

There are a number of motivations for this project, each of which have been touched upon throughout my reflections for the module. With this writeup, I will walk through my creative, critical, and reflective processes, starting with what is probably the most acceptable of all of my points:

change is needed.

Based on the diversity of readings I have conducted in research throughout this and other modules (as well as ideological conflicts throughout the 20th century) it is safe to assume that there are differences between the way each individual believes the world should be, primarily relating to their own needs... and this is ok, heterogeneity is a wonderful catalyst for change and new ideas. But from these differences, it is fair to imagine an issue “*I*” about which people's opinions are in direct opposition with each other. Since the world can only exist in one state at one time, all conditions of all opinions cannot be fully satisfied at once. Again, this is great! This characterises compromise and community, vital aspects of human existence, to the extent that we constantly critique the alternative, creating artistic examples of individual/personalised utopias being framed as dystopic¹.

However, when this occurs in a society where there “**must**” be winners (such as – but not limited to – our own neoliberal capitalist flavour), it creates the necessity of “non-winners”/losers – some people are left out of pocket ² (Schrecker and Bambra, 2015). This inequity in needs-met is characterised by critical theorists – particularly the Frankfurt school of thought – as being produced by the dominant class, upheld/reproduced by an (often capitalist) superstructure, and having dire consequences for those at its margins (Best et al., 2018: Sections 2 and 8).

As a person who has existed – and is surrounded by people who have existed – nearer these margins as a result of: socioeconomic standing; race; ability; and level of formal education, this is an issue I see as a direct threat to my existence, as well as that of my community. Although this exposure is the reason that I desire change, it is not the area I would like to *directly* address with *this* project³. Before I get to what I *will* be doing, I must first take a quick take a quick a look at another aspect of my positionality, the arts.

¹ For example, the “Matrix” of... *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999), or “Infinite Tsukuyomi” of *Naruto Shippuden* (Anon. 'Infinite Tsukuyomi' n.d.; Kishimoto, 2014).

² To put it lightly...

³ There will be other projects, and this work will continue to exist outside of the page you have before you, I promise.

I come from a family of people who live their lives through the arts, without identifying as artists. My uncle has always been a DJ to me; my mother who, other than being an avid fan of contemporary visual art, was an actress and dancer who decided not to pursue the field due to a lack of accessibility for her disability at the time; my father, a hip-hop producer/MC who grew disillusioned by external pressures on the growth of the genre, as well as by the concept of “genre” itself. Through them, I was shown how the arts were of utility to subalterns and their revolutions, used to speak out against the injustices which directly affected them.

In theory, my first exposure to which was Trotsky’s *Art and Revolution* (1992), the arts are widely considered as a means with which we engage in global, non-linguistic discourse, and as such deserving of some weight/respect (Halpé, 2017; Sakolsky and Ho, 1995; Watkins, 2005). But, the importance/reverence of the artwork is itself a flaw. This phenom is formulated by Benjamin as the “aura” of the artwork (Buck-Morss, 1992); such art exists in a relation to society such that the auratic artwork is not merely composed of the metaphysical *Being* of the piece, nor the set of social relations which form the context within which it was created, but instead in the nature of the two as existing in relation to each other (Benjamin et al., 2008:ch1). Goethe offers a characterisation of “the beautiful [as] neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil” (Ross, 2018:43). That the piece is created the way it is in part due to the nature of the superstructure within which it was conceived is the crux of the message – for example, Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Lamar, 2015) would be irrelevant to inhabitants of mars, even if they had issues of gang violence and systemic oppression⁴.

If the artwork conducts discourse through relations

(opposition being included as a relation of course)

to the superstructure, and use of discourses⁵
reaffirms the very powers which created them,

⁴ Of course, I sincerely hope that they don’t.

⁵ Although implicitly linguistic in Foucault’s discourse analysis (Jergensen and Phillips, 2002; Wilson, 2012), I think the notion of “discourse” is equally valid when applied to the arts.

then a by-product of protest art is a centring of those values of the dominant class which were “baked into” considerations of paradigmatic artwork.

This is because anything conceived in line with dialectic considerations must, by definition:

- A) Respond to that which came before, and
- B) Oscillate around an asymptotic point⁶.

This oscillation highlights the nature of the asymptotic space by proxy of a negative silhouette – the dominant values are characterised by what the *anti/counter/post/etc* claims not to be, and so these protests highlight its position. In a similar fashion to detective rubbing charcoal over the impressions left in a pad of paper – reproducing a note written on the previous page – so protest becomes a negative re-inscription of the dominant values.

As an artist who exists in a space where resistance does not feel like a choice, but necessary means of securing the future of my community, this re-inscription of power built into my tools results in both urgency and hopelessness. The closest description I have to this feeling would be of sinking in quicksand. I am aware that I am sinking, with no footholds, and that panic would drown me, but what appears to be my escape – vines above me – are actually snakes, exacerbating my predicament. As a result of this, and further to a voicelessness I feel behind the drum set in some settings – itself arising from an ‘insufficient’ engagement with the vocabulary of the jazz tradition – I began to feel a voicelessness of the second degree as I further researched for my project. This second voicelessness is caused by the proverbial snakes⁷, the knowledge that all of my efforts to engage with tradition are exactly that – based on *tradition* – and that my efforts to bring about change through art might merely re-inscribe the relations I fight. After all, theories of subaltern art, subversion and resistance pervaded the 20th century and yet, here we are⁸... We must be revolting wrong.

