 'step aside to be in control' (Feldman [1966] 2000b, 26) and to compose as a dead man (Cage 1961, 37), or similarly with Cage's vast, self-disciplinary apparatus of chance composition through the I Ching, Marsicano developed an *ascetics* to get beyond her training 'in this school of contemporary taste' (Marsicano 1957c, 4). Marsicano's anti-conceptualism gives free play to her emotions beyond an intended meaning: 'I should like to feel free to allow my feelings to construct whatever shape and form they take, give them whatever image would depict most intensely so that they should stand in themselves not for or against anything' (Marsicano 1957c, 2). Marsicano's practice emerges as a kind of intuitive method that moves away from representation to the pure intensity of experience. She desired—as she said of *Figure of Memory*—'Powerful occurrence' (Marsicano 1957c, 1).<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the limited evidence of Feldman's contemporaneous writings in the early 1950s, his music played an important role in the shared vitalist sensibility found in



New York School modernism. His collaborative relationship with Marsicano is one important example, and there are further beyond it as well. Vitalism inflected a number of collaborations from the early 1950s, especially the films *Jackson Pollock Painting* by Namuth, and Nathan Boxer's *Sculpture by Lipton*, both with music by Feldman.<sup>16</sup> These films established—as had Herbert Matter's *Works of Calder* with its soundtrack by Cage—the equivalence of artistic creation with natural forces. In the words of Matter's voice-over for *Calder*, artworks and the natural world get 'mixed up' and 'dreamy'. In *Pollock* and *Lipton*, the artists and their art are surrounded by nature which is figured as a necessary source of energy. What Joseph has recognised of Cage is as much true for Feldman, Marsicano, Pollock and Lipton:

Cage did adopt Bergson's ideas of nature as flux in duration, of the role of temporality in the perpetual creation of the new, and of the interrelated functioning of intellect and memory. Like Bergson, Cage saw that to dissociate oneself from the intellect's instrumental predispositions, one had to turn away from the anthropocentric point of view and identify with nature—or, as Cage termed it, the "outside". (Joseph 2003, 53–54)

We have seen how Marsicano and Feldman developed their own ascetic procedures—the former intended to 'blindfold her ability to construct a dance'—to get out of their personal tastes and leap into the immediacy of intuition. Their community of artists developed signifiers for vitalism which operated as a 'secular metaphysics' (Katz 2007, 62). As Feldman put it, 'If I want my music to demonstrate anything, it is that "nature and human nature are one"' ([1964] 2000a, 18).

Katz gets at the vernacular quality of this shared sensibility, though he does not call it that: 'Indeed, the very casualness of Pollock's vitalism suggests that it was probably picked up third hand, less the product of direct study than of ordinary conversations among friends'.<sup>17</sup> Even if third hand, the intimate circulation of these ideas does not diminish their pervasiveness or seriousness, realised as they were through open-form compositions and imagistic dance abstractions, glimpsed in filmic experiments documenting artistic practice, and argued over at the Cedar Bar. More than through direct philosophical engagement, the vitalist sensibility of New York School modernism emerged through gossip, close listening, and extended attention to artworks. Feldman's attempts at faking *élan vital* with *Intermission 6* and his work with Marsicano on *Figure of Memory* are marginal but telling documents of the wider importance of intuitive method and its metaphysical implications. By calling Feldman's and Marsicano's vitalism a vernacular metaphysics, I want to stress the avant-garde's interpenetration with some aspects of popular culture and explore how the Bergson-craze of the early twentieth century had an afterlife in New York School modernism. It preceded the revival of the philosopher inaugurated by Gilles Deleuze's *Bergsonism* ([1966] 1988). This particular relationship between popular culture and avant-garde practices to some degree prefigures later formations of what Benjamin Piekut has called the 'vernacular avant-garde' (forthcoming) and Benjamin Lee—working on 1960s hipness—has termed 'vernacular styles' (2010, 775).

