12k: between two points

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1. ATTACK

K-k-k-k-k-k. Boof. Chhhhhhh. Hiss, whirr, pfing: 12k's is an onomatopoeic music. The audio equivalent of concrete poetry perhaps, where the sign (there, a letter or a word; here, a click or thud or tone) is elephantised, blown out of proportion, simultaneously stripped of reference and fraught with multivalent meaning. (Is it any coincidence that 12k founder Taylor Deupree is a graphic designer? You can almost hear the flip of a serif in 12k's grainy whoosh, or the nuzzling of kiss-kerned type in the cool brush of two bleeps.) In the releases of this Brooklyn label, notes, pulses, textures bear no immediate relation to the world around them, to a language of melody or tonal narrative, but in their careful melding of pulse and grain, they sketch an abstracted narrative of the development of several phenomena: electronic music, desktop DIY, and – especially – minimalism.

Minimalism, it seems, keeps getting starker. When Brian Eno recorded *Music for Airports* in 1979, the title encapsulated his philosophy of music-as-wallpaper – Muzak redeemed, where art music could acceptably be reduced to its use-value as aural environment, a sonic cocoon for travellers gliding on people-movers. But this new minimalism might better be called 'music for air-*locks*' – built as it is (or seems to be) from fragments of vacuum hiss, CPU hum, and eardrum pressure. Somewhere between ambient music and inaudibility, microsound – a strain of minimalist post-techno music – marks the crystallisation of a smattering of influences and impulses: the sandblasted silence of Bernhard Günter, looped into the regularised patterns of techno and overlaid with the sinewave pointillism of Ryoji Ikeda. The sound is itself crystalline, marked by glassy absences and pinprick flashpoints. This description is especially true of releases from Brooklyn, New York imprint 12k and its sub-label LINE. With releases from Deupree, Richard Chartier, Shuttle358, Goem, Komet and others, 12k has become one of the primary platforms for the movement – as well as its most visible proponent in North America.

2. DECAY

Microsound or 'glitch', reports the composer and critic Kim Cascone, is a term coined by Curtis Roads 'for all variants of granular and atomic methods of sound synthesis', derived from the development of applications like Max/MSP, Reaktor, MetaSynth, Audiomulch and still others, both proprietary and open-source, which continue to emerge on a regular basis. As Cascone explains:

> In response to the radical alteration of our hearing by the tools and technologies developed in academic computer music centers – and a distribution medium capable of shuttling tools, ideas, and music between like-minded composers and engineers – the resultant glitch movement can be seen as a natural progression in electronic music. In this new music, the tools themselves become the instruments, and the resulting sound is born of their use in ways unintended by their designers. (Cascone 2000)

Oval's *Systemisch* (Mille Plateaux 1994), an album of shuffling rhythms created by defacing CDs and resequencing the skips, pops and stuttering loops into dense, shifting, Moiré-like patterns, is widely heralded as one of the first microsound compositions to reach an audience outside the narrow sphere of programmer-musicians; its appearance on Mille Plateaux, the experimental sub-label of Frankfurt's influential dance-music label Force Inc, signalled the rise of post-techno, in which the rhythmically focused forms of dance music began to be reconfigured along more experimental lines, disregarding dance floor use-value in favour of focused explorations of texture and tone. For better or for worse, *Systemisch* also established an aesthetic that has largely defined the parameters of microsound, in which miniscule clicks and pops – hitherto regarded as errors to be eliminated in finished recordings – became the *prima materiae* of the music, instead of traditional synthesizer tones or samples. Often, however, these glitches – or in the terminology of Mille Plateaux, 'clicks and cuts' – are reconfigured into the steady pulse of techno, with its unflagging 4/4 rhythm and almost polka-like backbeat kick.