At this point in my research, my suspicions were reaffirmed Audre Lorde, who proposed that “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House” (Lorde, 2018). In perhaps a slightly problematic way, it felt nice to be validated by the academic world, to feel like my anxiety wasn't

⁶ As per Hegel's characterisation of dialectic as being convergent, which I'm not 100% sold on.

⁷ though I do think I would be silent in the presence of the non-proverbial variety

⁸ Of course progress has been made, and subaltern artistic revolution has not always been a great deal for everyone (Stalin, 1943; Trotsky, 1932) but one would hope that by now, people wouldn't still be fighting for their lives....

something I'd manufactured in my head, but was instead a legitimate concern, a wicked problem which even the mystic world of research couldn't crack. I began to reflect on who's tools I was using – the history of jazz drumming is one fraught with colonialism, othering and conflict. In fact, many of the jazz giants were former soldiers – their playing and kit coming from the army and, in turn, the tradition of the colonial snare drummer – leading to a huge rudimental⁹ basis for jazz drumming around the kit after the first world war and moving forward (Scheuerell, 2018: viii).

Melodically and harmonically, there are further structures which I will not go into here, but one need only consider how long it has taken for microtonality and heterogeneity in temperaments to be considered seriously¹⁰ in the western world to see that they persist today. This to the extent that saxophonist Wayne Shorter often quotes Miles Davis as having asked: “do you ever feel like playing music that doesn't sound like music?” (Schroeder, 2013).

This was it! This is exactly how I had felt as I delved more into the efficacy of expression through sound. It inspired a complete 180 of my project – I decided to shift my focus away from what change I wanted first to see, and instead look towards changing *how* we bring about such change through sound, my main aims being to:

- Decentralise the power which creates musical tools/canon/discourse
- Decentralise the power created by musical tools/canon/discourse
- Encourage collaboration

I decided to create a number of sonic tools and experiments which engaged with these issues. A common theme in my planning was some interaction of multiple instruments via a digital medium which, while serving as a neat metaphor/simulation of our online, globalised society, also opened up the conditions of music creation. I believe freedom in process would best combat the potential for musical voicelessness, and creating more processes afforded performers different¹¹ freedoms. If we are the *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003), then I hoped we would also be the metaphors we play.

⁹ Rudiments are the drummer equivalent of scales, sticking/rhythmic patterns most jazz drummers must confront at some point in their life (Scheuerell, 2018: 5-28)

¹⁰ Without fetish, though I'm not sure they have yet

¹¹ I wouldn't say “more” because there were definitely a bunch of restrictions which came with these methods

I became interested in understanding what “natural” *being*¹² could look like – personally and academically – and so began to practice yoga and mindfulness regularly. For me, the extent to which something felt natural became the same extent to which it was a function of my body rather than of my mind. Though my body is often contorted into positions and spaces by human constructs, this is not nearly as often as my mind must adjust to the environment in which it exists (Berman, 2010). Functions like shifting my weight, lifting and dropping my arms, vocalising and breathing became very interesting to me¹³.

Experiment 1:

At first, I stepped away from instruments, my first experiment was to take a cry for help and make its feeling public while keeping its content private. I wanted to express this voicelessness without engaging with literary or musical tradition. I also didn’t want to feel at any point that I was writing for an audience. As a means of confronting this, I wrote a poem for myself¹⁴, and analysed the transients (volume peaks) of my speech, using this to trigger random notes from a guitar sampler I created. The result is non-linguistic, but I feel it still conveys the cadence of my speech, the space-time compression and expansion of my thoughts, and thus the combination of desperation and hesitation which I felt at the time. It felt cathartic to do, and still feels an honest representation of my headspace at the time (EXP_1). It was not collaborative, but there is nothing to stop people from existing vocally together through such a method or by combining this transient data with other sources. Since I am generating midi, I could perhaps use the method I devised with my next project.

Experiment 2:

¹² Alone and with others, or both at once, as is explored on Karriem Riggins’ *Alone Together* (Riggins, 2012), in which he deftly mediates between the jazz and hip-hop worlds

¹³ Of course, a critique of vocalisation would consider that cadence/speech is a social construct dependent on where I grew up and who raised me; moving forward it might be worth considering the issues that come with this. In fact, during the roundtable session, I was presented with suggestions for natural being that centred around necessity – for example breathing and eating. Perhaps speech can slip through the cracks of the social construct critique by virtue of its necessity if it were to (as I am trying to establish here) find a means through which it could escape its social-constructed-ness. Of course, there are issues with finding a middle ground between non-social-constructed-ness and necessity, particularly surrounding mutually agreed rules for communication – and so we get back to my original problem. This became apparent at points in experiment #2, which will be discussed later.

¹⁴ Since it is for myself, it would betray the purpose of the project to share it here, though I promise it exists!

