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**“I CONTAIN MULTI-TUDES” – A MEDITATION  
ON THE NEED FOR ROUGH AND ROWDY WAYS**

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BRUCE RUSSELL

## **“I CONTAIN MULTI-TUDES” – A MEDITATION ON THE NEED FOR ROUGH AND ROWDY WAYS**

*I go right to the edge, I go right to the end  
I go right to where all things lost are made good again  
I sing the songs of experience like William Blake  
I have no apologies to make  
Everything's flowing all at the same time  
I live on the boulevard of crime  
I drive fast cars, and I eat fast foods  
I contain multitudes<sup>1</sup>*

Since his elevation to the Nobel laureateship, quoting the lyrics of Bob Dylan seems even more apropos to successfully understanding the rubbish which fills ‘modern times,’ and the possible solutions to our current eschatological predicament. In the more-or-less poetic ‘meditation’ which follows, I will use his lyric as jumping-off point for a kind of wilfully Derridean exegesis. My aim is not to attempt to divine what St Bob ‘meant;’ but to use ‘categories’ derived from his words to cast a sideways light on an emergent art form based on improvisation with sound, which I believe can show us the embryo of a strategy for resolving some of the challenges we are currently facing.

This framework of ideas, I argue (informed as it is by my reading of Guy Debord), may serve to support new disciplinary paradigms, and also to mirror a sustainable future strategy for socially engaged creativity based on the breaking down of distance between artist and audience, the questioning of otherwise unexamined cultural presuppositions, and the creative re-use of post-industrial detritus. The ultimate goal is a form of creative practice that points to a way out of our current impasse, towards universally emancipatory outcomes. Towards a *style of* (and for) *living*, that can aspire to universality; to accommodate, to satisfy and ultimately to contain multitudes.

## EVERYTHING'S FLOWING ALL AT THE SAME TIME ...

One of the most pressing characteristics of life in 'modern times' is that we find ourselves continually exposed to a barrage of 'content' driven by the weaponisation of the internet by a new global elite of techno-robber barons. The toxic, apparently irreversible and intentionally directed nature of this assault on 'civil society,' through the precision-targeting of individual psyches on a mass scale, is usually referred to by the unacceptably benign name of 'social media.' But it is best understood by using the name that Guy Debord gave it, before it was even born – *the integrated spectacle*.

As Debord put this in 1988: "the final sense of the integrated spectacle is this – that it has integrated itself into reality to the same extent as it was describing it, and that it was reconstructing it as it was describing it."<sup>2</sup>

Apart from climate change (with which it shares common root causes), this truly "spectacular" corrosion of all meaningful social bonds, and the fatal undermining of the individual will to live which accompanies it, is the most serious threat we currently face as a species – because it prevents us from even seeing what lies behind each and every other threat: rampant inequality and an industrialised death-drive.

I believe that the only way to push back against this "veritable Matrix" is to identify tiny cracks in the commodity spectacle where creativity, and its handmaid, collaboration, can carve out limited zones of autonomy – some room to live. *This* must be the work of 'art,' and the art which does this will be striving to resist commodification. Nothing else matters in a time of emergency; and surely we have arrived now at a point where everyone can accept that there is a global emergency unfolding 'in real time'?

To realise this avowedly utopian goal, of kicking against the pricks, 'art' will need to draw on ideas that are already "in everybody's mind."<sup>3</sup> In plainly dystopian times, only utopian solutions can have any chance of success. Now that we are living in 'the worst of all possible worlds,' we need to get over the pessimism about human nature that neo-liberalism has enshrined into the all-encompassing ideology of "capitalist realism,"<sup>4</sup> and find a 'North-West Passage' – towards forms of action that affirm our autonomy as human subjects, rather than accepting our passive transformation into reified objects.

Luckily a map is at hand, courtesy of Debord's "revolutionary poetics," which can show us how improvisational art practices might transcend the limitations of avant-garde elitism and be placed at the service of such a revolution. Properly understood, Debord's ideas point to improvisation as a true integration of theory and practice which, if implemented with sufficient rigour as a creative strategy, can literally 'change minds,' away from the zombie state of uncritical receptivity required by 'modern life.'

