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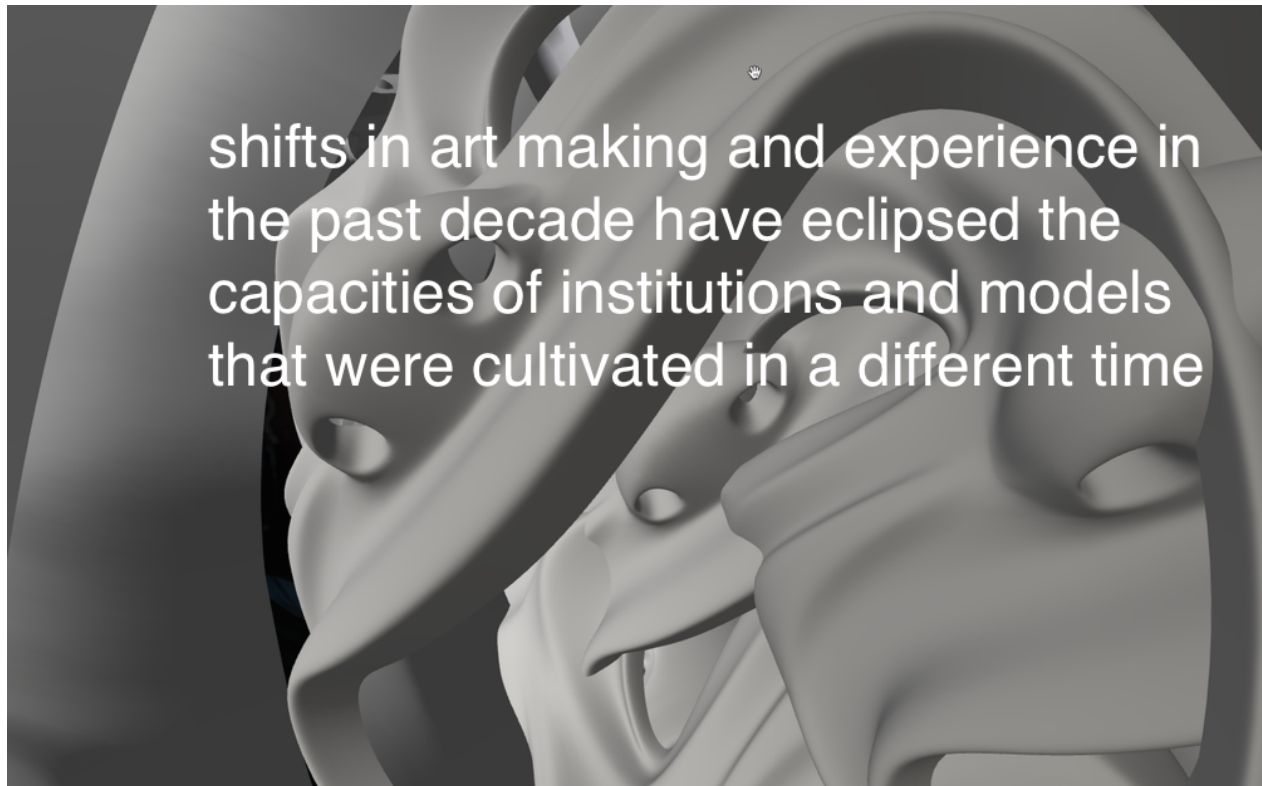
Re-Engineering Hegemony: Glass Bead in conversation with Mat Dryhurst, Holly Herndon and Alex Williams

Alex Williams,

Holly Herndon,

Mat Dryhurst

Music, unlike many other forms of art, has long been recognized to serve more than an ornamental or representative function. Plato acknowledged the capacity of music to 'mightily fasten' to the inward places of the soul.[1] Studies in evolutionary musicology have investigated how music may have served as the basis for social cohesion in early hominids groups, and some have argued that this was a necessary factor in the development of complex intelligence, the synchronized coordination of bodies and the expansion of memory and anticipation.[2] Jacques Attali further claimed that the changing form of music is a historical process, deeply bound up with the wider political economy, that not only expresses but is *prophetic* of future forms of social organization.[3] Singularly placed for elaborating the efficacy of music in this regard, we invited Holly Herndon, Mat Dryhurst, and Alex Williams to discuss with us their shared cross-disciplinary interest in speculatively orienting art, technology, and politics toward the future.

