On redesigning the system

Philosopher and digital artist Mat Dryhurst on music as a carrier signal, and the power of collectively rethinking systems of power.

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A lot of the questions I have for you issue from your Twitter mini-essay about mental health, which I found helpful. First off, in the contemporary meshwork of ideological pressures and design/technological apparatuses, how do you as an artist and a thinker functionally proceed?

I basically roll up and play shows with my wife, [the composer, musician, and sound artist Holly Herndon], and that's how we make money. Increasingly we are doing more commissioned work in art spaces. I also teach at university, so as a practice, it's my job to ruffle feathers and maybe be a bit more assertive about my opinions. I consult from time to time, and also often present ideas publicly. I like being an outsider, for credibility. I'm not trying to sell anyone anything.

So you are in a really interesting vanguard position: you have a bit less weight on your shoulders than Holly, who is the market-facing persona of the project. It's a very unique kind of freedom that you have, then, and I think that's part of the reason why it's important that you say the things that you say, for instance about the psycho-dynamics of ad-driven, social media-driven artistic culture. Because for someone like Holly to come out and say these things, it means something more dangerous.

Exactly. Of course Holly has many positions on these things too, and they manifest themselves in different ways. I am insulated really from certain risks, but exposed to others. Being a contemporary musician within these networks, you have to play to satisfy the platform logic at least to a certain degree—and artists, magazines are all in the same position. Under ad-driven platform capitalism, everyone to some extent has to calibrate their statements like an advertiser, and market test their positions.

I attempt to critique structures, because as a techno-materialist, I think that technical structures in many ways dictate behavior. I try not to ever go in on individuals living under those structures, because most of us are in the same precarious position. I'm a bit more established, and at the end of the day, in the worst-case scenario, I could also go work on something else, so I try to be as earnest as I can be.

Let's dig in a bit on what you see when you sketch out an accurate model of the state of affairs.

Broadly speaking, I see a clear division between central points of authority, the platforms that coerce people and businesses to comply with their objectives, and projects on the margins that are trying to build something else. Let's say "experiments in the decentralized organization of culture." That activity on the fringes bears many of the hallmarks that made me fall in love with culture in the first place. I've said before that decentralized projects in some ways have the potential to be the equivalent to what independent labels were in the 80s and 90s. It's the space where people are gathering together to dream up their own protocols, or ways of doing things, in opposition to the agenda of Spotify or Facebook, for example. As we discussed before, that is a wide and diverse community, from crypto-leftie projects to straight up right-wing stuff. But that always existed.

Right, so that's the simplest map of where experimental cultures can transpire today, whether they're progressive and just groups or, for instance, ethno-nationalist memelord groups. And for you, personally, where does your practice find its space and find its community?

We're in Berlin, so we're very lucky. There are a bunch of spaces here and a bunch of characters who are working on awesome, interesting stuff. My practice, personally, is medium agnostic. Music is the way in which I came in: I've been a touring musician since I was 17 in various different capacities; that's my heritage. But at the same time, music-for-music's-sake means nothing to me if it's not achieving what I want it to achieve. Holly and I have been somewhat successful in existing inside of a community that feels wonderful and vital, but the shared sensibility is less about music in isolation, and more about a certain kind of experimentation and ethos. We have more in common, perhaps, with some developers or writers, who are dealing with certain contemporary issues with a level of seriousness, than we do with just any old person who wants to make music with synthesizers. The commonality is more about intentions than any particular medium of expression.

I'm not sure if this is what you intended, but synthesizing some of the stuff you've been saying has made me think of a different way of understanding why I dispose so much energy to, for instance, Twitter as a medium—and why Twitter does feel closer to how music discovery felt 15 years ago for me.

You're finding people, that was the point, you're finding people. I've said this a million times, the reason I got involved in music: music was the carrier signal that allows me to go into a room and find my people. In all honesty, many of those people—many of the the most interesting ones—have left music. Holly had this whole thing about using an album as a Trojan horse or something, and it's true. You're going out there, you're signaling, and you're finding people. That's an incredible tool to have at your disposal. For me at least, music is fundamentally about congregation. It has a remarkable ability to gather people. The people in the room are what matters.

Yeah, the work itself functions selectively to distribute a people. And so, to attach to the music is to attach to a people in a decisive way, an entire set of assets and values and concepts. Music is a carrier signal capable of establishing a congregation, even a micro-congregation. This is a *modest* model of music, to a certain degree. So, one question then is: how do you define success and failure on this alternate path?

