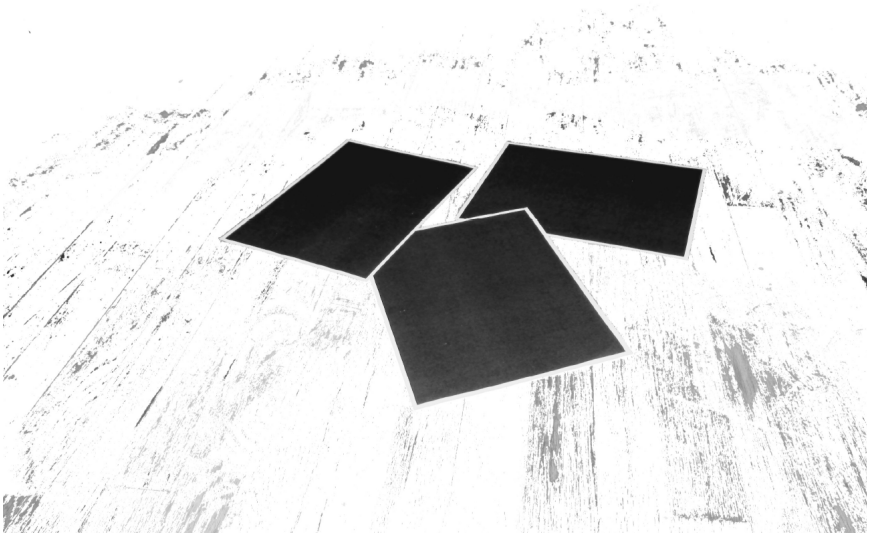


Sound Mass

a Writing & Sonic Meditation
on the "Individual," the
"Collective,"
& the Nature of Music Practice



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Political & Philosophical Orientation

The "individual" is a rhetorical construct that does not exist in a pure sense. As soon as we start to investigate individual selves, we quickly find that they (we) are deeply intertwined with the other selves, and the planet / universe that they exist on/within.¹ In the same way, the "collective" does not exist in a pure sense either. Both "individual" and "collective" are words that exist as part of human language. They are abstractions that exist in the virtual realm of symbolic thought that we all inhabit, alongside the realm of immediate experience which all animals inhabit.²

Because of the nature of our current socio-economic predicament, what is of concern here is the structural over-emphasis of the "individual." From this basis we can start to think about the many ways that the concept of the individual, used on its own at any substantial length without reference to the collective, impoverishes artistic, philosophical, and political practice. What I'm briefly describing is the foundational folly of the rugged-individualist, "bootstraps" narrative that is an essential part of capitalism.³

There is a particularly insidious brand of bootstrap individualism that permeates various art and music communities. This is characterized by a belief that the "best" naturally rise to the top, that music and art production exists above socio-economic processes, and that the fundamental way to grow culture is to compete and economically succeed as an *individual*.

There are also insidious and misleading faux-radical reactions against bootstrap individualism. These reactions can be characterized by an ironic artistic practice and detachment from the human need for culture / ritual; individual / identity based representational politics that do not take into account flows of resources and fail to challenge the fundamental nature of institutional power; and/or the reduction of political ethics to artistic aesthetics (i.e. where the most radical artistic practice is judged by the characteristics of the artistic *product*, rather than by the efficacy of *organizing* for democratic power against structures of oppression).⁴

While superficially different, these both enable uncritical relationships to how art and music function and are valued within capitalism. Both implicitly or explicitly they validate the reified notion (i.e. abstract idea falsely made to be real) of exchange value (money) as the correct way to value and nurture artistic practice. A diverse group of music

practitioners and I have in great detail articulated the fundamental folly of this form of valuation as it pertains to culture (art, music, etc.) in the writing *It's Not Enough to Get Paid for Your Art: Care and the Commodification of Culture*.⁵

The insidious aspect of both of these tendencies is that they generally appear as obvious, yet unstated underlying assumptions – “of course this is the way things are and should be... he's really telling it like it is...” The full implications of these modes of practice are psychologically repressed in the practitioner as unconscious beliefs. This is the definition of ideology.⁶

We are forced to interact with the dominant socio-economic order (i.e. capitalism), and the dominant culture that supports it, in order to access the necessities of life - food, water, shelter, etc. So, it goes without saying that I also struggle with these ideologies, as I think we all do.