While 'glitch' music has primarily been characterised along these lines, an equally important strain of microsound is found in the work of Japan's Ryoji Ikeda, whose experiments in minimalism have concentrated almost entirely on the interaction of isolated sinewaves. Ikeda's aesthetic is true to the digital conceits of glitch music, with his binary imagery of + and − and track

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titles composed of 1s and 0s, but his explorations of pure sonority are more properly architectural in nature. His bunched and twined tones interact with the space of listening, filling the room and creating hyper-stereophonic illusions: even on a two-speaker set-up, the sound shifts and bends as you turn your head or move about the room. Ikeda draws attention to this phenomenon in the lone sleeve note to his double CD *Matrix* (Touch 2001): 'matrix [for rooms] forms an invisible pattern which fills the listening space. the listener's movement transforms the phenomenon into his+/–her intrapersonal music'. Ikeda's emphasis upon the physics and the physicality of sound have the important effect of returning attention to the listener and the listener's body: if much glitch music seems destined to live and die within the abstracted confines of the desktop where it was born, Ikeda's music, like that of Finnish analog specialists Pan Sonic, is meant to be experienced in an extended burst of pure viscerality. In this, Ikeda is arguably closer to the spirit of classic techno than much of the microsonic post-techno that studiously recreates the genre's boom-tick template in miniature: rather than mimicking a rhythmic signature, Ikeda harnesses the visceral thrill that marked the work of techno pioneers like Derrick May or Joey Beltram. Where the latter customised their rumbling sub-bass, resonant mid-range and sparkling high-end to facilitate ecstatic dance-floor communion among the masses, Ikeda and his ilk exploit the relationship between sound and space to charge the listening body of the individual liberated within a room of pure sound.

3. SUSTAIN

In the last five or so years, the microsound aesthetic has been replicated and expanded upon by a variety of artists from Europe, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and North America; its centre of activity, rather than any one geographical location, is virtually located in the .microsound mailing list, founded by Kim Cascone and San Francisco critic Sean Cooper. The .microsound list mission statement explicitly states that it 'is not a "genre" mailing list', but at the same time it is clear that some stylistic continuity – even if simply an attention to the grain of digitised sound – constitutes a core aesthetic within the realm of the practice. Microsound is a new moment in the evolution of genre – the genre itself evolved largely as a result of the Internet, and the acceleration of communications that the Internet affords. This was not the first such example – the development of IDM (Intelligent Dance Music) is closely entwined with a mailing list established to discuss the work of seminal post-techno producers like Autechre and Aphex Twin; in fact, the name 'IDM' originated with the mailing list, but now is routinely applied by reviewers, labels and fans alike. But microsound is a second generation, coincident with a list that was formed in part to create a border around like-minded works that might not have been seen as belonging to the same genre. Whether or not it was a result of this process of definition, works ratifying the most literal interpretation of the term 'microsound' – characterised by unusual levels of quiet, high-pitched tones, 'granular' textures evoking motes of dust and grains of sediment – proliferated in the first two years of the .microsound list's existence.

12k is one of only a handful of North-American labels known for advancing this particular style within the development of post-techno music, and the label's catalogue charts the evolution of microsound as a genre. 12k has never been about a 'sound', but rather an aesthetic that arcs from release 1 to release *N*; today you catch the arc in mid-flight. The music of 12k, rather than an entity unto itself, offers a kind of remediation of other forms: the crackle of electrostatic, the regular pulse of dance-floor techno, and the spatial explorations of acoustic experimentation.

Founded in 1997 by Taylor Deupree, 12k initially was conceived as a vehicle for experimental and minimal techno, moving away from the ambient techno projects Deupree had pursued in the early 1990s in projects like SETI and Prototype 909. The first release was one of Deupree's own, Human Mesh Dance's *Thesecretnumbertwelve*, a collection of throbbing minimal techno composed of glitch textures and sound splinters recorded for New York label Silent, but never released there. 'I had no real plan for the label except to make a plan as time went on', recalls Deupree, and indeed, the first two years saw only four releases emerge. But 'as the next year or two progressed I knew I wanted to venture into more subtle, minimal territory', says Deupree. 'As my tastes shifted away from straight techno rhythms into more listenable, yet still very synthetic sounds, I decided to release the *.aiff* compilation.' Named after a standard sound-file format, the compilation proved to be a turning point for the label, highlighting not only the familiar minimal techno and taut sequencing of Kim Rapatti and Komet, but moving into the more unsettling realm of sharpened sinewaves and out-of-earshot rumblings. *.aiff* was released within a month of Caipirinha's *Microscopic Sound*, also compiled by Deupree, and together the two albums established a framework for what, at the time, seemed only a sprawling assemblage of entropic outputs.