My experience of this over many years has been enacted within an apparently insignificant international art underground of networked sound improvisers. Thirty-five years and as many albums with The Dead C. on numerous American, European and even New Zealand labels has still generated, deservedly and reassuringly, little mainstream media attention. The insignificance of this still "emergent practice"<sup>5</sup> in terms of media attention and capital investment is of course its greatest strength; it is, in Bourdieusian terms, at the "most autonomous pole" of the field of cultural production.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the work is undertaken largely free of economic incentives, which

always tend towards the service of power. As a consequence of this structural autonomy, enduring forms of social action through art, and the social relations that underpin these, become possible. These forms have so far proven 'un-recuperable,' because in terms of their *aesthetics* they do not conform to established norms (as Bud Grossman said to Llewyn Davis at the Gate of Horn, "I don't see a lot of money here"). Their virtue instead resides in their *poetics*: the roles they play in establishing relationships and the ends that these then enable in society.

## I LIVE ON THE BOULEVARD OF CRIME

Anyone who feels perhaps that some of my assertions are 'overly poetic' should consider that my hero, Guy Debord, judged that the reason power misprized him so thoroughly in later life was not what he did during the 1968 events, but rather in 1952, when he undertook for nearly two years to "never work,"<sup>7</sup> but rather to engage solely in a form of "working without a work." This latter phrase is one of the best definitions we have of improvisation understood as a creative practice.<sup>8</sup> Debord's efforts at that time were directed almost exclusively to the activity known as the *dérive*, a psycho-geographical action that involved the aimless perambulation through an urban environment by a small group of individuals collectively engaged in mentally charting its changing ambiances. What was important in this focused attention to the *dérive* was its impact on the collective psyche of the participants; which was, in a real way, a work of art realised as a *style of living*.<sup>9</sup> The point of this activity was to create a group of potential revolutionaries psychically trained to resist the commodity spectacle, a process that in their case led to defeat in 1968, but to a defeat which nonetheless planted seeds against the future.

And this is essentially my argument. That in these times, even a style of living can be a form of rebellion, and an 'unpopular' artwork that defines, articulates and builds the improvised creative capability of a group engaged in such a style of living could be the most important form of activity open to us. Such work does not require unsustainable, massive server farms of hard drives ceaselessly crunching algorithms. On the contrary, it leverages capabilities inherent within the human psyche to create its own meaning – ex nihilo.

In this light we may see the street as the opposite pole to the internet; a pole where social change may be realised through a revolution in everyday life ('fast cars ... fast foods'). A revolution which must in a real sense be seen as a 'crime' against power, even if it is just as often also seen as a crime against taste.

## I SING THE SONGS OF EXPERIENCE, LIKE WILLIAM BLAKE

Behind these assertions of course, lies the foundational work of Walter Benjamin. Building on the achievements of the Surrealists, he elevated *fânerie* to the level of both artform and tool for interrogating commodification, anticipating many of the insights later independently arrived at by Ivan Chitchevlov, the archetypal Lettrist *dériveur*.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, Benjamin was responsible for elevating the concept of 'experience' to the forefront of understanding life in a given social, historical and economic formation. Benjamin understood culture as a complex of overlapping perspectives, within the intersection of which the meaning of any given artwork could change radically over time. He castigated the opposing view of fixed historical reality independent of any given standpoint (an unchanging aesthetics of 'eternal masterpieces') as "historicism."

For Benjamin the true 'origin' of an artwork was not when it was made, but when it entered into the historical context that gave it definitive meaning: "The authentic – the hallmark of origin in phenomena – is the object of discovery."<sup>11</sup> And that discovery can happen in unexpected ways, at unforeseen times, emerging unexpectedly from a "monad" or cultural constellation – and by definition the existence of a constellation depends on the point from which it is viewed. This is why experience becomes central and, as the Situationists found, everything depends on the lens through which you view it. Hence their decision not to condemn, but rather to eulogise, the rioting arsonists of Watts in 1965; not as criminals, but as true revolutionaries: "the irreconcilable enemies... of the alienated way of life of the entire modern society."<sup>12</sup> In that vein of course, Benjamin had already in the 1930s advanced the thesis that history is nothing but a pile of wreckage; and a record of barbarism written by the victors, to boot.

So we should consider, what can art do with this wreckage; gratuitously? I use the latter word in its primary sense – given or done free of charge. For something done for the good of all people cannot be done for the benefit of any one person – disinterestedness is one of the primary hallmarks of authenticity. And this is why I advance the claim of a minor art, which has proven itself able to travel everywhere, but be successfully commodified nowhere. As Benjamin went on to say in the quote cited above concerning the nature of the authentic: "the act of discovery can reveal it in the most singular and eccentric of phenomena, in ... the weakest and clumsiest experiments." These are all honours I freely claim for my own work.