Under these economic conditions, to some degree we must play the games set out by capital in order to survive. But, it becomes a serious ethical problem when we believe the economic and ideological logic of capital is the truth, our values become regressive, and we forgo building solidarity and organizing for change. For example, there is a lot of “tell it like it is,” abusive and dogmatic posturing that happens in the Jazz world, turning what should be a living tradition into a static

thing. This position parades as respect for Black music, but in actuality, adopts many of the white-supremacist values of the classical music industrial complex, often quite directly supporting the agenda of plantation owners both old and new.⁷ Like I said above, I think this is often an unconscious and unintentional product of material circumstances.

In past years, I have asked music to politically be more than it can possibly be. Again, I think this is a common pitfall among progressive / radical minded artists. For me this meant, as stated above: "the reduction of political ethics to artistic aesthetics (i.e. where the most radical artistic practice is judged by the characteristics of the artistic *product*, rather than by the efficacy of *organizing* for democratic power against structures of oppression)."

If we are to be ethical, socially responsible artists we must clearly and emphatically state that it is beyond the scope of artistic activity alone to achieve liberation from class based society. And, we must certainly develop the discernment to understand what types of rhetoric and practice actively serve the authoritarian power interests of the ruling class - modern day plantation owners, the bankers, the captains of industry, etc.

The domination we experience has to do with the centralization of decision making

power and capacity for violence, as well as how resources are produced and distributed. Who grows the food on the one hand, and who controls how it is grown and distributed on the other? Liberation is contingent on effectively winning democratically controlled political and economic power. Creative cultural activity is an essential human need, but alone it cannot liberate us. Just as radical nurses understand that healthcare is an essential human need, and also know that they must do something else (organize!) to build democratic power. Being creative alone is not enough, and that creativity is most certainly not a neutral activity. There is evidence of music and art all around us every day that is used to maintain the authoritarian power of the ruling class. We address these points thoroughly in *It's Not Enough to Get Paid for Your Art: Care and the Commodification of Culture*.

Art and culture are most certainly an important component of the struggle for liberation, but they must be part of a holistic ecology of struggle that recognizes how culture and our emotional selves relate to the production and distribution of power and resources.⁸

It is well within the scope of cultural activity to both posit alternative value systems, to show what creative activity and social relations might look like that are not attached to capitalist ideology, and to offer emotional / spiritual catharsis which can serve

as ritual to strengthen bonds of solidarity (much in the way music and ritual functions in the radical Black prophetic tradition of Martin Luther King Jr., or the tradition of *Mystica* of the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil).⁹

This last point is what I am interested in here. I think that it is important to cultivate cathartic practices that are healing, yet non-escapist. Those that bring us to the knife's edge of the moment, and help us love ourselves in the face of death. This is Cornel West's "Learning how to die in order to learn how to live." This is the Zen Buddhist concept of "not one and not two" - we both die and we do not die, we are both individuated and part of a totality. And, this is the *Dialectical Biologist's* notion of no universal subjects or objects, wholes and parts are implicated in each other, parts grow and differentiate from the whole.¹⁰ In *It's Not Enough to Get Paid for Your Art*, we argue that this (i.e. care) should be understood as the real (i.e. non-reified, actually existing) standard for the valuation of culture and the arts. Emotional liberation - of which culture as care, along with radical embodied mental health, is central - is an essential part of a *materialist* basis for solidarity (materialist meaning, grounded in the dynamics of our nervous system, society, and the universe).¹¹

A central part of the material liberation I've been talking about includes the time and freedom for all people to actively partake in

the creative development of culture. Something that we argue is an essential human need in *It's Not Enough to Get Paid for Your Art*. The behavior which falls prey to the structural and ideological pitfalls I have been articulating, actively works against this liberation and should be clearly understood for what it is. Through the ethically grounded sciences of embodiment and ecology, I think we should work to heal ourselves and our communities from these poisonous underlying assumptions. I hope that this piece can contribute to some spiritual / emotional healing, and to the development of community dedicated to the liberation of humanity.

The Healing Nature of the Musical Drone,
Tensions in Free Improvisation, and the
Aesthetic Expression of Musical Community.

