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Article abstract

In this piece, Barbara Adler reflects on the Vancouver arts collective known as Sawdust Collector, which ceased operations during the pandemic. She asks how we might move beyond exhaustion by allowing ourselves the time to slow down and the space to reimagine creative praxes, and by contributing our energies to the unfinished work of others.

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Sawdust Collector / Spacious Season

Barbara Adler

In the third month of Vancouver's COVID-19 lockdown, I shared an article with the emerging artists I work with through Simon Fraser University's contemporary arts internship program. Through March and April, I'd scrambled to place these students with arts organizations, piecing together summer-long positions when none of us had any idea what the next two weeks would bring. It was no accident that the article I shared with the class was about exhaustion: Aisha S. Ahmad's "[Why You Should Ignore all that Coronavirus-Inspired Productivity Pressure.](#)" In early March, Ahmad's text was counterpoint to the maniacs who were resourcefully using this "downtime" to catch up on research, write screenplays, get buff, and discover novel sourdough yeasts. I imagined the students might feel relief at Ahmad's invitation to dismiss all of that. What if, instead, we considered the lockdown as a more spacious season of work? During our discussion, however, one student said, "I understand that. I'm just wondering what happens if I slow down and the other artists don't. Won't I fall behind?"

I had an answer prepared because the same anxieties were rattling me, especially around the work Cole Schmidt, James Meger, and I do with the curatorial and producing collective Sawdust Collector. I tried to pitch the student on an idea that I don't yet know how to live: things change when you think about other artists as members of your team, instead of your competition. "Maybe someone else takes the ball for a bit, but, you know, it's okay. Because your whole team—the arts community—that's still moving forward." I agree, it looks Pollyanna in print. And it's impossible to ignore the weight driving the student's question, the suspicion that whenever this ends, we'll all be pitted against each other, competing for even fewer resources.

Later, I spoke to a friend who manages programs within a large arts organization. He was anxious, because they weren't pivoting quickly to offer new services to artists. Other organizations were doing it faster. I tried out my line: Does it matter who gets there first? Aren't we all basically on the same team? My friend sighed at me. The reality is that there are only so many big funders. And the funders will want the stories of how we all bucked up and kept going. They'll want to know who did that the best.

So, what stories will we tell about Sawdust Collector? I suppose at first look, the headline for our collective is that we keeled over and died. We've given up our space at the Gold Saucer and have no programming on the books. We haven't posted helpful tips, inspiring articles, or even logged into our social accounts in over thirteen weeks. Sawdust Collector is entirely volunteer-run, our tiny venue and other expenses mostly paid out of pocket by the collective. It was too costly to keep, both in terms of the rent and the outsized production labour we'd have needed to continue our programming safely. We were just too tired to imagine doing it right now, whether face-to-face or livestreamed. So, the collective is pursuing a very "spacious" approach.

Individually? Cole writes:

After 6 months of planning for album releases, trips to Europe, and what would've been the 2020 Vancouver International Jazz Festival, this invisible germ came to town and cancelled all our music parties, forcing us to stay in our rooms and think about what we had done. I spent the lockdown making friends with a drum machine and learning to cook nice meals for my partner, who had just moved to Vancouver for a job in the arts. I feel grateful for the lack of worrying about attendance at the gigs while I wait patiently for the green light to allow us all to go back to running around, destroying ourselves with

community some more.¹

In June, James was offered a gig working on a prawn boat, and he and I left to spend the summer on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast. For forty-two days, he worked ten- to fourteen-hour shifts, waking before six, coming home at seven and sometimes later. My notes from that time are worry poems about James's hands. Seeing them swollen red and slow condensed all of my anxiety for him as a professional musician and improviser. I know how much time and practice are in his hands—which could easily be caught in some prawning implement and winched off.