Text overlaid on image created by Mat Dryhurst modding Akihiko Taniguchi's software (Mat Dryhurst, 2016)

Glass Bead: It can be argued that contemporary art is characterized by a fetishization of indeterminacy, and that there have been parallel tendencies within music and sound art. This fetishization is problematic on a number of levels; it is complicit with neoliberal hegemony, it is generally anti-rationalist and offers no constructive orientation to the future. On the other hand, there has been a progressive expansion of the space of music, and a rational exploration of complex sound and noise. What do you think about the development of music with regard to these two perspectives and the polemics that underlie them?

Mat Dryhurst: To be frank, I feel at all levels that the game has changed and we are in a process of reconfiguration to try and catch up with it. We were just discussing how the ceremonial and archaic aspects of playing in the music world, or contemporary art world, feel to a degree like playacting. One has to acknowledge them to make a living and participate, however it is clear that we are perhaps a transitional generation, that shifts in art making and experience in the past decade have eclipsed the capacities of institutions and models that were cultivated in a different time and for a different function than is perhaps required today. It is also clear that the game has shifted in accordance with the neoliberal hegemony you describe, but we cannot wince at that, as it is too crucial.

It's one of the things, I think, that excites us most about the group of characters you could crudely describe as the left accelerationists—this idea of surveying emerging relations and shifting modes of power and attempting to modulate our activities to antagonize or exploit those new channels. We are obsessed with YouTube stars, not always for the quality of the work being made, but for how distant the rules of engagement are with anything that has existed previously in an arts context. I see most contemporary artists now as simply curators of phenomena that they have witnessed existing in the *real* cultural battlefield—snippets of something happening in Eastern Europe, a font from here, a reference to an obscure YouTube trend from kids with cell phones in Chicago. This is an indeterminate, prostrate state—one that normally ends in a conclusion of "IDK WTF to do. There is just too much, but this looks nice."

The challenge is to not simply observe this world from the outside, and congratulate ourselves for the conversations we follow, but to *participate* within that culture and exercise some of the ideas and models we believe in within an arena that has legitimate impact. This is really hard, but ought to be the goal. The great opportunity, as you described, is that this new environment is pretty open to things that traditionally may have been marginalized—Metahaven and others have talked about how comedy, for example, *won the web*.[4]—and in a sense this new landscape favors sharp minds with the ability to produce work quickly and pointedly—which is why I find Ben Singleton's works on *Metis*[5] and the introduction of Francois Jullien's *Treatise on Efficacy*[6] to be so essential. It's also part of the motivation behind my Saga project,[7] which prioritizes time and context specific expression (a comedic trait) and also the need for us to begin to start dealing with the new era of personalization that has been ushered in by a web driven by advertising and the desire to target us as individuals.

I did a talk for PAN a couple of years ago, speaking of the need to appreciate micro gestures online, as allegro (alacritous) notes in one unfurling composition, and think that there is merit to reconfiguring our appreciation of art production in this new climate through such a logic. Models exist to facilitate such a shift; we just kind of need collective will to start participating within them. Which isn't to say there isn't merit in utilizing old industry. There is a lot of good will around the music industry, for example, and a lot of knowledge that can be repurposed towards new ends, but I'd rather see these institutions as modules in a larger project.

