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'You Should Try Lying More': The Nomadic Impermanence of Bill Drummond

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In March of 2009 the writer, musician and artist Bill Drummond attended the University of Northampton to orchestrate a performance of his ad hoc choir project, The 17, with my students on the BA Popular Music course. Bill had attended the University when it was an art college in the 1970s and was due to orchestrate another 17 performance in conjunction with the town's Fishmarket gallery the following day, so he seemed happy enough to appear at the university and talk to the students about The 17 project and his work more widely.

The 17 is an on-going project that Bill has been working on since 2006. Broadly speaking it is an improvised vocal choir consisting of whoever happens to be in attendance at any particular venue (the numbers involved are not limited to 17 at a time), and is an attempt to both circumvent the habituations and clichés of recorded music making, as well as a means for communities, or groups of people to reconnect with music making practices outside of the entertainment industry, formal music training, or indeed accepted notions of what constitutes music at all. Drummond uses poster-sized painted scores to provide stimulæ for the performers, and those 'scores' tend to vary from performance to performance. Most are written by Bill but many have been created by 17 performers themselves, particularly schoolchildren such as Shannon, Jade and Emma from Easington Colliery Primary School in County Durham. In our case we performed Score #5 entitled 'Perform' as a group of about thirty, singing five different pitches separately for five minutes each,

before listening back to the recorded overlaid effect of what amounted to around 150 voices 'bringing forth noise'. What the few of us heard that day was utterly astonishing, beautiful and flawed. None of us held a perfect note for anywhere near five minutes, providing rich layers of texture that included much giggling. When Drummond's sound engineer John Hirst, after playing our efforts back to us, deleted the recording in front of us, an audible groan of disappointment rippled through the group, as this powerful musical experience was lost to us, which of course made it all the more precious. I have since replicated Drummond's experiment with subsequent students and the same mixture of awe at what such a simple process produces, and the same 'awwww' of disappointment as the recording evaporates before them occurs, every time.

Drummond's 17 project, and its attendant book of the same name published in 2008, was instigated by his increasing dissatisfaction with his experience of recorded music. Graffiti put up by Drummond around the world alongside his performances asks passers-by to 'imagine waking up tomorrow and all music has disappeared'. The image on this slide was taken in the Far Cotton area of Northampton some months after the performance at the university and the 17 stencilled on the ground marks where I was required to stand, along with 99 other seventeenists who each had their own graffitied tag in a 1km circle around Northampton town centre at the performance the following day, itself a dry run for a larger scale performance later the same year in Beijing. These performances, never to be repeated and as temporary and immaterial as dew on grass, can be seen as the latest manifestation of a fascination of Drummond's with ideas of permanence and impermanence that stretch back through his career. Perhaps the most famous example of such disappearances relates to the burning of £1 million by Drummond and his collaborator Jimmy Cauty on the Scottish island of Jura in 1994. The money had been earned through Cauty and Drummond's highly successful but brief

pop career, first as The Justified Ancients of Mu Mu and later The KLF, culminating in them winning the Best British Band award at the 1992 Brits. Immediately after the award ceremony The KLF announced the complete deletion of their back catalogue in the UK and their retirement from the music industry, itself a disappearance of sorts in the days prior to widespread file-sharing. Having filmed the burning of the million pounds Drummond and Cauty screened the event at a number of locations around the UK, inviting responses to their actions, which ranged from the delighted, through the bemused and on to the openly hostile. This film tour itself provoked the publication of the book *The K Foundation Burn A Million Quid* in 1997, collecting the responses to the film and outlining the ambivalence felt by Drummond and Cauty themselves to their own actions. In this way the materiality of Drummond's musical output was negated both by its formal disappearance as records and CDs, and later by the monetary elimination of its rewards, although it is doubtful that all of the proceeds from The KLF were incinerated.

Further actions stress the potentiality of impermanence. In 1993 the K Foundation awarded Rachel Whiteread the Worst Artist of the Year award in the same year that she won the prestigious Turner prize, negating the power of awards and problematizing the relationship between art and money. Drummond has also exercised issues of impermanence through his dissection of Richard Long's photograph *A Smell of Sulphur In The Wind* into 20,000 pieces to be sold at \$1 each. Although not all pieces have currently been sold, Drummond intends to bury the \$20,000 collected at the site of the original photograph in Iceland. A more recent project involved the sale of 40 t-shirts printed in such a way that the 17 logos would disappear after approximately one wash. The T-shirts were sold on the 8th March in Birmingham with the proviso that they be worn collectively on the 24th April, constituting a human sculpture that could

extend absolutely anywhere, as Drummond would have no control over where the wearers might be that day.