As for me, pandemic time has meant Zooming through the cognitive dissonance of advising students on their careers in the arts. I worry about my part in launching emerging artists into the post-pandemic abyss as I quietly attend to my own projects, which likewise may never land. In the longest running project, Mermaid Spring, our team is collecting second-hand yarn as material that we'll crochet into the set for a musical about professional mermaids. Sorting through boxes of donated yarn, I've encountered many "UFOs."² This is the crafting word for unfinished objects, the disembodied sweater arms and stubby scarves that peter into nothing. Some of the abandoned work has been very fine and I have morbid fantasies about what whisked the crafter away from their goals. Illness? Death? Another calling? Other pieces are gnarled in tight, crooked stitches. Imagine the relief of chucking the screw-ups into a bag and never looking at them again.

This is the project that has kept me sane while I worry about Sawdust Collector and the scarcity looming for any of us who work in the arts. When I borrow yarn from the UFOs, I sometimes feel that our new project is continuing the hopes of the unseen crafters. It's Pollyanna, but hear me out. We get to finish something they put into the world. Differently, but it's something. Now that I'm tuned to that idea, I see its invitation everywhere. Last weekend I salvaged our new landlord's "COVID garden." They'd crammed their deck full of tomato and pepper plants in the first weeks of the lockdown, but they'd picked fussy cultivars and ran out of time to take care of them. Now, I'm learning to care about plants I didn't choose for myself. My roommate is doing the same for me in the Vancouver garden I abandoned when I came to the Sunshine Coast.

On a sunset walk a couple of nights ago, James and I talked about how lucky we are. This is a bit different from the Privilege Talk we've also been having, but it intersects. We were laughing about how we are fortunate to have never really "made it" in a mainstream way. We've both had moments of incredible opportunity, but it's also always been more than a bit DIY. That's how Cole, James, and I run Sawdust Collector—this raggedy thing, in a constant state of falling behind and keeling over. Our long-time experience of that feeling is saving our asses right now. It's not such a shock that we don't get to keep our space, make an album, mount the full show, make money on the tour. We've known for some time that people might not discover our work.

Now, we've been realizing that there could be something essential about embracing this humble scale. We're a collective of white artists and organizers. Money and power need to be redistributed, immediately. So perhaps part of our job is to celebrate making to the available scale, giving up on gloss. And of course, it's a mark of our extreme privilege that this is the conversation we're having, that the space we're giving up is a venue, not a home, and that our uncertainty is around the kinds of art we'll be able to make. You caught that I work at a university? All these riches are the argument for us to be modest as we imagine what resources we really need.

Our work is still happening, just somewhere else and in a different form. James's captain on the

prawn boat is Joe Denham, a musician and poet. The hours they spent fishing helped hatch the beginnings of an idea to run Joe’s recording studio together. My time with UFOs and gardens is helping me believe the ideas about community that I pitched to the nervous arts students in my class. Those are the ideas behind Sawdust Collector. We make connections between different parts of the arts community because we want to be on the same team. We’ll keep trying to do that. We’ll probably get the itch to put on shows again, soon enough. For now, some of our old work is being done by different people. In Vancouver, we recognize Meredith Bates, who recently took some of the loss of the Merge Collective and spun that energy into the Vancouver Improvised Music Society. You’ll read about the work of Lisa Cay Miller and Aram Bajakian in this journal.³

I do have a Pollyanna dream for those busy ones. I hope the programmers, producers and artists still hustling through this can feel a sense of the shared load. I hope anyone who needs to slow down or redirect knows that they can. When they fray, there will be people who discover what they’ve done, who will continue it in their own way. If we look for the scrappy wins, in the edges, I think we’ll see that nothing’s ever truly abandoned.

Notes

¹ Personal correspondence.

² With thanks to fibre artist Heather Cameron, for teaching me about the utopic possibilities of UFOs.

³ Aram Bajakian’s piece appears in [Volume 1 of “Improvisation, Musical Communities, and the COVID-19 Pandemic”](#), while Lisa Cay Miller’s piece appears alongside this piece in Volume 2.

Works Cited

Ahmad, Aisha S. “Why You Should Ignore All that Coronavirus-Inspired Productivity Pressure.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 26 Mar. 2020, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/why-you-should-ignore-all-that-coronavirus-inspired-productivity-pressure/>.