It's really difficult. I can't speak for Holly here, but I would say for us it's basically, "Can we continue to do the work that we want to do at the level where it feels like we are still making somewhat of an impact, or contributing to a conversation?" That is basically the success. It's a weird accident that with our interests, circumstances conspired that all of a sudden we are playing larger festivals to large groups of people—and that's actually wonderful! Addictive too, as there are thoughts that circulate around your head of "don't mess this up," but ultimately we try to not let that fear influence the work.

One strength perhaps that we have is that we would have a hard time faking anything. We know what we do really well, and to some extent we literally couldn't do anything else. We have a practice, and even though everything is very volatile right now for artists, the practice tells us what to do. That's also what I try and encourage in my students. If you get obsessed enough, the work will tell you what to do.

Your essay talks about "self-cannibalizing for clicks" and "competing for attention by any means necessary." You said "it obliterates once radical concepts that gave lives or practices purpose and meaning." So the question is, do you have a counter-motif in mind?

Music is abundant, purpose is scarce. We are in a new scenario now. A friend of mine, Cullen Miller, said years ago "making music now is like playing video games, and it's just how it was when we were younger, everyone knows how to do it a little". He is right, music is so abundant that the signal to noise ratio is all over the place. Community was always a way to remedy that. It's essential. I think we share that genesis.

For the longest time, there were deep musical communities of largely hobbyists who were obsessed with certain musical legacies, and trying to contribute to that thread. Those deep music communities provided a signal for indie label infrastructure to follow and support developments, and that label infrastructure provided a signal to

venues and festivals, and so on and so forth. That whole ecology has been under assault for a long time. It is eroded year by year, and being replaced by these ahistorical, algorithmic platforms that create a ton of noise and corrupt the signal. We can't go backwards, but we can do a whole lot more to adjust to this new reality.

In the weirdest way, it's quite paradoxical: the last horizon of independence is through social self-promotion, but then those socials are already being farmed and mined.

Metricized. In terms of next steps though, I think one thing we could jettison is this concept of independence. It's not that helpful. In many ways, the meme of independence *won*. Now everyone is individuated, and independently free to compete with one another to sell their time and wares on the platforms, and the reality of that is a pretty precarious and unfulfilling existence for most. When everyone is *independent*, it turns out that we don't have much collective bargaining power to influence anything all, or at least those with the most wealth or resources will dominate. Counter intuitively, I think that when you take the independence narrative to its logical extreme, most people have less agency than they did without it. So it's interesting to call that bluff.

In a music context, I think it's only playing out to eviscerate the ways in which musicians as a community came to accrue collective wealth and agency. That's what labels are, for example, or festivals, or venues, or magazines. Legacies that get to keep a thread going as a result of the work created in their community. Fortresses that get to represent something.

If they disappear, which is happening, what we then have is a chaotic sea of competing, individuated artists, serving as a free-ideas factory for those at the top of the pyramid to extract value from them. So someone like Kanye, or whoever, can hire scouts to do a quick survey of stuff percolating on the fringes, and then hire teams of producers to create some kind of weird scrapbook of a bunch of culturally interesting moments that happened over the past year, and collect all the profits from that labor. It's a trickle-up ideas economy. That's where pure independence gets you. When everyone has access to everything, those with the most money and best ability to survey that information win out, which is why we see a monarchic class emerging across culture.

So I think that we need to reconsider first principles. Even closer to home, in the club community, you see how certain good ideas can warp over time in this new climate. DJing, for example, has a storied and noble history. In the best cases, taking something like Berghain as an example, club culture can be self-regulated, sustainable, and sovereign. In most cases, however, the permission systems of DJing in this new climate (where nobody buys music) are also tantamount to exploitation—where basically anyone with the right contacts can collect money performing the work of others for free, all under the cover of a narrative of electronic music as some kind of collective celebration.

If you think about it, DJing, unbeknownst to the people who innovated the practice back when people were buying records, is almost a perfect compliment to the platform logic of Web 2.0, in which all the value trickles to the curators, or gatekeepers, of content. What is more Web 2.0 than getting paid to promote yourself curating the unpaid work of other people?

My gripe isn't with the working person. I'm not after modest working DJs or people who post their music to Spotify or whatever, but it's more of a macro approach. I'm interested in systems, and narratives. So yeah, these great stories that we have told ourselves, about independence, and about free circulation of information and music, are worth challenging. Not in a reactionary way of embracing DRM and antiquated hierarchies, but it is worth experimenting with some new logics that haven't yet been tested, and might work out to be more equitable and healthy. We can't be imprisoned by these old narratives when they clearly aren't working out.

