



A Soundtrack for Collective Engagement

By Juli Carson

Community is what takes place always through others and for others. It is not the place of egos...but of the I's who are always others (or else nothing)...It is not a communion that fuses egos into an Ego or a higher We. It is the community of others.¹

– Jean-Luc Nancy

Prequel: A Proposition

The scenario begins in a motion capture studio at UCL. Five pianists enter and sit at a table, while a film crew records the event on three cameras. The following instruction is written on a white board: "Rule: to play one piano with all the pianists playing together." The specific theme – *a soundtrack for collective engagement* – will be given to the pianists when they return the next day to compose the piece live before the cameras. Meanwhile, the group engages in small talk on the subject of their respective areas of expertise. One pianist, the only woman, specializes in improvisational composition; two study classical music; the other two are jazz musicians. What's brought them together is neither a curricular obligation nor a shared interest in a specific musical genre. Rather, they arrive having answered a performative solicitation – circulated by the conceptual artist Koki Tanaka – to compose and play a piece of music, simultaneously, on film.

A Piano Played by Five Pianists at Once (First Attempt) is the latest chapter in Tanaka's ongoing project – the production of artworks derived from actions, which he instigates in a given site. Sprung from an economy of means and the absurdity of chance, past actions have entailed Tanaka selling old palm fronds as a vendor at a local flea market; showing sculptures to a friend's dog; or orchestrating a haircut simultaneously performed by a team of hairdressers. With *A Piano Played by Five Pianists*, Tanaka takes his "chance operations" further, into the realm of "chance music." Also known as aleatory music, this method of composition introduces elements of chance or unpredictability regarding the entire composition or its performance. But in Tanaka's case, we must ask who is the composer of this soundtrack? Who are its performers? In this piece of chance music, all such positions are thrown into flux. The result is a contingent community of interdisciplinary artists and musicians who collaborate in the production of what the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy calls an *inoperative community* – that unplanned communal state in which the *I's* are always *others*. As such, *A Piano Played by Five Pianists* not only produces (by chance) a soundtrack for collective engagement –



the ostensible task at hand – it also provides an opportunity to envision a different, *contingent* model of collaboration and, by extension, collectivity.

Scene One: Positions

The film begins with Tanaka handing the pianists a slip of paper identifying the theme – *a soundtrack for collective engagement*. He then instructs the group, "When you are done let us know, and we will stop filming." These are the only parameters Tanaka offers for meeting the assignment, leaving the group to negotiate what is meant. They decide to leave the table and go to the piano. Sitting at the keyboard, side by side, they establish five positions from which the composition will be devised: musicians playing melody, color and chords sit in the keyboard's middle range, while those responsible for high and low registers flank them on either side. Having established this seating arrangement, the two Classicists return to the table to devise a plan, prompting the Improvisationalist to ask, "Why are we leaving? Can't we stay at the piano?" A tug of war ensues between the Classicists, who want to work from an *a priori* system at the table, and the Improvisationalist, who insists they compose at the piano extemporaneously. The Jazzists are caught in between. Not far into their negotiation of the five positions, which they continually swap amongst themselves, Tanaka's base requirement is met when they spontaneously compose something that they play together. The composition, however, could hardly be called that. They remark that it sounds awful. "This is why we are going to college," one of them groans. They actually want to *compose* something. In search of a solution, they keep referring back to the basics of the assignment: *soundtrack* and *collective engagement*. But how to collectively engage in this task when all five pianists are conditioned by the conventional constraints of their musical genres? How can they communicate and on what terms?

Nancy's notion of an *inoperative community* is helpful here. Through it, he deconstructs the colloquial notion of a community as being based upon a singular preordained entity. Nancy instead posits a *contingent* community, one organized around the atomistic notion of the Clinamen – an unpredictable spontaneous swerve of atoms – put forth by the Roman poet Lucretius in his two-thousand-year-old epic poem "On the Nature of Things." Literary critics have also taken recourse to citing Lucretius' theory of an atomistic universe; Stephen Greenblatt poetically describes the Clinamen's operation – or swerve – thusly:

The stuff of the universe, Lucretius proposed, is an infinite number of atoms moving randomly through space, like dust motes in a sunbeam, colliding, hooking together, forming complex structures,



breaking apart, in a ceaseless process of creation and destruction. There is no escape from this process. When we look up at the night sky and marvel at the numberless stars, we are not seeing the handiwork of the gods or a crystalline sphere. We are seeing the same material world of which we are a part and from whose elements we are made. There is no master plan, no divine architect, no intelligent design. Nature restlessly experiments, and we are simply one among the innumerable results.²

For Lucretius – in either Greenblatt's or Nancy's hands – there is no master plan of the universe, world or community. Rather, whenever a spontaneous swerve occurs in the pattern of atoms – ones that ordinarily descend like rain in parallel formation – a new world is produced (as if by chance).

Back to our pianists. In their first attempts, rules were continuously devised. "I think we should use more black keys." "Let's try a Philip Glass minor 3rd theme." "No pedal." "Less color, more melody." In this Glassian meta-configuration, a fledgling composition, dominated by arpeggios, begins to emerge. One of the Classicists suggests adding a splash of Beethoven. They begin to devise another composition but collectively decide it's too fixed. They change positions. While the Classicists make one argument after another for algorithms, the Improvisationalist tenaciously swerves away from any tonal composition they derive. This prompts an accusation that the Improvisationalist is the "culprit of dissonance." The Improvisationalist, in turn, insists that they should collectively focus on the *process* and not on any master plans. Two hours into the assignment, the specter of John Cage enters the room when a frustrated Classicist begins pounding on the piano as an alternate means of "collective engagement." Another dead end. Frustrated, the Improvisationalist asks Tanaka if there is anything he wants to say to them. Tanaka silently shakes his head and moves instead to direct a cameraman. The pianists carry on their struggle to compose between what they see and what they *hear*, between what they *plan* and what they *play*. Still, the notes continue to fall like rain in parallel formation (as if by chance).