This last example illustrates some competing tensions within Drummond's work. While the T-shirts might disintegrate, or at least their logos, each person who bought one received a copy of the Notice poster that you see here, itself another form of Drummond's painted scores. If the music of the KLF is made immaterial and the music of the 17 is originated to be immaterial in the first place, and if Drummond's graffiti actions themselves become immaterial whether through flyposting, council clean-ups or merely the ravages of time, then the posters and the books associated with Drummond's works achieve a more concrete solidity. What seems to be the case is that the printed or painted word achieves a more material status in some cases than Drummond's musical or artistic happenings.

Clearly at one level Drummond has consistently sought to undermine the processes of repetition, to borrow the context of a phrase from Jacques Attali, that constitute the global music industry. While Drummond might seek to make art, even if it is art that looks quite like popular music, his quest to reinstate its value necessarily leads him to the knowledge that recording and reproduction undermines the very value of that art. Attali, in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, characterises the era of repetition as marked by the commodification of music in such a way as listeners become almost entirely passive, silenced by their lack of active participation in the musical experience, while the very music that is being listened to constitutes silence through its repetitive composition, distribution and consumption. The 17 project then is clearly a way to make music mean something again and for it to bypass the hierarchies of capitalist dissemination. However, the potentiality of what the 17 might do is concretized through the painted scores produced by Drummond and his current collaborator and manager Cally Callomon. During the Fishmarket

event in Northampton, the scores were hung as works of art, a far more solid form of manifestation than the sounds that would make up the 17 performance happening around them.

Having contacted Cally for another research project I am currently working on I asked him about the relationship between the immateriality of much of Drummond's work and the seemingly more fixed nature of text. This was his reply:

I consider Bill Drummond's art to be neither a search for any 'truth' nor for it ever to be finished.

However, I also know that if one is to make art, and if that art has a broad appeal, it may mean that others are willing to pay money to own a part of that art. To that end we devise and construct a series of items that could be of use to people in exchange for their money.

Chiefly these items rely on text. This is always Bill Drummond's text. The text results from a series of activities or thoughts by Bill Drummond. Structurally they come in the form of large printed text-pieces, books, text paintings and the odd fragment of re-appropriated artworks.

Aesthetically I have always admired both Trade Gothic Bold Condensed (I started to use it in 1990) and Walbaum. I started to use Walbaum in 1994 after I experienced too many drawbacks with the typeface 'Modern'. I enjoy using the same typefaces much as a musician may enjoy playing the same violin. To the violinist the performance of the music is all, the instrument, though considered and looked after, is secondary.

With Bill Drummond; the actions thoughts and texts is all, the posters are mere postmen, albethey nice smelling ones if we screen print them.

You can even buy them as a book. As such the relationship between the scores and the performances they create might be understood as one of necessity. It is the commodification of certain aspects of Drummond's work that allows him to pursue the line of immateriality in others.

Through Drummond's concentration on the immateriality of culture, whether it be music, literature or the visual arts, we might start to understand what he is attempting to do as a form of nomadic engagement. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in 'Treatise on Nomadology' in *A Thousand Plateaus* posit the nomad as an agent operating within the smooth space of immanence, in contrast to the striated spaces of hierarchical capitalism. As Mike Starr puts it...