'It was with that release', notes Deupree, 'that the past seven years of my musical career came into focus. It was a huge turning point for me, and it defined the direction for both my personal work and the output of the label – both in terms of sound and design'.

A look back at the label's historical output charts this trajectory. The second and third releases have yet to display microsound's methodological interest in cracked electronics: Arc's *Arc vs. Tiny Objects in Space* (1997) and Drum Computer's *Alphabet Flasher* (1998) are still based on the mimetic drum machine sounds and placid synthesizers of classic ambient techno, albeit updated

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with the emerging textural palette of glitch. Taylor Deupree's 'Tokyo' (*Comma* 1998) is a similarly bangin' techno track built out of undulating arpeggios and a looped vocal sample, representative of late 1990s dance floor material. But with *.aiff*, a new aesthetic begins to emerge: alongside the nuanced ambiance of Shuttle358 and the skeletal techno of Kim Rapatti there are the seasick oscillations of Goem and the piercing frequencies of *0 (Nosei Sakata). The latter are completely cut loose from a techno foundation, following instead the fluttering rhythms of seemingly randomised bursts of static interlaced with staccato sine tones.

Shuttle358's *Optimal.lp* (1999) – the work of Los Angeles composer Dan Abrams – is the first artist album to follow *.aiff*, and while Abrams' hushed pulses are lovely, they remain more or less within the known realm of ambient music as established by Aphex Twin, if updated with the brushed-steel palette of glitch music, revolving around open harmonies and melancholic effects. But with the label's seventh release, Nosei Sakata's collaboration with Richard Chartier *0/r*, the promise of *.aiff* is borne out: Sakata and Chartier manage to combine the analog throb of Pan Sonic – an ominous, low-end rumble that seems to emanate from the listener's own belly – with the anti-gravity oscillations of Ikeda. The sounds seem to have no source but their own circulation, no reference beyond their hermetic sphere. *0/r* deepens the label's commitment to sound as material in itself, bringing together two artists more preoccupied with sound structure than song structure: Chartier describes his work as exploring 'the relationship between sound, silence and the act of listening', while Sakata echoes Ikeda in tackling the scientific properties of frequency, layering inaudible tones far beyond the range of human hearing in a manner that creates barely audible interference patterns.

With the arrival of Sakata and Abrams, another crucial aspect of 12k comes into being: where the label launched more or less as a DIY operation for Deupree and his long-time collaborators, it now becomes an international platform for like-minded artists brought together under Deupree's curatorial scope. *Optimal.lp* is Abrams' debut, sent as an unsolicited demo to the label, while *0/r* provides the first introduction for many North-American listeners to Tokyo's Sakata, whose previous CD-R releases had hardly extended beyond the limited sphere of the cassette and CD-R underground. Throughout 1999 and 2000, successive releases from the label continue to map disparate points in the microsound universe, simultaneously establishing the 12k aesthetic and maintaining a dialogue with labels like Mille Plateaux, Raster-Noton and Touch, all of whom are also invested in the development of the genre. Taylor Deupree's and Richard Chartier's *Spec* (1999) fuses the former's interest in post-techno repetition with the latter's inaudiblist edge. The untitled compilation that follows, the label's eighth release (2000), runs from Chartier's high-end flutter to Goem's oscillator industrialism, from Miki Yui's crystalline bell-tones to Surge's damaged minimal techno (produced not with a high-end digital workstation, but with a vintage Casio VL Tone 1, demonstrating that microsound can indeed transcend gearhound fetishism of G4s and Kyma workstations). Across these releases and still others – Taylor Deupree's collaboration with the versatile Tetsu Inoue (2000), Raster-Noton cofounder Frank Bretschneider's *Rausch* release under his Komet moniker (2000), Shuttle358's breath-taking and sentimental follow-up *Frame* (2000) – 12k assumes almost magnetic properties, drawing to it a number of figures both new and well known, simultaneously reinforcing its own aesthetic and participating in an internationalised conversation among numerous labels and organisations.