I GO RIGHT TO THE EDGE, I GO RIGHT TO THE END,  
I GO RIGHT TO WHERE ALL THINGS LOST ARE MADE GOOD AGAIN ...

So this "going right to the edge" can be understood to mean the periphery of culture, the edge of what is generally accepted and understood as 'art.' In this, improvised sound work has the great value of being 'not-music' (but rather, rough and rowdy). As such it is not freighted with the ideological baggage of bishops and princes, whose patronage gave rise to 'proper music' in the early modern period. If it has a cousin, it is in folk musics, which were never codified or written down while living, but relied on oral transmission and improvisation; within a setting ("the boulevard of crime" – teeming with Baudelairean gamblers, whores, rag-pickers and apaches) in which audience and performers were not separated or defined by particular respective expertise, nor by a fixed etiquette of performance.

In this way it can (within a field of restricted production<sup>13</sup>) fulfil the Situationist requirement of fundamental opposition to 'separation' (and specialisation). Whether in their few theoretical discussions of the *dérive*, or indeed of revolutionary action per se, the Situationists always made plain that the revolutionary class would be "people actively participating in every aspect of their lives ... [and not] a new audience for some new spectacle."<sup>14</sup> So, in this way the identity of audience and performers in a field of restricted production marks its suitability for just such an extra-aesthetic, or poetic, form of creative practice.

The experience of direct participation in decision-making and collective action is precisely where a truly mis-competent creative practice is both most useful and most fully realised. I have defined mis-competence as "the ability to do something both deliberately wrongly, and well,"<sup>15</sup> and I have employed this attitude of willed and deeply learned ignorance to restructure my approaches to

performance, to the (mis-)use of technology and even to career planning. It is profoundly evident to me that in almost any circumstance, people who are held back from taking action because they allegedly 'don't know how' are doing themselves a grave dis-service. To use a slightly barbaric idiom, there is always another way to skin *any* given cat. Any "rough and rowdy" practice that encourages broader participation (albeit within a group that must remain small in order to escape recuperation by power) has the potential to enable and encourage autonomous collective action – and to release the consequent beneficial experiential impacts of 'just doing,' in a world dominated by the separation and passivity of commodity-spectacular conditions.

This approach, rejecting mere competence as a trap and a self-imposed handicap, also serves to raise improvisation to a defining principle of existence. In this way it aligns perfectly with a radical view of human freedom, one that sees the freely adopted position of 'audience subjectivity' as the foundation stone of social control – the surrender of autonomous agency starts at such a basic level that we are unable to readily critique it for what it truly is. It begins the first time that we accept the Other's assertion that "*you* can't do that." My considered reflection on my own creative practice – centred as it has been on "mis-competent improvisation with sound" is that it really has taken the form of an unintended training, analogous to the legendary learning ordeals of the Shaolin order, as depicted on the black-and-white television screen of my youth. I have done apparently impossible things simply by refusing to think of them as impossible.

The "rough and rowdy ways" in which this creative practice is realised have an additional cardinal virtue in the current time of post-industrial crisis, in which we are (too slowly!) coming to terms with the need to rethink our environmental footprint as a species. It enables "all things lost [to be] made good again" via a practice which aims to release "the immense forces of 'atmosphere' concealed in ... [outmoded] things."<sup>16</sup> This employment of obsolete machines, analogue tools, valve technologies, physical sound media and junkyard trash redeployed as sound-generating instruments are all universal strategies which signify the emerging cultural field in which I am engaged. And these 'upcycling' strategies have become more pertinent, more *de rigueur*, with every passing year.

The mis-competent employment of recycled technological supports is also directly implicated in the innovative impact of the work. This involves breaking free of established structures and ways of thinking and working; de-coupling the habitus from artistic forms and from supporting technologies. "It is," as Bourdieu put it, "always forgotten that the universe of products offered by each field of production tends in fact to limit the universe of the forms of experience."<sup>17</sup> My goal, and more broadly our mission as artists, is to expand that experiential universe without excessively consuming irreplaceable resources. And if we can also through our methods and practices inculcate a new form of consciousness, better adapted to the times, then more power to our arms.

