

Collateral Damage

When John Richards of Dirty Electronics began manufacturing interactive sound devices such as a hand-held analogue synth, he tapped into a participatory social experiment in revitalising digitally numbed senses

It is more a case of collateral consequences – side effects of digital cultures – than collateral damage, for much of the damage has brought new ways of looking at things. One of these consequences has been to heighten the importance of face-to-facing (or, as a musician might say, ear-to-ear). Sometimes it is hard to imagine how online communities have fostered meetings and social gatherings ranging from Stitch 'n Bitch knitting groups in local pubs to blogwalks. What could be less digital? Even the idea of online dating is an oxymoron when the ultimate aim is to meet and date in person.

Art and music as a social practice is something I have become increasingly drawn to. Constructivists Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner, in their 1920 “Realistic Manifesto”, argued: “Art should attend us everywhere that life flows and acts... at the bench, at the table, at work, at rest, at play.” Similar themes are continued in the work of Joseph Beuys and the idea of social sculpture, where art is directly linked to and influential upon society. The theatre works of Bertolt Brecht and the *Lehrstücke*, which blurred the line between actor and audience and emphasised process over outcome, were hugely influential on composers Kurt Weill, Hanns Eisler and Paul Hindemith. Cornelius Cardew, in “A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution”, saw The Scratch Orchestra as an “assembling for action (music-making, performance, edification)”. He also considered in the constitution that “the word music and its derivatives are here not understood to refer exclusively to sound and related phenomena (hearing, etc). What they do refer to is flexible and depends entirely on the members of the Scratch Orchestra.”

Thrusting new technologies often force us to examine both the future and the past. The Industrial Revolution not only gave birth to a host of new technologies that transformed the way we live, but also the Romantic movement that vigorously questioned the impact of these technologies on society. Nam June Paik railed against TV for turning its viewers into passive consumers, and made thought-provoking works such as *Zen For TV* and *Participation TV* that challenged our relationship with technology and the society it represented. Many emerging artists and musicians have also attempted to understand the social impact of all-pervasive digital technologies by placing social engagement at the centre of their artistic practice. For example, Nottingham artist Matthew Trivett explores various processes and workshops for the generation of collaborative artworks that include home brewing and beekeeping

(perhaps picking up on Beuys's fascination with bees as a model for social organisation); and electronic noise artist Ryan Jordan's low budget hydrophone and canoeing workshop, where you construct your own underwater microphone then build a canoe to enable field recordings on a canal.

At the end of the millennium I began to develop my own response to digital cultures that shirked the ever-growing miniaturisation of tools and iCulture. I became part of a growing DIY electronics/instrument community who were seeking other ways to make sound and perform. Digital cultures did play their part through forums such as *Matrixsynth* blog, *electromusic.com* and *Make* magazine. Cross-disciplinary work became instantly more possible through online communities, a discussion in its own right. Making music in the studio and on computers, which had become one and the same, lost its appeal and I sought to engage with sound, materials and people in a much more physical way. I wanted to get my hands dirty in some kind of alternative process of music making. I wanted to ‘touch’ again: reawaken a sense numbed by digital technology. There was going to be collateral damage. There were no albums, or even any downloads to begin with. In some people's eyes and ears I kind of dropped off the map for a while. I made electronic circuits, sounds and performances with likeminded people in what you could call ‘events’ and I became more interested in DIT (do it together). And this didn't mean file sharing.

I started designing sound generating devices and printed circuit boards (PCBs) that were intended to be built by attendees of Dirty Electronics events, whose musical potential would be explored collectively. But these devices and PCBs became a catalyst for musical and artistic expression. It was about following in a tradition of ‘composing inside electronics’ (a term coined by David Tudor), exploring the intersection between design, sound and performance, and rethinking where composition begins. It also occurred to me that I didn't have to labour over every recording and oversee each performance, when in the creation of a sound-generating device the seeds of a composition were there for anyone to realise. It was a bit like a cuckoo laying an egg in a nest for another bird to hatch and nurture. These devices weren't gadgets or gizmos that fetishised material objects, but compositions that articulated a particular aesthetic and a broader artistic purpose. Dirty Electronics events were hard to document with recording and video equipment, being more about an experience, a 21st century happening. But the circuits became documents of the

events – collateral if you like, or so it seemed. It wasn't long before I was selling more circuits than recorded music and collaborating with Mute Records to make a touch-controlled synth. Perhaps this can be seen as a small contribution towards shifting the paradigm of what record companies sell and how they represent music. Through working on Dirty Electronics circuits and commissions it has been music that has become ‘collateral’ to a bigger process, a hybrid that is part instrument, circuit, performance and social experiment excited and driven on by digital cultures.

Dirty Electronics has also made me aware of a potential alternative to the artistic and economic models presented by Kenneth Goldsmith (*Epiphanies, The Wire* 327) and Chris Cutler (*Collateral Damage, issue 328*), a model that is dependent neither on recorded media nor the live performance, but based on a wider social network of participation. Digital cultures and social media have also helped create a participatory milieu. Tweets and blogs allow us all to participate in social comment, and cheap/cracked apps and software allow anyone to participate in the creation of music and its dissemination through portals like Soundcloud. Nam June Paik would probably be turning in his grave over the sham of participatory TV that has evolved where you can register votes through phone-ins and audition to take part in the programme itself, only to engage in the act of viewing TV in the same passive way.

So it is of no surprise that current trends in music demand ‘participation’. Workshops and communal events are now everywhere: arts institutions and organisations routinely include them to help justify their funding. Despite this, workshops have also flourished at a grassroots level. Look at the programme of NK in Berlin that offers a huge range of activities, from workshops and performances to listening salons and discussions. Such artist-led organisations have elevated and made possible the idea of workshop as an art form. In general there are differences between, for example, the workshops run by Cardew at Morley College, London in the 1960s, and those currently at NK in Berlin that are far wider reaching, bringing together a whole host of artists from different disciplines and backgrounds through online communities. With recent social and economic change threatening the very survival of many artists and musicians, participatory events offer sustainability, both financially and through community support. Like it or not, as a result of digital cultures, we may all need to become, broadly speaking, social workers. dirtyelectronics.org