But this is not to say that 12k's focus – or that of microsound in general – is all academic, nor all preciously quiet and minimalist. Surge's 'Strictly AC', off 12k1008, is a raucous, if pared down, version of classic Germanic techno, looping a rave tattoo with the polka bounce of Kompakt. But the track also strains against that genre's clean, machinic sound; the off-beat note, typically as predictable as Greenwich mean time, here lurches around the beat, as though the artist were triggering the sound manually. It sounds very 'wrong', but it is not the kind of codified 'glitch' that has become synonymous with a more reductive portrait of microsound. If this is a music of 'mistakes', Surge demonstrates that human error can be as much a creative catalyst as hardware failure. And while it may be a minor point, the track's inherent flaw says all kinds of things about the genre: it embodies a kind of punk anti-musicianship, and it flouts the use-value of the dance floor even as it mimics dance forms – after all, what DJ has the patience to beat-match a track that refuses to keep in time?

The perversion of loops, a trademark of many 12k releases, is one of the most obvious hallmark's of the label's post-techno positioning. A staple of dance music, the loop provides the rhythmic regularity that the DJ and the dancer crave. It is also what has attracted some of dance music's most trenchant criticisms, drawing charges of laziness, mindlessness, even a sort of revival of Adorno's critique of the beat in jazz: the 'four-on-the-floor' of house and techno is seen by these critics as a mindless march in time to the beat of consumer hedonism and escapism. Insofar as microsound labels position themselves in at least partial relation to dance music – by virtue of the tools used, the method of distribution (limited-run CDs and 12″?s sold in specialist shops), and the circuit of festivals like Sonar and MUTEK – the loop remains central to the genre. In many of 12k's releases, however, the loop is not presented in the simple thud-thud-thud of the dance floor, but as a knotted code, the frame in which difference takes place. Taylor Deupree and Richard Chartier's 'Specification.seven', for

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instance, from *Spec*, overlays multiple patterns that confound the clean internal divisions of 4/4 time. And Goem's (Roel Meelkop, Frans de Waard and Peter Duimelinks of the Netherlands' V2 organisation) album *Abri* (2001) offsets techno's blunt minimalism with echoes and out-of-time squiggles that lend a baffling sense of space, as though this were music for a dance floor buckling under seismic waves and violently shifting air pressure – a kind of stunted anti-funk.

It is such subtle plays upon the formal aspects of genre that give this music meaning: it exists in a cultural space as well as a purely sonic one. The stress upon generic minutiae can confound some critics who would prefer to free the music from the predeterminations that accompany any form of categorisation, but it is important to remember that meaning is made precisely through the manipulation of such categories. Still, there is not always a clear demarcation between microsound in general, or 12k specifically, and other forms of post-techno; they all belong, broadly speaking, to a movement that has yet to be adequately named. Oddly enough, there is no convenient term to designate Aphex Twin and Russell Haswell *and* Taylor Deupree *and* Fennesz *and* Autechre, even though they are all working within a similar framework. For whatever reason, listeners and critics have seized upon the minutiae of the music – perhaps because it is so very 'granular' in nature – and thus subgenres thrive where the genre itself creeps stealthily under the lame disguise of 'electronica': dozens of groves within a forest with no name. But if certain signs separate the key players – Autechre moves increasingly toward a confounding rhythmic complexity premised on generative synthesis; Aphex Twin straddles rave nostalgia and fey melodicism, but always with the goal of riling 'serious' listeners; Fennesz moves ever closer to a pure hybrid sound of guitar and computer – that is not to say that there is no bleed-through. 12k's most recent signing, Ghislain Poirier, in many ways embodies the '12k sound', but he incorporates the keening sentiment of early Autechre, the earthy flange of Aphex's rave classic 'Digiridoo', the chugging pulse of Berlin techno – all this using a PC with so little processing power that he composes in segments of under a minute a piece and stitches them together later (and yet there is not a trace of 'lo-fi' to be found here, despite Poirier's distance from the high-tech tools of the genre's hard-disk jockeys).