Holly Herndon: There is sometimes a strange false dichotomy in musical discourse between the rational and emotional. I find this particularly frustrating because I try to make work that deals with both. There's a tendency in music to rely on emotional tropes,

particular vocal inflections, instrumentation, swelling, or chord progressions, to express a depth of emotion. While I of course also draw on a shared musical language, I'm more interested in developing new motifs to express new emotions, which are usually directly tied to the underlying concept of a work. Mat and I develop musical processes that deal with the subject matter of the piece, tying in production, text and delivery. This to me is both more conceptually and rationally sound, as well as more emotional.

Alex Williams: Matt and I discussed online a little while back the fetishization of indeterminacy in the guise of a sort of complexity porn. This is something that interests me in a number of registers: aesthetic, yes, but also theoretical, scientific, and political. There is an entire meta-ideological strand of thinking, from political theory through to contemporary art practice, that lauds the 'creativity' of being itself in ultimately indeterminate complex processes. This is either a sort of shock and awe aesthetic of the irretrievably intricate, or a 'lava lamp liberalism' of neovitalist animistic wonder. They slot in, as you state in your question, quite snugly into some of the fundamental intellectual beliefs of neoliberalism—principally Hayek's idea of spontaneous and unplannable order.

What I am interested in, in art as well as in politics, are those approaches that can mediate between irreducible epistemological complexity (where the world is too complex to ever understand, 'master,' or manipulate) and older discourses of absolute understanding and control (i.e., Laplace). Put much more simply, the world and its phenomena *are* complex, but not purely indeterminate. To act in such a world requires us to understand the patterns that are formed, even in highly complex domains. For art, even if the original work itself is rigorously indeterminate, our pattern-locating mentalities will tend towards projecting patterns onto them. Suffice to say, however, the best (academic?) music today combines a formal complexity with an overarching aesthetic design. At its best, this matches a compositional complexity with the sensory register, enabling us to 'hear' the process, albeit often processes very different from traditional western harmonic resolution, and hence to find order within the complex.

HH: This speaks a little to what I mentioned above in tying process to concept, which is of course much more possible when dealing with electronic media—i.e., a song about surveillance can include self surveillance software, etc. When successful, the very sound or aesthetic of the piece can convey the idea.

If we think of the container, as the form of the piece, it holds smaller complex cells with complex relationships to the other cells. A sharp ear could be able to recognize these relationships and gain an aesthetic experience from that understanding. The problem is

that in certain communities not all dialog is considered valid, and I personally think that the definition of those cells should expand. For example, the politics of choosing a specific drum pattern with a specific drum kit; this is a dialog within dance music communities, which would not be placed on the same level as the dialog of timbre and pitch class in academic circles.

I'm particularly interested in the pop music container, because it can act as a sort of Trojan horse, to borrow from my friend Benedict Singleton. Using custom and experimental software, I can create complex timbral shifts and rhythmic inflections, or cover political ground, but also participate in a shared cultural dialog that is happening outside of niche music communities. This is the sweet spot.

Mat Dryhurst modding Akihiko Taniguchi's software (Mat Dryhurst, 2016)

GB: Holly, you have an album named *Platform* after Benedict Singleton's theories about the strategic operationalization of contingency, and Mat, as well as your collaborative work with Holly you've designed an embeddable platform for self-hosted, website-specific artworks (called Saga) and talked about platforms in terms of the political economy of music in the digital age. Alex the concept of repurposing has played

an important part in your thinking, and you've recently written about the politics of platform dynamics. How can the logic of platforms be usefully applied to music, both at the level of aesthetics and politically speaking?

AW: Platform logic, if it can be reduced to a singular idea, is a matter of generative entrenchment. This is the philosopher William Wimsatt's term for a basic feature of complex adaptive systems of all kinds: they feature building blocks that operate as relatively stable platforms for other entities to build upon, and in doing so, in generating the behavior and structural possibilities of other entities, they become entrenched, hard to shift.[8] Generativity and entrenchment are therefore deeply coupled together. The more generative something is, the more difficult, or costly, it will be to shift or transform. This is, if you like, the basic diagram of the platform.