Writers, filmmakers and artists can be nomadic in the sense that they explore the potential of their respective mediums, and then break away from established paths, using thinking that operates outside the conceptual structures endorsed by and supportive of the established order. Specific cultural texts can therefore be 'Models of nomadic and rhizomatic writing'

Eugene Holland, in his essay on the nomadology of free jazz, differentiates the Greek term *nomos*, suggesting a rule of thumb, from *logos*, or the law of the state. In Drummond's case we might see similar distinctions between musical theory or literary authority and his own artistic interventions. Holland also provides a rather beautiful model of the artist as nomad scientist:

'Let's take, as an illustration, a piece of wood. Royal science will want it milled to established specifications – as a 2 by 4, for instance – so it can be used in building construction whose designs are based on the

availability of lumber conforming to certain predictable ‘constants’ (size, regularity of grain, strength, surface appearance, and so on). Any knots that occur are considered mere imperfections, and may indeed lower the quality rating of the piece of wood as construction lumber, or preclude its use altogether. A sculptor, serving here as nomad scientist, will assess the piece of wood very differently. For the sculptor, knots, grain and irregularities appear as singularities, features that inhere in the wood-matter as its unique form of content. And in the sculptor’s hands, each singularity can become a substance of expression: a knot may become the eye of a fish; a grain pattern may become the waves of the sea. Or something else entirely: the content/expression relation here is one of contingency, not necessity.’

If Drummond is seen to be seeking to subvert the commercial machinations of the music industry, or to be reconnecting music to a plane of immanence and contingency, then these seem very much like nomadic operations. However, the concentration on text based forms as more materially concrete suggests that Bill Drummond as nomad still has to operate within codified structures, or a logos, that makes him make art that has some form of permanency and commodity value. In this sense one might question the success of Drummond’s strategies, if indeed such nomadic operations are his intent.

However, Drummond’s books offer a further insight into the nomad strategies affected by him. Drummond has been the co-author, with Mark Manning, of two travel memoirs, *Bad Wisdom* and *The Wild Highway*. Both books feature fantastic, yet seemingly real journeys made by Drummond and Manning, with their ever-present roadie Gimpo, to the North Pole to plant an icon of Elvis to bring about world peace and the heart of the Belgian Congo to confront Satan in order to demand their souls back respectively. Both books

share the formal characteristic of competing commentaries from Drummond and Manning. Drummond's sections of the books seem to present a reasonably faithful account of the events as they transpire, while Manning's refract that reality through a hyper-perverse lens inspired by Artaud, Bataille and De Sade. While both men seem to be recounting the same events, Manning's clearly fantastical take seems to foreground Drummond's own words as inherently more trustworthy and real. However, Drummond is far from a reliable narrator himself. In the 17 book, and its predecessor 45 Drummond continually fictionalises events, often admitting later to their own fictionalisation, and his writing often confuses the borders of reality and mythology. Similarly, Drummond's suggestion that you ignore the entire ethics of *The 17* in Score #2 or that performers use their initiative in Score #3 suggests a willingness to abandon his role as conductor, or authoritative author. Even his text subverts the certainty that what he is saying is true, or the way it will be. While *Bad Wisdom* and *The Wild Highway* seem to highlight Drummond's narrative as more trust worthy in the face of Manning's pornographic refractions, such an assurance is itself untrustworthy. Everything is up for grabs, no one, not even the authors, have prior claim to any form of authority.

Finally, there are attempts by Drummond to provide some form of centre to his work. The 17 book features a running commentary on Drummond's narrative from four artists who consistently note the theoretical foundations that Drummond is drawing on even if he claims to have little knowledge of those ideas. Similarly, a number of chapters revolve around an interview conducted with Drummond where the questioner talks about the potential influence of Cornelius Cardew, Fluxus and Karlheinz Stockhausen on Drummond's work. Drummond is willing to acknowledge, while not a direct debt, then an indirect one through encounters with figures such as Gavin Bryars, who worked with Cardew and whom Drummond met at art school. However, Drummond is keen

not to place the strategies of music making of the 17 in any form of theoretical discourse or academic context. The project's immanence is enough for him, even, as both he and the book's commentators point out, it has all been done before. In this way, Drummond is positing an anti-theory of art that has connections to his collaborators and associates, particularly the writer Stewart Home, from whom the title of this paper is taken. In an interview with Drummond in the Guardian in 2004 Home suggests that Drummond should try lying more, yet it is the very lack of a foundational basis that gives power to his artistic happenings, no matter what their level of materiality, that marks his art out as nomadic. Origins, truth and theory bear little relevance in this context. This would explain Drummond's assertion that music, or art shouldn't really be taught in universities, a point that I don't necessarily disagree with. It might also possibly be why a music tutor colleague of mine, after hearing him talk at the university, denounced everything he had said as complete bullshit.

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