12k has also extended its line of inquiry with LINE, a sub-label curated by Richard Chartier (Chartier also designs LINE's sleeves, while Deupree attends to 12k design). Inaugurated with Chartier's ultrasubtle CD *Series* (2000, awarded an Honourable Mention in the Prix Ars Electronica 2001), the imprint has gone on to release work from Immedia (the UK's Vicky Paniale and Darren Reynolds), sound/installation artist Miki Yui, the Italian duo Z.E.L.L.E. (Maurizio Martusciello and Nicola Catalano), and the respected microsonic composers Bernhard Günter and Steve Roden. Deupree describes LINE as a platform for 'ultraminimal soundworks from people who work not only with sound', but also in visual or installation art. Chartier says that in opposition to 12k's more rhythmically based work, LINE's releases 'tend to be more conceptual. LINE tends to focus on texture and spatiality – the relationship between sound and silence, the actual act of listening'. LINE releases, in contrast to 12k's, have little to nothing to do with dance music forms, instead addressing questions of sound and space. Roden's CD *Forms of Paper*, for instance, is a reworking of a piece designed for installation at the Los Angeles Public Library, made entirely from the recorded sounds of pages being touched and turned. And Miki Yui's *Lupe Luep Peul Epul* is a collection of hazily processed field recordings designed to be listened to 'at a transparent volume' and in random order, resulting in a kind of audio filter that subtly tints the conditions of its playback.

With its expansion into LINE's more focused, sound-art terrain, 12k follows in the path of other independent electronic-music labels, like Touch and Force Inc, that have found it useful to brand certain lines of inquiry under different imprints. Jon Wozencroft's and Mike Harding's Touch label acts as parent to Or, curated by Russell Haswell, while the legendary Frankfurt techno label Force Inc has over the years spun off a number of sublabels: Mille Plateaux for experimental electronica, Force Tracks for variations on deep house, and Ritornell for sound art and drone. While each label may have its own reasons for the strategy, it underscores the dialectic between label and genre, and the degree to which style becomes a trans-individual development. In evaluating a style, the emphasis no longer falls on a given artist, but rather on the host label.

12k also shares with Touch and Force Inc's Mille Plateaux and Ritornell imprints an overriding interest in holistic design. The label's first four releases shared no one graphic signature but, *.aiff*, with its striking Mylar packaging based on the 12k floppy-disk logo, established the design standards which have become an integral part of the label's aesthetic. Much like Touch, 12k conceives of its releases as audiovisual projects where the design and music interrelate, 'creating a complete concept', according to Deupree. *O/r*, for instance, from *0 and Richard Chartier, comes packaged in a die-cut sleeve with a perforated opening. Once it is torn open, it cannot be returned to its pristine state – a detail that resonates with the CD's pure/impure sonic oppositions, as well as highlighting the fetish quality of 12k's impeccably designed releases. The first nine albums were limited to a single edition of 500 apiece, and seven of the first ten releases are now out of print. In part, this is a savvy economic decision: even with the increasing attention given to the genre ('glitch' was named 'hot genre'

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in *Rolling Stone*'s 2001 'Hot Issue'), the buying audience remains small, and the economics of running an independent label are largely hand-to-mouth. Still, the fetish quality of the release is worth noting – especially in a climate where rare releases can fetch hundreds of dollars on the online auction service eBay. At first it would seem an oddly consumerist indulgence on the part of labels that typically set themselves apart from corporate capitalism, but there could be another impulse at work. In the mass-produced landscape of the Culture Industry, where the agonising over copyright stands perversely at odds with the infinite reproducibility and endless distribution of the Cultural Industry's productions, to run a 'boutique' label can embody its own kind of politics, finding value precisely in limits. Such a stance also privileges an aesthetics quite alien to the Culture Industry, where the well-designed object is an end in itself.

4. RELEASE

Recent critics have noted the 'sameyness' of much recent microsound, and the .microsound list itself has engaged in lengthy debates regarding the possible exhaustion of the genre and the future of the form. The past year has seen an increasing influx of releases treading increasingly crowded waters, both thinned-out glitch techno and more freeform digital noise, and the greater the collective numbers, the more forgettable individual releases seem to be. A number of questions have come to light regarding the genre: is production of minimal, digital 'experimentalism' just too easy, a matter of sliding a few virtual faders? Along the same lines, is the genre fraught with the same programmed obsolescence as its tools, due to be thrown aside with every release of a new product? Those questions are beyond the scope of this article, but they're obviously closely tied to the future of 12k. Deupree is not deterred, however, remarking, 'The state of the genre is definitely at a turning point now, although I'd venture to say it's not only because of the amount and quality of the music coming out, but also because today's listeners (perhaps the younger ones) are more apt to have a shorter attention span. So they're already ''bored'' and looking for the next thing'. Chartier locates this pattern of acceleration and boredom in the tools themselves: 'I think every genre, as soon as it is labelled and packaged, can get oversaturated. Two things in the past decade have added immensely to the time element of this: information and its subsequent dissemination', and more immediately, 'the advent of the CDR'. Chartier points out, 'as the cost of making music goes down, the greater the amount of input [the genre sees] from people working at home, working on the side etc. So you have a greater amount of people spending less time on creating'.