Music, at multiple levels, displays platform logic. Think of something like genre, for example. In dance music, genre is most often constructed around some basic conventions (BPM, beat structure, instrumentation choice). This generic setup is most powerful when it is capable of operating as a flexible platform for multiple different realizations—for example, the basic four-to-the-floor house and techno beat structure is incredibly simple, yet supports a vast array of different aesthetic realizations in practice. Alternatively, we could think of certain forms of tuning and pitch systems, and the way they operate as an invisible ground for much music-making practices. So the logic of platforms is already at work in basically all forms of music making.

The political side of platforms, as I understand it, comes in the way they recede into the background. They are literally fundamental, in the sense of being the ground on which practice occurs, yet successful platforms have a tendency to appear merely neutral. In this sense, they can control and guide action occurring atop them. In terms of IT platforms, the license to print money which Microsoft, for example, obtained in the nineties with Windows, was entirely about its ability to function as a smooth, apparently neutral platform environment. In the business studies literature on platforms, the ability to present yourself as a neutral space is deemed extremely important.

Beyond a certain tipping point, platforms become difficult not to use. All this means that power, and a conservative form of power at that, is deeply involved in platforms within the human world. But I think it is also important to emphasize that the reason platforms become successful is partly because they enable you to do things; they are productive, generative. Those seeking to oppose a given platform—a technical one, like Microsoft, Google, or Apple, or a political one, like Neoliberalism, or an aesthetic one, like conservative genre boundaries or tuning systems—have to remember that. It implies that

a purely negative or transgressive project will be unlikely to be able to seriously disrupt the functioning of existing malignant platforms. Only the building of new, better ones, will suffice. Or perhaps the re-engineering of those already in existence.

MD: I totally agree with Alex's point about musical convention as platform, and that is something Holly has spoken of a lot in the past; you basically have an entrenched language with which to express yourself as liberally as you can. I also think we see eye to eye about the need to re-engineer existing platforms such as the music industry, which I touched on a little bit before. One addition to this, I would say, would be the studying of social platforms that have always existed but perhaps have only been acknowledged since the advent of social media.

Art History, or Musicology, is often quite poor at identifying the idiosyncratic social elements that led to many of the canonized milestones of the evolution of the medium, the webs of influence, finance and opportunity. There is a reason we know who John Cage is, less so Harry Partch. I remember Holly writing a paper about Mary Bauermeister once, whose money and social circle contributed so greatly to Stockhausen's career and thinking—and without being too conspiratorial I believe there is real promise in understanding how these cultures were formed, with less emphasis on the icon and more emphasis on the platform that made the rupture possible. That was one of the goals with the ongoing *Platform* project, to emphasize the web of actors who contributed to its construction as a way of addressing that opportunity.

I remember being really struck by Reza Negarestani's mentioning of *Taqqiyah* in Cyclonopedia,[9] this idea of dispersed satellite agents, waiting to be activated, which also parallels the most promising aspects of John Perry Barlow's 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace'[10] which featured quite heavily in the track 'Interference.' These kind of social platforms exist in all aspects of society—platforms of wealth and influence determined by family names, platforms of favor determined by affiliation to institutions.

How can we learn from those models to construct social platforms with more virtuous/tricky aspirations? Is there a core ethos with the flexibility to sustain the generativity Alex speaks of and actually be productive? It might seem ambitious but I think we can learn a lot from how the independent musical infrastructure was developed out of necessity and conviction in the eighties and nineties, which is something I'm preparing a presentation about this month, incidentally.

