Dissensus, refusal and participatory music: Negation and rupture in *Crowd in C*

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Abstract

In this paper, I will explore the formal, micro-political, and typically consensus-based space that participatory music works engender by analyzing *Crowd in C* by Sang Won Lee. Taking its moniker from Terry Riley's well-known minimalist work, *Crowd in C* is a web-based instrument, computer music system, and participatory work of music that encourages social interaction by offering audience members the option to create and modify their own melodies through a simple graphical user interface (GUI). Focusing on the audio-visual documentation and the work's codebase, I will analyse participant actions by applying Jacques Rancière's logic of emancipation to the micropolitical and normative space of *Crowd in C* and show how these moments and actions evoke a theory of dissensus. Finally, I argue that the established framework for sensing and sense-making in this space can be ruptured by musical and political processes.

By examining participants' potential to both disrupt or refuse the performance of *Crowd in C*, I will show how these actions can complicate the norms and aesthetics of participatory music creation. For example, interrupting a participatory musical work, breaking the rules of the participatory 'happening', and mangling or purposefully misinterpreting the intentions of the composer fissure the common space and draw political power away from the artist's hegemony over the poietic process. It also undercuts the consensus-based norms of the concert music experience. Further, while refusal in small amounts may hand local political power over to those who adhere to the normative, participatory space and mode of production, mass refusal can usurp the aesthetic, social, and ethical dimensions that ground participatory works: instead of being an abdication of power, refusal en masse collapses the space of the participatory music experience. Through the excavation of these moments within performances of *Crowd in C*, I will put the literature on participatory computer music systems in conversation with post-political critique and Rancière's theory of dissensus.

Interdisciplinary implications. This paper therefore has broad implications for interdisciplinarity within musicological study. For one, by highlighting *Crowd in C* and analysing the effervescent Rancièrian political moments in the musical piece, I argue that the low-stakes environment of a participatory music setting, subtle as it may seem, offers valid commentary on theories of the post-political, as well as on Rancière's politics of aesthetics and theory of the political. Further, the technology-based mode of music making in Lee's work incorporates themes of cybernetics, virtuality, and human-computer interfaces. Finally, because of the nature of Lee's work, participation (or disruption and non-participation) in musical spaces is central to the topic of this presentation. All the above mark a broadly interdisciplinary line of argument, which draws from music technology and musicology, political theory, and sociology.

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