{This was originally written as in the context of my deep involvement with the Chicago (mostly north side) improvised music scene c. winter 2018, when I lived there, where "free" improvisation is the default mode of operation for most shows. As of now - c. summer 2022 - I am still highly involved, but at a distance... because I now live in Pittsburgh c. Dec. 2019}

As improvisors, I think we experience the tension with the above described ideology of individuality in a visceral way when we

"freely" improvise. This manifests internally as the struggle between our personal musical desires and tendencies, and what is best for the collective musical statement. We are engaged in the real time negotiation of small scale musical frameworks and aesthetic expressions of our personalities / social ecologies, as they exist in relation to the others we are playing with.

I personally feel that lots of free improvisation without breaks of playing with others through some kind of explicit frameworks can make me fall into unwanted repetition. That is, instead of allowing myself to listen to and be reactive to a musical moment, to come to a truly collectively decided framework, I default to an individually satisfying thing when I have not given myself adequate musical restriction. Of course, this is the mark of a skillful improviser. We become responsible for the constraint we put on ourselves and negotiate with others *in the moment*, so we must have a sharpened presence of mind and maintain a delicate balance between risk and discretion. I think playing with predetermined, explicitly stated constraints can help develop more "free" or open ended forms of improvisation.

What an explicitly stated framework can provide an ensemble is a symbolic reference point for improvisational communication that enables the building of structures that would

not, or could not, otherwise be reached, particularly when the ensemble is of a larger size.¹²

I'm interested in frameworks of various restrictive qualities, but here I would like to explore a framework that is simultaneously very restrictive and very open: the "sound mass" (a term from Anthony Braxton's *Composition Notes*), which can be understood as a non-static relative of the musical drone. This is not to say that musical drones are ever *totally* static in actual realization.¹³ I want to explore this framework for reasons relative to what I articulated in the last section: 1) Its tendency to induce cognitive shifts and spiritual/emotional catharsis i.e. its meditative qualities (e.g. as have been used in various chant traditions - I grew up in around Byzantine Chant). 2) As it is created and improvisationally navigated by a large ensemble, it is a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, in which individual sonic activities must melt into the whole. And 3) its aesthetic expression of the Buddhist "not one and not two," principle - i.e. it is simultaneously very restrictive, and very open-ended. As you will see, the tension between freedom, collective responsibility, and restriction will put the group into a very subtle predicament. It will be the exploration of the *boundaries* of these very particular constraints that will yield interesting outcomes.

Score

The group can be made up of any configuration of instrumentalists and/or vocalists of any level of experience. This piece can be done as a participatory collective meditation and/or as a performance. If done as a performance the group will set up in an arc, which can consist of several layers if need be. Where possible, all players will play acoustically, or where necessary or when integral to the player's sound, with small personal amplification stationed close to where they are.

The group will strive to channel, sustain, and collectively end a "sound mass." This mass of sound can potentially be contributed to with any type of sound that the player is able to produce on their respective instrument. But, the sounds should be produced firstly with the intention to project a healing energy, and secondly with the aesthetic quality of blending with the rest of the sound that is being produced. This should be a unified sound mass, albeit one whose shape, texture, and overall dynamic quality should strive to be ever changing and evolving, but nonetheless unfragmented. How can we move **together** as a

cohesive unit? Think of different ways to obscure your attack and release, avoid attack sounds or find ways to integrate them into the whole. Contribute with conviction but never aim to stand out, instead always melt into the whole and allow the distinction between yourself and the individuals around you to blur. The air that you are moving is what it is in large part because of the air that the rest of the group is moving, and more fundamentally you are what you are in part because of your relationship to the rest of the group, your community, the planet, the cosmos, etc. Support the group, but not in a patronizing or overbearing manner. Sometimes support is agitational, but should never be domineering.

This should last from around 30 to 45 minutes. Timers should be used, but don't need to be dwelled upon.