HH: We were interested in seeing the release of an album as a platform with certain mechanisms that may be experimented within. So much of this is dictated by industry. Really mundane things like brand recognition, etc. play a big role in how music is discussed, praising the lone icon. We tried to subvert this with the interviews and press surrounding *Platform*, asking how we can keep enough name recognition so that the work is sharable and infectious, but use the platform to highlight other people's research. Depending on the journalist, it was more or less successful. The same goes for performance, travel, etc. It has helped me to open up experimentation beyond the software or sounds alone, and this is really exciting, as sound is so often quite abstract. Becoming more aware of the platform politics of releasing work is encouraging us to have a more direct role in the shaping of these platforms, to see them as malleable and to view ourselves with agency.

Electronic music, a field where I spend a lot of time, is obsessed with aestheticizing dystopia; it sounds cool, it works in a dark club, etc. Don't get me wrong, I love a good dystopian catharsis too, but I see a need for that to be balanced with a feeling of empowerment and encouragement. Independent music has long been a place where communities feel emboldened to take on infrastructural issues. This is where we are trying to take the conversation in music.
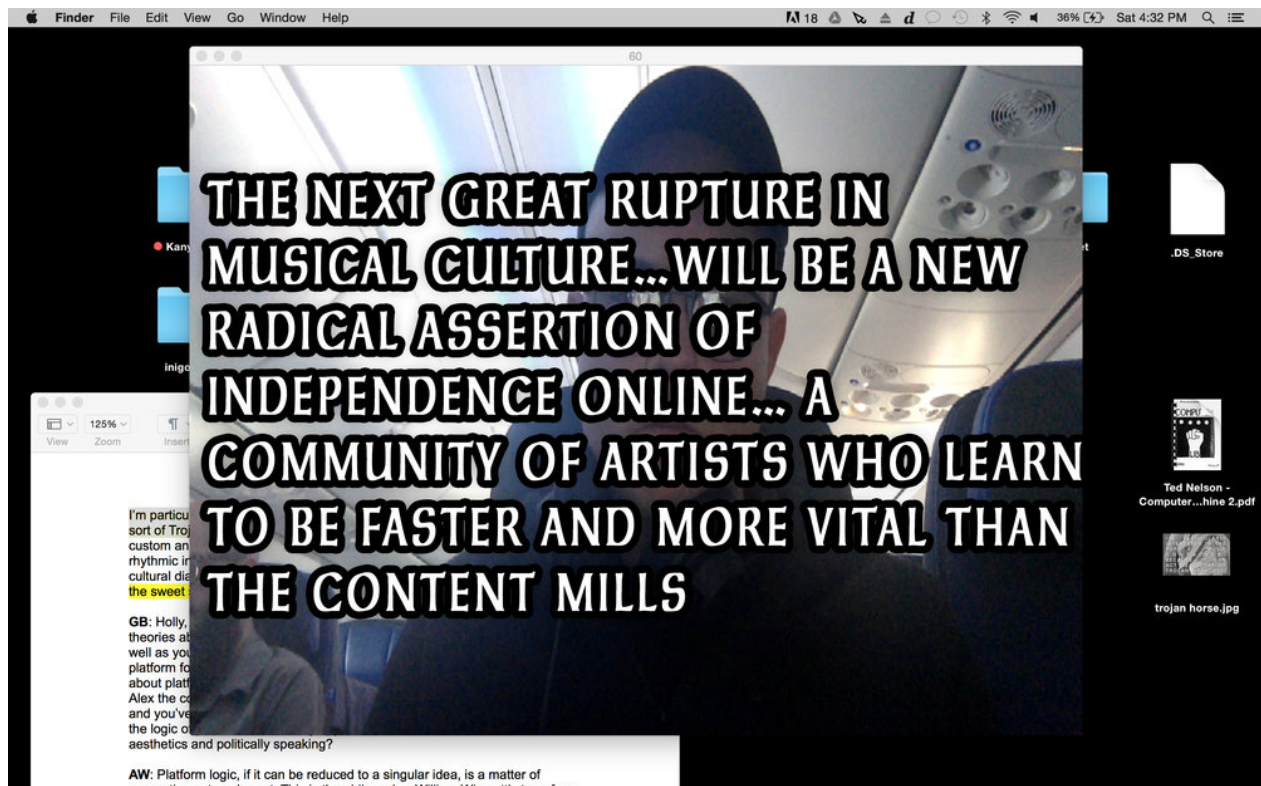
Mat Dryhurst modding Akihiko Taniguchi's software (Mat Dryhurst, 2016)

