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The development of
**USE THE DRESS OF DEGENERATION; TAKE
ADVANTAGE OF THE CONSUMER**

A performance by Alex Keller and Philip von Zweck

Premiered at the
In the Eye of the Ear festival
Blue Rider Theater
Chicago, Illinois
Fall 1995

There is not a lot to learn about the creative process from studying the methods of someone like Mozart. We who do not create complete music, prose, poetry or art fully developed in our minds are left cold by stories about artists who do. I don't find genius that interesting anyway, and America agrees with me. We much prefer a Horatio Alger pulling himself up by his bootstraps to a Thomas Edison who forgets to change his clothing for weeks on end because inventions are exploding from his head like Athena, fully dressed in a patent application. Making art is like pulling teeth for most of us and as a result we have an easier time relating to toil as opposed to divine inspiration.

The story that I am going to relate is the story of a collaboration that happened eight years ago or so and was a bumpy ride in many ways. Sleep was lost, feelings were hurt, and money was spent. The ideas meshed together in a very weird hybrid, which created a piece that neither of us would have made on our own. The story is a useful one with which to describe a creative process because we used so many tangible objects and

conceptual ideas. Rather than preconceiving the piece before execution, the execution was where the piece was conceived: not as an act of genius but as a collection of symbols and ideas, a rebus in the form of a question instead of an answer.

Eight years ago I was working on my BFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. SAIC was the school for me since it was at the time the only school with a Sound department. Many people are confused by the idea of sound art, and I was too for a while, though I kept making it. Eventually I figured out how to explain it, in a way that makes a lot of sense if you remember the SAT's analogy section.

sound art : music :: photography : painting

or

sound art : music :: film : theater

Sound art is related to music but doesn't necessarily operate with the same rules. It usually has more of a heavy conceptual or theoretical focus and owes a lot to Modernism. It was a small scene (and still is) but very vital, and very exciting. Small art scenes are exciting because you find yourself working alongside and with artists who you don't necessarily have a lot in common with, and the diversity can become a real strength.

I had done a few performances in the area, and was networking a lot both through the school and through my internship at Chicago's Experimental Sound Studio, which is a not-for-profit organization that provided recording facilities and support for sound artists. I wasn't very well known, but people in the know knew who I was (one of the negative things about small scenes is that they can be very insular). Steve Barsotti and Tod Szweczyk were curating a two-week sound art festival called *In the eye of the ear* and invited me to perform. I agreed, and invited Philip von Zweck to perform with me. Philip was another SAIC student and was very involved in performance and creating new works. He and I had discussed performing together before and I saw this as a great venue for us.

We got together in my studio to play and toss around ideas. As well as recording gear, in my studio I usually have odd books and sound-generating toys around to play

with, since for me tactile open-ended play is a great way to start getting ideas and making work. The themes that kept coming up in conversation and play were recursion and mistranslation. We were both interested in the weird translations of the English language that you see on cheap imported toys and Asian food packages, and the idea of the children's game called the whispering game or the telephone game, where a sentence passed around the room takes on a completely different meaning due to misunderstanding and misspeaking.

We experimented with walkie-talkies, talking toy parrots and Spanish language translation software with the intention of developing a palette or vocabulary of sounds and ideas to create something with. We obtained walkie-talkies from thrift stores and wired them in a series so that when you said something into one it would be broadcast and rebroadcast down a chain of walkie-talkies, getting very noisy towards the end. The talking toy parrots did the same thing on their own. They were designed so that when you said something to one of them, it would repeat it twice at twice the original pitch. I found that if you set several up together they would talk to each other without any human involvement, passing the same idea back and forth and distorting it more and more. We used the Spanish language translation software to manipulate texts by translating them from English to Spanish and back over and over. To our delight the translation errors that came up were distorted by the retranslation process and quickly turned our texts into gibberish.

We abandoned the parrots to avoid overwhelming the audience with too many concepts, sound sources and visual references (since then I have used the parrots a lot, and plan on performing with them soon in Austin). We decided to divide up the tasks: Philip was to refine the software-generated texts and I was to modify the walkie-talkies so that they would delay the broadcasting by half-a-second or so, to discourage feedback and make the broadcasted sounds move around the space more noticeably. My task turned out to be impossible. After hours of research and experimentation and a lot of money spent on parts, I realized that what we wanted to accomplish wasn't possible within our budget and the limits of our abilities.

Here we were, a few weeks before the show, running into creative stumbling blocks, and our lines of communication completely broke down. Understand that our schedules were very difficult. Since we were both taking studio classes we were in class about 35 hours a week each. Between work and an internship I was committed to another 30 hours a week, and also was married with a three-year-old son. Philip worked too, and usually our work and class schedules went against one another so it was very difficult to meet. It's also worth mentioning that this precedes serious dependence on e-mail and cheap mobile telephones as communication tools. Whatever the cause, we were only very rarely able to get hold of one another to brainstorm, report on various successes and failures, and so forth. I became very frustrated with Philip, which was caused mostly by concern for our finishing the piece; in retrospect my frustration was misplaced. The problem was our situation and schedules, not anything that he did or didn't do in our collaboration.

I've been building this essay to a climax, in which the audience might expect some sort of deus ex machina to help us overcome our difficulties and make a fantastic piece of art. I'm afraid nothing of the sort happened. When we finally did catch up with one another it was a few days before the performance, and we had a few weeks worth of work to catch up on. We decided that we needed to work around the difficulties so that we could focus on the final piece. Since we were unable to create a sense of space with the delayed walkie-talkies, we decided to manipulate sound in the space by towing the walkie-talkies around the room on big plastic toy trucks, which would then broadcast to other places in the room. We would be on center stage, in gorgeous suits, behind a podium, reading the texts into walkie-talkies and reeling in the trucks. We derived a title, *Use the dress of degeneration; take advantage of the consumer* from some of the gibberish that the software translator spit out.

The performance was great. I think we truly horrified a few audience members; we received cheers when our trucks got tangled up and almost capsized. The pitch of the squealing feedback changed as the distance between the trucks did. Unfortunately the

only documentation that exists is an audio recording and the texts themselves (see the Appendix for URLs).

Philip and I keep in pretty close touch; as I said earlier the sound art scene is a small one. He runs a weekly experimental radio show in Chicago, and curated a gallery show recently for which I contributed an installation piece. I have performed on his radio show several times, including my BFA thesis broadcast and once over the telephone from Seattle.

Being an artist has a lot of rewards, tangible and intangible. One of the best ones is that I reach a lot of aesthetic and intellectual conclusions with each piece I complete, informing my newer work. *Use the dress of degeneration; take advantage of the consumer* taught me a lot about practical collaboration and communication, and helped me more thoroughly develop my ideas about recursive sound and themes. I also learned that having an audience be amused by my work doesn't mean that they don't take it seriously.

Collaboration neatly subverts genius. Imagine if Mozart had tried to explain to a collaborator the melodies that just poured out of his head like water through a sieve. I would guess that he'd never get anything done, because the internal language that artists use to realize ideas is very difficult to express in literal language. I don't intend to suggest that a piece by Mozart is superior to a piece by someone who has to carefully craft and revise his work, but it's true that we can learn more from an account of horrid toil than an account of divine inspiration. A student of a discipline needs to make mistakes and understand the mistakes of others, in order to master that discipline.

APPENDIX

Program notes: <http://www.latibulum.com/mictlan/usedress.html>

Audio: <http://www.latibulum.com/mictlan/use%20the%20dress..mp3>