Scene Two: Composition

All five musicians sit at the piano. A rule is finally agreed upon. They will play a theme one by one – beginning in the upper register and descending down through each position – until the group collectively plays at once. Having established this rule, they swerve into a fugue formation, the very essence of which entails a sequential series of

Cover and Interior: Production photographs of *A Piano Played by Five Pianists at Once (First Attempt)*, 2012. Images courtesy of the artist, Aoyama Meguro, Tokyo, Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou

additional swerves. Based upon a contrapuntal style or *texture*, the fugue metaphorically “pictures” Nancy’s inoperative community:

A fugue is always written in a contrapuntal style, i.e. with a texture consisting of a number of individual voices, usually three or four. It is based on a short melody, called a theme or a subject, which is stated at the beginning by one voice alone and taken up (“imitated”) by the other voices in close succession, reappearing throughout the piece in all the voices...Because of the wider variety of ways in which a fugue can be combined, it is preferable to see the fugue as a procedure rather than a specific form [my emphasis].³

The leading characteristic of the fugue’s contrapuntal style – note against note, melody against melody – is that each of the lines sounding together retains its character as a *line*. This feature distinguishes the fugue from *non*-polyphonic textures, in which one line predominates a series of subservient lines. Analogously, when Nancy states that “community is at least the Clinamen of the individual,” he’s describing the predominance of concurrent individual voices – maintained as singularities – that swerve together around a contingent principle or *theme*. In so doing, a collective engagement emerges, through which the *I*’s find themselves in equal standing with – and in the space of – the *other*. The result, however, is not a *fusion* of identities dominated by a singular *will* to absolute imminence. Rather, these singular beings are distributed or *spaced* by the sharing that makes them *others*. In this way they are...

...other for one another, and other, infinitely other for the Subject of their fusion, which is engulfed in the sharing, in the ecstasy of sharing: ‘communicating’ but not ‘communing.’ These ‘places of communication’ are no longer places of fusion, even though in them one passes from one to the other; they are defined and exposed by their dislocation. Thus, the communication of sharing would be this very dis-location.⁴

As a result, Nancy concludes, what *exists* in the place of communication is *neither* the subject *nor* communal being, but community and sharing.⁵

Four hours later, over the course of *chance* trials and errors, the five pianists finally reconcile themselves to this *inoperative* notion of sharing – of keyboard, positions, notes and composition – and are able to complete a “soundtrack for collective engagement.” In different variations, the fugue moved through them and, conversely, they moved through the fugue. They played the piano as composer/performers in-as-much as they were played *by* the piano as subjects, for it was *through* the piano’s keys that they spoke to one another. Their final attempt masterfully ends on one shared note, swerving the five pianists to the ecstasy of shared communication. With a degree of surprise, they look up at Tanaka and proclaim, “I think we are done. We are done.”

Coda: A Soundtrack

Having completed the soundtrack, they return to the table, driven by a need to verbalize what they had just accomplished. They had proven that 10 hands could indeed play one composition simultaneously. Out of curiosity, they ask Tanaka what movie they had written a soundtrack for. Tanaka replies, “This one,” which precipitates another swerve. In film terminology, a “sound track” is an audio recording created or used in the film’s production or post-production. Dialogue, sound effects and music each have their own “track,” which are subsequently mixed together to make a composite track. In the 1950s, the contraction

“soundtrack” more commonly denoted a film’s music track alone, which often added other recordings consistent with the film’s aesthetic genre – the same definition of soundtrack the pianists had in mind when they asked their question. Tanaka, however, had a different notion in mind, one in which there’s a temporal dislocation of the very terms “film” and “soundtrack.” In his case, the recording of the soundtrack *constitutes* the film in advance. Whether the task of composing the soundtrack met with failure or success was of no circumstance to the film’s making. Rather, the *attempt* to make a soundtrack (of collective engagement), in essence, was the film. Soundtrack and film driving each other – a tautology whereby each becomes the catalyst for the other – the entire *enterprise* constituted the “community” at hand – the artist, the film crew, the gallery staff, *along* with the pianists themselves. At its simplest, Tanaka’s film thus provided the means of *a few people passing through a rather brief moment in time*.⁶ This phrase was the title of Guy Debord’s film dedicated to the Situationist International, a post-war avant-garde collective dedicated to constructing the type of situation staged in the motion capture studio at UCI. As such, Tanaka’s *A Piano Played by Five Pianists at Once (First Attempt)* is a powerful and poetic homage to this legacy.

- 1 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 15.
- 2 Stephen Greenblatt, “The Answer Man,” *The New Yorker*, (August 8, 2011).
- 3 *Harvard Concise Dictionary of Music*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 181-2.
- 4 Nancy, p. 25.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 See Thomas Y. Levin: “Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord,” in *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International, 1957-1972*, (Boston: Institute for Contemporary Art, 1989).

UCIRVINE | CLAIRE TREVOR
SCHOOL of the ARTS

ROOM GALLERY

UCIrvine | Claire Trevor School of the Arts
712 Arts Plaza | Irvine, CA 92697-2775
Hours | Tues-Sat 12-6 pm | Telephone | 949.824.9854
www.ucigallery.com

Juli Carson | Gallery Director
Robert Plogman | Associate Director
Lindi Emoung | Brochure Design

CUA

ROOM GALLERY

Koki Tanaka

A Piano Played by Five
Pianists at Once
(First Attempt)

Jan 12 - Feb 11, 2012