GB: In Hesse's *Glass Bead Game,* the leading academics played a game of knowledge synthesis in which musical motifs, philosophical propositions and scientific equations are equally represented by patterned placements of beads. This fantasy presents an ideal unification of knowledge, but various developments occurring after Hesse's book certainly make transits and syntheses between different domains possible: in particular category theory and complexity theory but also computational modeling to some degree. How does your own theory and practice of music relate to the notion of universal synthesis allegorized in Hesse's game?

MD: I think it's an interesting analogy for what you guys are trying to do, and somewhat haphazardly what I think we have been trying to do. I did an interview a while back talking about how frustrating I find it that many people in the art world harbor this bias that once something *does something*, it's no longer considered art. In many ways I feel that is a really limited perspective, cultivated at a time when people did not have such immediate access to one another. It's hard to quantify, but there is a large community of curious (in both senses of the word) people in different fields who are all finding each other online, and this synthesis is occurring at greater frequency. It's the only area I want to operate in.

Perhaps this synthesis is already happening, and teenagers now are slightly confused at the distinction between fields and people's dogged identification with one or the other. Music is one way to participate in a synthesis of sorts, but everything we do is pluggable and gestures are not contained to one area or one purpose. The album is a Trojan horse for other elements. The live show is a gathering place and a performance. We just participated in a conference that began as a slack group. It is one thing to aestheticize this synthesis, which a lot of people have attempted to do in the past, and quite the other to embody this synthesis and take advantage of opportunities not previously available. It's something we talk a lot about, how there is a regrettable focus on novelty, awe and spectacle within both arts and technology; "It's like a sculpture, but *the internet!*" or "We made this building look like it was constructed from 16 million ants! Look at all the moving lines!" And in a sense this seems quite antiquated—when the real exciting areas of progress for me are the ways in which people have adopted quite simple, ubiquitous technologies and grown cultures from those new interactions and connections. That's why the live text stuff we do for the show is, in my mind, far more interesting a proposition, as it is an experiment in data mining, real time communication, and real time broadcasting that is triggered simply from checking Facebook and using text edit.

Those kinds of experiments don't position artists as people pawing at the window of culture, as detached curators of phenomena they witness online, or assuming some kind of removed, constructed stance, but as figures participating within a culture.

HH: It's a really lovely allegory. I've been fortunate to be involved with some institutions that take similar view, such as CCRMA or IRCAM. These are computer music research institutions where composers are seen as researchers who add value to the research progress. This requires a great deal of respect and humility on both sides, and when successful can yield amazing results.

GB: Alex, what are the political stakes of knowledge syntheses?

AW: In short, extremely significant. To summarize brutally, if politics is basically about power, and about how we can strategize within power relations, then the constitution of those power relations and our understanding thereof is key. But there is no simple, unitary way to understand all the ways that power is ramified, which means that any serious project to try and comprehend them is necessarily a highly synthetic one, expanding from the analysis of language to technology, energy networks, political organizations, economic systems, cultural production, identity and subjectivity, and so on. Mapping these formations and the complex interactions between them is a difficult task. Beyond that, there is the need to deal with the problem of complexity, which is based upon limitations of knowledge, and how to strategize on the basis of partial information.