## I HAVE NO APOLOGIES TO MAKE

At this point I must reiterate that my argument and my intentions are avowedly utopian. To escape a dystopian reality will require utopian methods, utopian thinking and, finally, utopian people. Debord was at his most clear-eyed and also most innovative in his practical solution to the perennial Marxist dilemma regarding the appearance of a revolutionary consciousness (a requirement for revolutionary action) in advance of the appearance of the material preconditions for revolutionary success. This was the fundamental question that animated Georg Lukács to write *History and Class Consciousness* in the aftermath of the failure of proletarian revolution to sweep Europe following the First World War. This quixotic piece of writing nearly earned him ‘cancellation’ courtesy of Stalin, but later proved influential in the development of modern sociology, as well as so-called Western Marxism. Lukács argued against materialist determinism, and said that revolutionary consciousness could advance “beyond what was immediately given,”<sup>18</sup> and that it was moreover the consciousness of a class which must be understood from the viewpoint of social totality (quite separate from the consciousness of any given individual) – in effect, another kind of ‘constellation.’

Debord’s response to this problem was both innovative and ruthlessly practical – to change the worldview of a small group of revolutionaries through the exploitation of their material circumstances. This is what was later termed by Kaufmann “the poetics of revolution,”<sup>19</sup> but which I would more directly characterise as his adoption of avant-garde art practice as a kind of ‘psychic kung fu,’ with the dive-bars of Paris as his monastery. In this he placed his faith in the power of direct action to promote ideas; ideas which, when their Benjaminian ‘origin’ catches up with them, will be found to be “in everybody’s mind.”

Our challenge, in the current century of environmental and social crisis, is to find ways to carry on this little-understood work – because it is clear that established ways of thinking, and the economic sub-structures that underpin them, are equally unsuited to the situation in which, as a species, we find ourselves. The ongoing discountenancing of Debord’s work (in the Anglo-sphere at least) tends to support my suspicion that it is central to any hopes we may have of success. My hard-won insights from a career spent largely on the fringes of art and music may be without evidentially persuasive value, yet I still firmly maintain the importance of advancing them. As Paul Feyerabend memorably (if counter-inductively) argued in connection with the history of science, knowledge is not advanced incrementally, by building directly on the received ideas of yesterday. On the contrary, knowledge really progresses in paradigm shifts that advance hypotheses often based on totally ‘wrong thinking,’ which usually explain reality less plausibly or completely than the established wisdom, even when the latter is (as is often the case) utterly false:

*there is only one [epistemological] principle that can be defended under all circumstance and in all stage of human development. It is the principle: **anything goes.***<sup>20</sup>

Today’s ‘wrong thinking’ is tomorrow’s Unified Field Theory; and for that reason we need multiple bodies of knowledge, a multitude of apparently irreconcilable hypotheses and the equivalent of a multiverse of competing (even conflicting) plans of action. Because we cannot afford to fail by betting everything on one of them.

## I CONTAIN MULTITUDES

In challenging times, creative practice (or 'art') can help us find tiny spaces for autonomous activity. And improvisational mis-competence can help us to leverage from those opportunities. This practice must be enacted socially and collectively in the spirit of International Lettrist freedom, which paradoxically can be mistaken for idleness.<sup>21</sup> To once again quote Paul Feyerabend:

*We must expect ... that the **idea** of liberty could be made clear only by means of the very same actions, which were supposed to **create** liberty<sup>22</sup>.*

Taking place around emerging practices in the field of restricted production,<sup>23</sup> such activity does not have to be itself a mass movement, because it can be the seed that might just "contain multitudes" through the creation of a new and potentially contagious revolutionary psychology that will turn out to be already "in everybody's mind."

In a world where "everything's flowing all at the same time," every kind of thinking needs to focus on the starkly intractable problems in front of us. My psychic art practice kung fu prescription may prove to be a work of imagination, but as Debord was rightly fond of pointing out, "There is rebellion in *imagining* that one could rebel."<sup>24</sup>

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Bruce has also directed two independent labels, Xpressway and Corpus Hermeticum, and written essays and criticism for *The Wire*, *Bulltongue Review*, artists' catalogues and other publications. In 2010 he published *Left-handed Blows: Writing on Sound 1993-2009* (Clouds) and in 2012 edited *Erewhon Calling: Experimental Sound in New Zealand* (Audio Foundation/cmr). He has a doctorate in sound from the RMIT School of Art and is currently writing a book about the death of rock'n'roll and the poetics of sound.

Bruce Russell coordinates creative research and postgraduate teaching in creative practice at Ara Institute of Canterbury and is an adjunct associate professor in art and music at the University of Canterbury.



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22. Feyerabend, *Against Method*, 26.
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