Notes

1. This is a claim grounded in the work of dialectical and emergentist science traditions as well as radical Black and Indigenous organizing and intellectual and classical eastern philosophy traditions, articulated by such thinkers as Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin in *The Dialectical Biologist*; Helena Sheehan in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science*; Sylvia Wynter in *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being*; Chanda Prescod-Weinstein in *The Disordered Cosmos*; Terrence Deacon in *Incomplete Nature*; Robert Sapolsky in *Behave*; Carl Sagan in *Cosmos*; Noam Chomsky in *The Machine, the Ghost, and the Limits of our Understanding*; Rami Gabriel and Stephen Asma in *The Emotional Mind*; the folks at the *Ayni Institute*; Kim Tallbear; Robin Wall Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass*; *The Tao te Ching*, and other Taoist / buddhist writings (see Alan Watts for succinct, and well delivered overviews); and J.R. Primak & Nancy Ellen Abrams in *The View from the Center of The Universe*; among many others. Many of these thinkers / traditions disagree about a variety of issues, but they all deeply explore (and I

- think irrefutably confirm) the fundamentally intertwined nature of life.
2. This is made possible by "the human symbolic capacity." See the work of Terrence Deacon, especially *The Symbolic Species*, and *The Role of Symbolic Capacity in the Origins of Religion*.
 3. See David Harvey (especially his lecture *Visualizing Capital*), Moishe Postone, Richard Wolff, bell hooks, and folks from the Marxist-Feminist tradition such as Tithi Bhattacharya, Nancy Frasier, and others for a definition of Capitalism.
 4. For example, Adam Curtis in his documentary *Century of the Self*, details how capital appropriated and sanitized the radical aesthetics of the counterculture movement of the 60s.
 5. See *It's Not Enough to Get Paid for Your Art, Care and the Commodification of Culture*. Available at shred-mag.com for a time. If not there, find it at elinamay.org.
 6. The work of Robert Sapolsky in *Behave* as well as Rami Gabriel and Stephen Asma in *The Emotional Mind*, give some of the most detailed framework for how ideology sits in the emotional system and drives behavior, as a material force. Also see Arnold Schroder in his podcast *Fight Like an Animal* for a comprehensive literature review on the subject. And yes, Slvoj

- Zizek talks about this often, albeit in an extremely convoluted, abstract way.
7. This claim can be grounded in the research in Ben Barson's forthcoming work, *Redefining Africa, Reimagining Freedom: Afro-Caribbean Eco-Socialisms, and Music in Louisiana's Sugar Plantations*, as well as in Dale Chapman's *The Jazz Bubble: Neoclassical Jazz in Neoliberal Culture*.
 8. This is the focus of an (as of summer 2022), a still relatively nascent think tank project that I am helping to organize called *Shred Magazine*: shred-mag.com . We are exploring how the intertwined areas of embodiment, ecology, and ethics can strengthen labor and community organizing. Depending on when you go to the website, this mission may not be fully articulated, and it might seem like it is a more culture / art forward project.
 9. See John L. Hammond's *Mistica, Meaning, and Popular Education in The Brazilian Landless Workers Movement*. Also, see Cornel West's lecture *What it Means to Be Human*.
 10. See Cornel West's lecture *On Being a Chekavian Christian and a Blues Man: Christianity, Pragmatism, and Democracy*; see Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind*; and see Richard Levin and Richard Lewontin's *The Dialectical Biologist* & Bertel Olleman's *Dance of the Dialectic*.
 11. Scientists and anthropologists, such as Terrence Deacon, Karen Armstrong, Rami

Gabriel, and Stephen Asma, as well as radical organizers and intellectuals such as Cornel West, bell hooks, the folks at *The Red Nation*, and Arnold Schroder (host of *Fight Like an Animal*), have all done work to articulate the very important role that emotion, myth, and ritual play in human bonding, coordination, and mutual aid (i.e. solidarity).

12. In a big picture sense, this is related to the observation about how language and shared symbols help humans coordinate and cooperate across very large scales and in large numbers. See Terrence Deacon's book *The Symbolic Species*. Even though I disagree with a lot of his (reductionist / deterministic at best, and techno-fascist at worst) conclusions, also see Yuval Noah Harrari's *Sapiens*. See *Sapins Maybe, Deus No: The Problem With Yuval Noah Harari* for a critique.
13. I deal with this in a forthcoming writing called *Ecologically Situating Musical Activity: a framework for grounding meaning and ethics in music practice*. This will be available on my website, elinamay.org .