I have proposed that something like *complex hegemony* can work as a conceptual container in which we can synthesize different forms of knowledge about power and the power of knowledge, while retaining local logics, or the fact that different fields of power organize themselves according to different rules and principles. Complex hegemony can then also work as a kind of technics (or macrophysics) of how power emerges out of the interactions of these distinct but overlapping domains or fields. This can then constitute a kind of strategic framework in which we can begin to conceptualize action, as necessarily always partial, revealing in the process of execution more knowledge as well as different capacities for action. Knowledge synthesis therefore underpins a kind of strategic synthesis of action, in a sense, ramified across domains, but with a quasi-intentional strategic orientation towards re-engineering power relations as a whole.
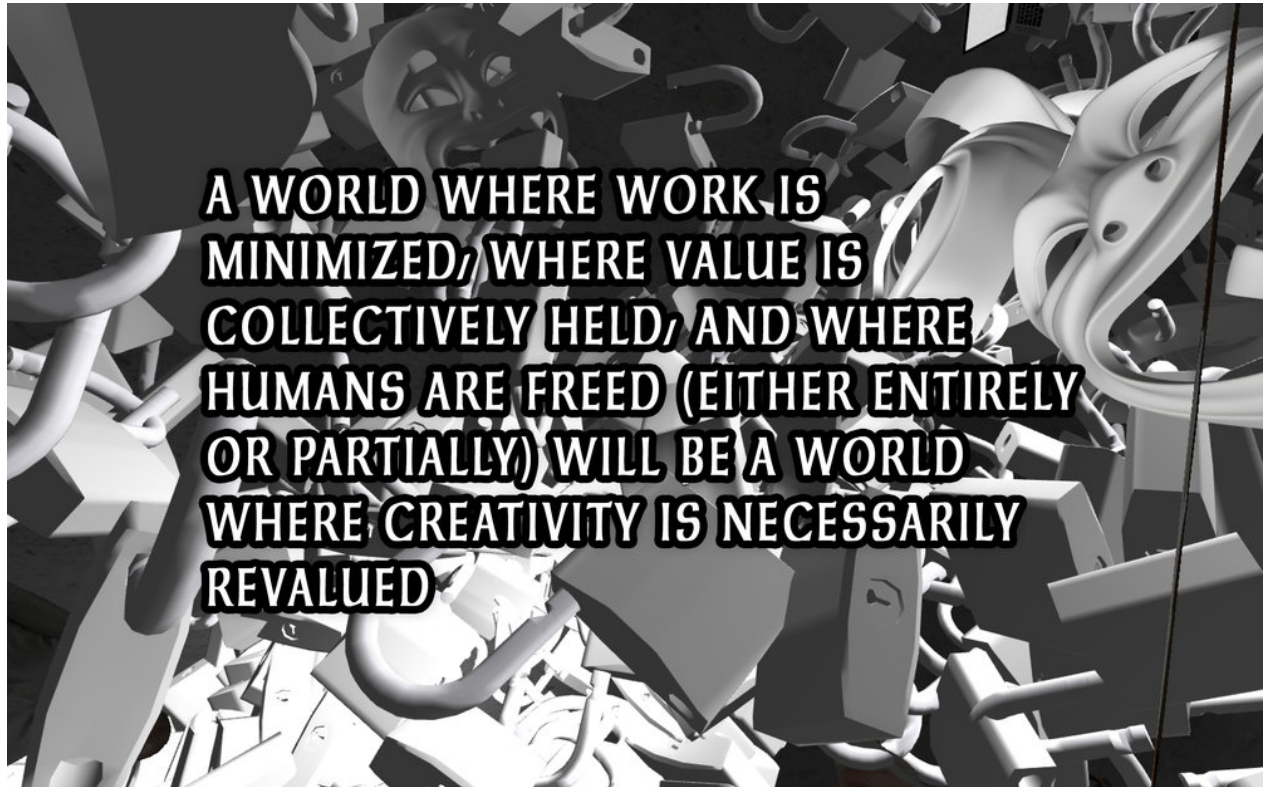
Mat Dryhurst modding Akihiko Taniguchi's software (Mat Dryhurst, 2016)

GB: Can you speculate on what a post-capitalist situation of music-making might be, or what might be some of the intermediary steps to its realization? Or, again this is both a political and aesthetic question: how can music reclaim the future?

