

The Danger of the Crowd

Opening excerpt of keynote

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I like to make music with lots of people. People I've never met before. It can be unpredictable, dangerous, and a little terrifying. It's kind of promiscuous. Things have ended in tears, yeah, but I love the danger of it. There's a tradition of this in much improvised music. There are pros and cons of course. It can be hard work and exhausting sometimes. And there's this feeling of always being at the beginning, a kind of Groundhog Day: nothing progressing necessarily. But then do we always need to think about development or goal orientated activity? This way of working puts me in a position of naivety, having to discover something for the first time. And, by default, it's radical – something that comes from the root, worked-up from the bottom.

Here we are now in a global pandemic. People speak of social distancing, physical distancing, call it what you like. It's made me think of my school days and, now, this might sound a bit pretentious, studying Shakespeare's play *Coriolanus*. Actually, I can't really remember much about the play; yet, one thing I do remember is how Shakespeare portrayed the crowd as a symbol of danger, the irrational and uncontrollable. I think back to times spent standing on the terraces of Highbury watching Arsenal play football or being in a mosh-pit at a gig. Going to the pub. Or even singing in a choir. There was a feeling of losing myself in those crowds, becoming part of something else, something bigger. Then, suddenly overnight, we're told crowds are forbidden. We've become atomised. Now, I've conditionally accepted this – I don't want to catch a highly contagious virus – but breaking up *the crowd* is the way to control and maintain power, just like Coriolanus did in Shakespeare's play.

I've been associated with the DIY and Maker Movement. This association is true, but there is a paradox in that I'm more interested in community, face-to-face activity, physical presence, materials/materiality, and group dynamics. It's collaborative making and large-group performance that get me excited, not doing-it-yourself.

I've been critical of a certain type of electronic musician – the bedroom artist with their home studio, and the solo DJ or laptop artist. Then there was the whole iCulture thing that seemed to represent hyper-individualism. I was reading Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* and thinking about dystopian futures and living in isolation. I recently heard author Will Self read an extract from J G Ballard's short story *High Rise* where the protagonist only converses with his wife remotely through a kind of zoom video conferencing. So prophetic. Brilliant writing. I've also recently written an allegory for a fanzine with Johana Ožvold called *The Soloist – Cooking for One*. It's based on an old cookbook recipe exclaiming the arrival of the microwave oven and the pleasures of eating alone at home. I think a lot of electronic music can be like this. I don't enjoy it.

Well, I hear you say: "You're screwed now!" Maybe, but no one's going to force me online to make music. I think every artist needs to fight back a bit, think laterally, be subversive, do things their way. In fact, my preoccupation with the physical world doesn't have to end overnight because of a pandemic, even if it does mean losing my livelihood. On the contrary, the pandemic has made such issues even more pressing, urgent, vital.

Like many musicians I've had all of my gigs cancelled. And it's doubly worse in that I specialise in off-line practice: traveling to places, meeting people, group devising and performing, and collaborative making. There's touching, hugging, sharing tools and instruments, rolling about on the floor, and sweaty gigs. It's all too dirty for the here and now! At the turn of the Millennium, I was reading publications such as *Mondo 2000*, where it was all about virtualness – you know cyborgs and virtual sex and all that – and I was also reading an interview with Laurie Anderson in the magazine *Rolling Stone* where she said: "There's not enough dirt in virtual reality."

Coincidentally, at this time I was also thinking about viruses and bacteria. The composer Henry Cowell wrote a great article *The Joys of Noise*. In this, he wrote:

Since the 'disease' of noise permeates all music, the only hopeful course is to consider that the noise-germ, like the bacteria of cheese, is a good microbe, which

may provide previously hidden delights to the listener, instead of producing musical oblivion.

These are times of very bad bacteria, life-threatening, killer bacteria. Still, to use Cowell's analogy, I'm carrying on looking for good bacteria and trying to engage with the physical world in any way I can.