Lastly, I want to make a point on method and return briefly to my interest in those seemingly recalcitrant or mysterious objects within Feldman's archive. What I have tried to do in this essay is to make sense of some curious statements made by Feldman, and account for the resonances of latent vitalist metaphysics within his practice. These are usually drowned out by Feldman's Kierkegaardianism, Cagean indeterminacy, or reductive conceptions of abstract expressionism as gut-spilling masculine hysteria. By turning to a little-known collaboration with Marsicano, I am hoping to recover something that might account for these eccentric metaphysical references—Feldman's participation within a broader vitalist field of relations of which abstract expressionism was an important part, as was Cage. Also, my attention to marginal figures like Marsicano is meant to extend Joseph's method of 'minor history' (2008) which offers tools to rethink the post-Cage avant-garde. By extending Joseph's minoritizing historiography backwards, we can see that the social situation pertaining to Cage, Feldman, and abstract expressionism—especially in the 1950s—may be more in flux than we have previously thought.

### Acknowledgement

Thanks to Susan Manning, Michael Gallope, and Benjamin Levy for their thoughtful comments on this essay. I am also grateful to the audience at the 'Performing Indeterminacy' conference at the University of Leeds where my ideas were first presented. This essay is dedicated to Sabine Hänggi-Stampfli of the Paul Sacher Stiftung in gratitude for more than ten years of collaboration and her invaluable role in my research and writing.

### Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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### Notes

- [1] On Judaic references in Feldman's work see B. Levy (2013).
- [2] There is a later reference to Bergson's idea of cognition in the Darmstadt Lecture of 1984 (Feldman 2005a, p. 193).
- [3] 'Obwohl eine gewisse Übereinstimmung zwischen Bergsons Gedankengang und Feldmans Zielrichtung offensichtlich ist, würde es zu weit führen, Bergsons Theorie auf Feldmans Verständnis des instrumentalen Bildes zu übertragen, zumal das Bild selbst bei Bergson nur die untergeordnete Rolle eines Vermittlers zwischen Realität und Wahrnehmung spielt' (Claren 2000, 121). Translation by the author.

- [4] My use of ‘New York School modernism’ is meant to invoke the interdisciplinary community to which Feldman belonged and to reference a collective sensibility across the arts, one undergirded by friendship but also by the vernacular metaphysics of vitalism I elaborate upon herein.
- [5] On the various versions of *Intermission 6* see Nobel (2013, 111–113).
- [6] *Skizzenbuch 3* contains references to Litz’s dance ‘Thoughts out of Season’ for which Feldman wrote ‘4 1/2 min of music which can be inserted anywhere within the structure of the dance’ (Feldman 1953, n.p.). *Skizzenbuch 3* also contains a draft letter to Jean Erdman that indicates some trouble over their collaboration on the dance *Changing Woman*. On Feldman’s work with Erdman see Harrison (2011). Feldman’s music, though used in the original 1952 performance, seems to have been subsequently replaced with music by Henry Cowell. Feldman’s draft reads:

I’m writing this letter with greater sorrow not for the money involved in the transaction but neither for our relationship. It is things like this which subtly come between people and before you know it they are not speaking to each other [and] resent working together.

I don’t want this to happen to us since I enjoyed working with you so much. I’m afraid that the remainder of the money will have to stand and be sent to me as soon as you can manage it. (Feldman 1953, n.p.)

- [7] I am exceedingly grateful to William Brooks on this point.
- [8] Feldman (1963, 33).
- [9] Other scholars have consistently misdated it. John Holzapfel (1994) is off by a year and places it in 1955 (p. 340). David Cline (2016) recently hypothesised that *Figure of Memory* ‘is undated but probably contemporary with *Ixion\**’ (p. 214) which would date it to 1958.
- [10] See the Sammlung Edwin Hymovitz. Paul Sacher Stiftung. See especially, Hymovitz 1998.
- [11] See video of the performance in the Jerome Robbins Dance Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. NYPL \*MGZIDF 6468.
- [12] Biographical material gathered from an unnamed and undated grant application in the Merle Marsicano Papers in the New York Public Library Jerome Robbins Dance Division. See folder \*MGZMD 308.
- [13] See Marsicano (1952).
- [14] I have retained Marsicano’s capitalisation. ‘[in]’ is in the original typescript.
- [15] On affective formalism see Cronan (2013).
- [16] I will expand on these connections in the larger version of this chapter which will appear in my *Morton Feldman: Friendship and Mourning in the New York Avant-Garde* (Bloomsbury, forthcoming).
- [17] Katz (2007, 63).

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