Some notes on 'Meme'

While extremely simple, for me, this piece potentially functions in a number of different way. Firstly, it explores the idea of what constitutes a meme and to some extent how they function. Can adding the literal word 'meme' act as enough of a frame to move an act into this function? No doubt the particular context in which some particular idea gets shared goes a long way to determining whether or not it 'goes viral'. Does the repetition of an action (and the sharing of it on social media) have enough force to facilitate this? And does a meme constitute a piece of art? The score in itself does not engage directly with these questions, merely implicitly raising them.

Secondly, this piece explores ideas of violence (in art). A few people who have read this score have felt repulsed by it or found it 'nasty' or 'problematic'. This assumes that violence always has negative consequences. It also assumes an equal, violence-free status quo as the foundation-context for any act of violence. The score, however, makes no distinctions about *who* to punch. The most famous punching meme of the last few years centred around punching *Nazis*. People's opinions differ as to the effectiveness of such actions in creating a society free from racial hatred and the ethics of such practices, but at least most of these debates nowadays admit a context where Nazism poses a real threat (Moosa, 2017; Ohlheiser, 2017; Stack, 2017). Whether or not you think that punching a Nazi constitutes a good idea (or a good piece of art), as a society and as individuals it seems increasingly likely that we will have to make decisions as to when and how force comes in to play against violent hate groups and at least one white nationalist has admitted the efficacy of antifa actions. (Lennard, 2018) We live in a society riddled through with a multiplicity of forms of violence—against people of colour, women, queers, trans folx, etc.—to suggest that any *act* of violence comes 'out of nowhere' against an assumed peaceful backdrop erases the everyday experience of *most* people in our society. In this sense, if we take this (admittedly quite silly piece) seriously, it asks of the performer: 'Who would I punch? In what context would I feel comfortable punching someone?'

Thirdly, this piece functions similarly to some Dada and Fluxus pieces which present a single idea or action and to some extent put the focus on the player to create

meaning. George Brecht piece 'For a Drummer' gives us a good example; the entirety of the piece reads:

> Drum on something you have never drummed on before.
> Drum with something you have never drummed with before (Brecht cited in Friedman, Smith, & Sawchyn, 2002, p. 27).

No doubt many have read this piece and not given it a great deal of thought, not engaged deeply with it, but this piece—and others by Brecht—had a significant impact on the works of percussionist Greg Stuart and composer Michael Pisaro, starting with works like *Ricefall* (Stuart, 2009).

'Meme' also calls to mind André Breton's statement that the "purest surrealist act" consist of walking into a crowd with a loaded gun and firing into it randomly (cited in Strom, 2006, p. 35). Breton's statement, however, insist on embracing *random* violence. Breton's (imagined) piece feels like the wet-dream of the male psychoanalyst—a 'pure' act of violence 'straight from the subconscious'. A piece written in 2017, by a queer trans woman, dedicated to a radical queer composer/performer has a quite different context (though we might also note some similarities of context in the rise of white nationalist and fascist tendencies).

That said, fourthly we can also read the piece as engaging with the absurdity of life and/or an artistic attempt to engage with existentialism along similar lines as Breton's piece, or other Dada pieces. While I have read a lot in to the piece in terms of politics, the piece itself does not contain these references and a 'valid' interpretation of the piece might well involve 'walking into a crown and punching a random stranger'. Repeatedly. Most of my scores have very open-ended interpretations that ask the performer to bring a lot to the piece.

Fifthly, we can, of course, easily read this as a conceptual piece. The piece asks for the player to *tattoo* their knuckles. This seems like quite a commitment to a work by an unknown composer. Perhaps the work functions as poetry and as a site for exploring ideas around memes, art and violence rather than necessitating that a performer actually inflict violence on someone. (Though we might also want to keep in mind the violence of words and ideas…)

Lastly, the piece also functions as a kind of 'joke' and (another) enactment of silliness, an important part of my practice. In this sense, it functions for me as a performative act of wanting to embrace the multifarious aspects of my self and let them all find expression, rather than shying away from some aspects in the pursuit of a 'more serious' artistic practice.

The composer Alex Temple explores similar ideas, having a profound interest in "reclaiming socially disapproved-of ("cheesy") sounds" (Temple, 2018) but also struggling at times with how she presents herself or her work; talking about removing a piece from her website because it did not sit well with how she wanted to present herself, she had concerns about "squashing parts of [herself] in the name of a false unity" (cited in Solomon, 2016).

I have some concerns around this but have so far erred on the side of sharing everything (that I think of as 'finished') but I occasionally have some discomfort around the possibility of people not 'taking me seriously'—amplified by my queerness, transness and lack of any formal musical training. So far though, I have felt quite resolved to share my silliness with the world. (I took 'Pbbbt' as my stage name and worship the goddess Eris.)

A large part of me hopes that no one will ever play this piece. Some small part of me does feel quite excited about the idea of it manifesting in the world along with all of the ethical questions that this would raise about my complicity in the acts. In this sense, the piece embodies the pseudo-existential question about our incapacity to 'really communicate' with people, our inability to know how our actions will change the world (because of the sheer complexity of it) and raises questions for me about the 'inevitable suffering' of 'samsaric existence'.

Bibliography

Friedman, K., Smith, O., & Sawchyn, L. (Eds.). (2002). *The Fluxus Performance Workbook*: Performance Reserch E-Publications.

Lennard, N. (2018). Is antifa counterproductive? White nationalist Richard Spencer would beg to differ.   Retrieved from

https://theintercept.com/2018/03/17/richard-spencer-college-tour-antifa-alt-right/

Moosa, T. (2017). The 'punch a Nazi' meme: What are the ethics of punching Nazis? . Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/science/brain-flapping/2017/jan/31/the-punch-a-nazi-meme-what-are-the-ethics-of-punching-nazis

Ohlheiser, A. (2017). A step-by-step guide to a meme about punching a Nazi in the face.   Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/01/23/a-step-by-step-guide-to-a-meme-about-punching-a-nazi-in-the-face/

Solomon, B. (2016). Queer as in Fuck Yeah: A profile of Alex Temple.   Retrieved from https://van-us.atavist.com/alex-temple

Stack, L. (2017). Attack on alt-right leader has Internet asking: Is it o.k. to punch a Nazi?   Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/21/us/politics/richard-spencer-punched-attack.html

Strom, K. (2006). "Sometimes I spit for pleasure on my mother's portrait". On the strategic uses of inflammatory rhetoric in Surrealism. In S. Bru & G. Martens (Eds.), *The Invention of Politics in the European Avant-Garde (1906-1940)*. New York, NY: Rodopi.

Stuart, G. (2009). *A percussionist's practice.* (Doctorate), University of California, San Diego, CA. Retrieved from https://cloudfront.escholarship.org/dist/prd/content/qt1kt9v0km/qt1kt9v0km.pdf

Temple, A. (2018). 400 Word Bio.   Retrieved from http://www.alextemplemusic.com/about/