I could talk forever about this. The invention of the web itself was hotly contested around ideas of attribution, for example. Ted Nelson, who is a hero of mine and invented hypertext, had a conception of the web as a series of hardcoded attributions. So if you had an idea, every instance of your thinking online could be traced back to you (this inspired Saga). What eventually won out was Tim Berners-Lee's conception of the web, in which the individual was free to do what they wanted to, unrestricted, with whatever information they came across, attribution be damned. So the individual could now say, "I like this, and like this, and like that," package and market it, and receive all the spoils for their curation and marketing efforts. Does that sound familiar? Again,

we have to go back to first principles, and I think that there is a direct connection between the first principles of how the web was born, and what we see play out in music today, and we can do way better.

It's risky, I think, but important to look at these structures close to us, which we are a part of, and these indie structures and figure out where the nastiness leaks into them.

I can rail on major labels all day, but they are more transparent somehow. It's too easy. I prefer to look closer to home, as I have more experience with that, and sometimes that is also where the distance between narrative and reality is the most profound. It's often not fun, but I think it's right to ask questions of myself and others. What I want to invite people to do is to say: "Look at the protocol of how you act"—and of course the protocol can be a technical thing, or it could be a non-technical thing—and say, "How do we make this *somewhat* better?" And *better* for me always comes down to more cooperative structures, it comes down to equitable distribution of resources and of wealth.

If there were a structure for redistribution of all the money earned by our little subset of friends, and then strategic investment of that, we'd all be wealthy. But instead, everyone is scraping by, competing with one another. It's so foolish.

To put it bluntly, I think at some point you have to kill your idols. It's a good technique in making music, to kill your darlings as they say, and I think it's also a good technique in thinking about the future of music. You have to become disenthralled with the legacy. Counter intuitively I think that is the greatest mark of respect you can give to the people who made that legacy—because you are following their lead. All the indie forebears broke rank with convention, and that's why we had that great experiment. We've seen that play out. Now is a time for other experiments.

What's missing is a model that says: hey, we could actually, if we all conspire together, not take over the pop music industry—I was never interested in the pop music industry—but we could make a more resilient and equitable counter-industry as our fore-bearers did, but under these new circumstances. To disenthrall ourselves with the elements of our history that aren't working takes a degree of self criticism, maybe thicker skin, and genuine good will. Some people think I'm miserly, some people think I'm too utopian! I don't know what I am: often people will call your ideas whatever it takes to insulate themselves from having to reconsider what they're doing. I have a lot of time for people who work hard to establish their own corner in music. I'm not gunning for anyone. I just think if we were to conspire together we might be surprised what we can come up with.

One thing I've been thinking about that's difficult to metabolize or process is how the values of *disenthrallment* and suicidality connect, and what to do with that fact. Look: I'm still alive, Mark Fisher isn't, a lot of other people aren't, and it seems like when you pull back the reins and disenthrall yourself of contemporary incentive structures, there's a monumental de-adrenalized, kind of counter-serotonin valley that you fall into. And I think booming suicide rates amongst precarious laborers are connected in some way to what you're describing.

Yeah. The suicides really trouble me. One is too many.

Like, an artist disenthralling from contemporary incentive structures involves an exposure to a true no-man's land. Disenthrallment is risky because it's actually a way of exposing yourself to the brutality of the contemporary free market.

I totally agree.

It's just a high-risk proposition, telling artists: disenthrallment is the path to pursue.

To ask people to disenthrall is a big ask, that's a big thing. Because obviously these systems have swarmed the outside world around you, and if you leave the Facebook group, it might hurt more to realize that there's nowhere to congregate in your city, because all the congregation spaces are now co-working spaces or whatever. It's a case-by-case thing. For me personally, I can't un-know what I know. It doesn't make me feel better to put that stuff at the periphery and pretend that things are as they always have been. I find that more eerie and

unsettling. There is no room for business-as-usual, that business shut down.

After all the political shit that's happened over the past few years, our strategy for sanity was to try and relocate ourselves around people. Just be in place with them. Hang out, make music, listen and contribute. We needed that. It's really just about trying to ground ourselves in community and purpose, and of course we are in a very advantageous position for that, living in the city that we're living in and having a source of income for the time being that allows us to experiment, but it feels right to just invest time and energy in people.

To experiment with disenthrallment and withdrawal?

I'd tweak that. To experiment with disenthrallment and realize that there's a ton of cool stuff we can do together that is better off for it. I don't think that withdrawal is a luxury any of us can afford.

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I put 10 in there, because why only put 5?

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Vocation
Writer, Philosopher, Teacher, Technologist, Artist