HH: Just as the computer has freed me from playing each instrument individually and necessarily in real time, to shape other aspects of the music and vocal performance in real time, this will continue. In some cases it makes people lazy, and this creates boring, mechanical shows, but those who use that new freedom will create new forms of performance, i.e., if one parameter is automated, that means that you have the freedom to experiment with another parameter. Making music is becoming more like gaming, and almost anyone can participate, which is really exciting. This will change our ideas of virtuosity, and will open up entirely new conversations in a musical language that has been tied to five or six parameters for a very long time.

MD: I think music can reclaim the future by waking up and participating in its creation. I gave a talk a few years ago for PAN about an 'alacritous' music, that redefined itself by the logic of real time exchanges of information. It's also part of the logic behind the Saga project. We have found enough ways to create and exchange waveforms. I find that pursuit quite boring. The exchange of time and context specific gestures is at a premium, and I think finding a way to participate and complicate those exchanges is of paramount

importance.

I also think that algorithmic music is a distraction. What I cherish about music's power is its humanity and *live-ness*. I have said for some time that I think the next great rupture in musical culture (equivalent to the establishment of the independent distribution systems of the eighties and nineties) will be a new radical assertion of independence online—not a hermetic retreat, but a community of artists who learn to be faster and more vital than the content mills; artists who self-host and experiment with the means of dissemination so as to make the waveform economy look geriatric. I see traces of it happening and get very excited to think about what it might turn into with the right momentum.

AW: Thinking about algorithmic music–we've all heard and been disappointed by the sheer blandness of many attempts—but I'm not sure that this is some kind of human deficit, so much as the deficit in creative acumen of those crafting the algorithms themselves, which are in a sense merely another order of automation within the creative process, on top of existing processes of standardization (generic convention) or formalization (as in serialism and onwards in the 'classical' tradition).

In the book I've just written with Nick Srnicek, *Inventing the Future*, we discuss the ways in which left politics can be reoriented around a specific future trajectory: the struggle for a post-work society, which uses automation to liberate everyone from the drudgery, misery, and boredom of work. I don't think, however, that in the domain of culture this means, necessarily, a shift towards nonhuman creativity, per se. Instead, a world where work is minimized, where value is collectively held, and where humans are freed (either entirely or partially) will be a world where creativity is necessarily revalued. This will be as big a shift in the production, dissemination, and consumption of music as the invention of recorded sound, with highly unpredictable effects.

As to the role of music-making in post-capitalist society, this is obviously a matter of total speculation. There has been a strand of socio-musical theorizing (for example, Attali) which would point to the future of music as being one where we all compose, using technology to help mediate the way. In this sense, automation doesn't necessarily replace human creativity, but rather augments it, and potentially universalizes it.

Interview conducted for Glass Bead by Inigo Wilkins.

Footnotes

1. Plato. *The Republic*. Penguin Classics, 2007. Print.

2. Steven Mithen. *The Singing Neanderthals: the Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body.* Harvard University Press. 2006.

3. Jacques Attali. *Noise: A Political Economy of Music. University of Minnesota Press*. 1985. Print.

4. Giampaolo Bianconi. "An Interview with Metahaven." *Rhizome*, February 2013. Web.

5. Benedict Singleton, "⬚ (Notes Toward) Speculative Design", *Shifter Magazine*. Web

6. François Jullien. *Traité de l'efficacité*. Le Livre de Poche, 2002. Print.

7. See http://accessions.org/article/saga-v1-0/ and https://github.com/matdryhurst/Saga#saga.

8. William Wimsatt. *Re-Engineering Philosophy for Limited Beings*. Harvard University Press, 2007. Print.

9. Reza Negarestani. *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*. Re.press, 2008. Print.

10. Online at https://projects.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html.

Alex Williams is a political theorist.

Holly Herndon is an artist currently based in San Francisco, California.

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