Interestingly, the multi-instrumentalist, producer and improviser Jim O'Rourke echoes this theory. He says that he was reluctant even to release his own album of 'PowerBook improv' sessions: 'I've been disappointed with how much stuff has been coming out, and how much of it is not very interesting. I didn't want to contribute to that. There's amazing people doing stuff, and there's a lot of people who don't wait until they've found their own voice before putting something out. It's too easy to put records out now. It's the equivalent of 10 years ago if somebody liked the Ramones and said, I want to do that too – they'd get a guitar and start a garage band. And that's fine, that's great. But the thing with the computer, and now, the ability to get something that sounds like the thing you want to do, and actually press up a CD and release it, you can do that in two days. You can do that lickety split. And it erases that gestation period that really brings out somebody's personality in music. That's been wiped away by how easy it is to do'.

It is a problem both of technology, and of genre in general, says Chartier: 'Whenever you have a genre, people immediately identify it by certain artists who become the flag for the genre, and then particular aspects of the work get translated into formulas – formulas which people then use as a "plug and chug" (to quote a math teacher about formulas). You add your sounds as the variables into a formula and boom – you have your drum and bass track, you have your microsound track, you have your indie rock track. It just becomes more evident in electronic music because of the speed in which work can be made with the use of certain software'.

What suffers, obviously, is a basic level of quality: as O'Rourke puts it, 'There still should be some level of critique'. But Chartier is unconcerned about the impact of a broader cultural trend on 12k and LINE specifically, since it is precisely the curator's role to create that level of critique. 'I think as 12k and LINE we have been very particular in what we release. Since there are usually eight releases a year, we must choose them wisely. Each work is judged on its merits and in many cases, [by virtue of an artist's] previous output. We have to think about its lasting quality as well rather than the taste of the moment – that is, you don't want to release something that is someone's first foray into electronic music or minimalism. Something that sounds fresh or new is great, but ultimately a release that gives you something new with each listen is the most important'.

Deupree echoes Chartier's optimism: 'Do I think microsound is finished? Played out? Not at all – I think there is so much more to be explored. What's happening now is no different than what happened to, say, techno – genres reach a saturation point after a few years, and then they split into a few defined subgenres. The cream of the crop rises, and people who weren't so interested anyway fade away'. If there is a benefit to this moment of generic malaise, it is that it occasions a healthy bit of self analysis: 'As an artist', says Deupree, 'I've been

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wrestling lately with the question, "will people want to hear this?" I think we've seen the direction that some labels are taking, and 12k/LINE will have to move as well. I think it's obvious that Mille Plateaux want to put techno into microsound. I think the same is partially true with Raster-Noton as well – you have Carsten Nicolai being influenced by R&B. Even Mego's released an alternative J-pop CD (which I love, because I listen to a lot of that kind of stuff) – and then you have 12k and LINE. I think it's easier to say where LINE is headed, because it's had a more definite mission from the start. LINE will continue to release very quiet, contemplative, sound art: the Günters, Chartiers and Rodens of the world. 12k's direction is more difficult because it falls halfway between the rhythmics of Raster-Noton and Mille Plateaux, and the subtlety of LINE. I certainly don't want to be left behind or be considered a passé label. I've always been proud of 12k's fresh output. I think the important thing for me to focus on is the initial, main aesthetic of the label. Not clicks, cuts, microsound or sinewaves, but minimalism. Whatever happens to microsound, will happen, but with 12k I want to keep releasing minimal sound/music created with computers and electronics. Whatever that may be!'.

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