Almost perfectly dialectically, my response to the outcome of the first project was the decision to create an instrument which had to be played by two people. To facilitate this, I embarked on a journey to learn MAX/MSP, a visual programming language which – when integrated with digital audio workstation, Ableton – allows the user to create plugins to modify incoming and outgoing data streams. Learning to create my own digital tools was empowering in and of itself, and really seems like the next logical step in rewriting the structures we use¹⁵. After to getting to grips with the framework of MAX, I set about creating a modifier which took different parameters from different MIDI¹⁶ sources and combined them into one output.

Eventually, I decided on what the collaboration would look like: one musician would have control of the rhythm of the sound, and the other, the harmony. Since it can't exist without **both** pitch and rhythm, the “melody” would have to emerge from the coalescence of the two. I decided that my process would be a sidechain (acting on a source **A** based on the information of a source **B**) gate (choosing when information does or doesn't pass through). In essence, Person **A** chooses *when*, person **B** chooses *what*. Since the software used to open it is licence protected, I have included screenshots of some iterations of my patch notes (IMG_1 + IMG_2). For the practical element of this experiment¹⁷, I sat opposite from a friend with it all set up, and we played – with no planning before, nor verbal communication during – for about an hour (VID_1 – 7).

We used eye contact only and tried to gauge where each other was going. I also kept in mind the core aims of the experiment, through the falling of my arms and space-time compression/expansion/rest when it felt right, rather than as dictated by the metre of the piece. It was freeing, but it certainly wasn't perfect. For example, there was a point (VID_7: 00:13-00:35) where we were building up to a climax, with the harmony moving upwards in a stepwise motion, and I misjudged where I thought he was aiming for, drastically shifting the energy before the resolution we had just been building towards. We both found this entertaining, and you can see our faces become disarmed by the unimportance of the moments we were shooting for. However, I feel that in this sense, the program achieved its aim. It didn't feel “right” to me because of my conditioned inclination toward traditional cadences, but it showed the fallibility of our cooperation and “best laid plans...”. Of course, one has to ask to what extent we can explain away “mistakes” as freedoms, but I think one would require a

¹⁵ Of course, these tools have their own issues/structures, but I don't wish this essay to become an infinite regression through the constructions of our species, and even if I did, I'd have to be pretty concise about it

¹⁶ Meaning Musical Instrument Digital Interface

¹⁷ I am hesitating to use the term “performance”, since the very aim was to avoid performativity as much as possible

significant amount of time of unlearning before they can begin to untangle that. I have included a number of other videos with brief descriptions to show the movements between sections/genric idioms, these being the spaces where the most negotiation occurs.

Experiment 3:

As an extra consideration, based on a suggestion at the roundtable, I also decided to consider using harmonic distortion to accent all the upper harmonics of a breath, since one can rarely be said to be making a mistake by breathing. I recorded an hour of my breathing through guided meditation and attempted to “play” my breath – varying dynamic range and intensity until I was sharply exhaling into the microphone. I saturated this recording with upper harmonic distortion, then played this back very loudly through a speaker which I had attached to my guitar, exciting the strings and creating notes and feedback in the process. I super imposed the two, and though the clip I have included is short, it includes a number of aspects of the piece. The 3 hour long total performance of which proved to be quite meditative despite its aggressive aesthetic. It made me think of my time as a teenager listening to Sonic Youth (1990) in a sort of meditative state, in bed or skating or doing anything physical, whilst claiming mental refuge in noise. Though this played-breath was not collaborative, I definitely believe that there is a space for distorted, image-world, utopic spaces such as these, and I’m sure modifications can be made to ensure they engage with the rest of my aims¹⁸. I am grateful for the idea I was given, as well as the path it led me down.

Perhaps a synthesis of these 3 considerations would help me achieve my aims, but I am encouraged by the results so far. I hoped that my processes would yield tools for change, I was also surprised by the level of reflection achieved during the creation of these processes, such as the interrogation of my own performativity while constructing my first experiment. I also had a moment the night before the second experiment: cables weren’t working; things weren’t coming together; I was on the verge of freaking out but decided instead to sleep on it. Without seeming too dramatic or hyperbolic, MY ANSWER CAME TO ME IN A DREAM! My mind took the opportunity of rest to work through simulations of the ideas I had previously dismissed, and at 5am on the morning of the recording, I woke up, and feverishly scribbled some notes. I was asleep by 5:05, and when I woke up 3 hours later, was astonished to find that some mystical parallel-dimension Ashley 2.0 had solved all of Ashley 3.0’s

¹⁸ For an example, go and see “Black Midi” live!

problems¹⁹. This moment centred me, as I realised that no matter the urgency, it is important to rest and reflect. As Brian said, perhaps this form of just being is the purest form of expression, free of social structure. This is a lifelong passion for me, and I hope that through development, my projects can help people – who, like myself, constantly hear music in everything – achieve this freedom, because existence is resistance.

¹⁹ Ah you were expecting **1.0** here weren't you? Plot twist! In this hypothetical universe with infinite Earths, I don't want to be *that guy* who assumed he was "Mr 1.0"

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