A Roach Without its Head

An album about dissociation

A Bachelor of Fine Arts Thesis

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by

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Abstract

Cockroaches are known for their ability to survive several weeks without their head, due to their decentralized nervous system. Sometimes, I feel like going about daily life can induce a similar feeling. Dissociation can be defined as:

The separation of whole segments of the personality (as in dissociative identity disorder) or of discrete mental processes (as in schizophrenia) from the mainstream of consciousness or of behavior.

In my own experiences, I've found the feeling of disassociating in extreme cases to feel similar to an out-of-body experience. Having your consciousness drift away from your body feels almost near-death. These experiences inspired me to dedicate an album of music to the concept of dissociation. Whenever I've felt myself dissociating in uncomfortable situations, ambient music has helped me remain grounded. I felt deeply inspired by the ability of ambient music to create a focused and tranquil state of mind, and wanted to replicate that in a guitar composition. Listening to artists such as Steve Reich and Phillip Glass helped me better understand how to use rhythmic cacophony to create ambient music, instead of long drones and free time. This project is my attempt to replicate that feeling, focusing on how ambient music can make someone feel grounded in a dissociative state. I also used the project as an opportunity to experiment with process music, dedicating the entire process of making the album to a single workflow, only using guitar and Ableton as a looper. This made the project feel concise and the music more directly tied to the concept. The goal for this album is to shine light on dissociation as a coping mechanism, and how ambient music can ground us when we are dissociating.

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Introduction

Dissociation is defined as a symptom of a mental health disorder, normally dissociative identity disorder or schizophrenia. I find the verb form, dissociating, to describe a more general experience of being disconnected from your own consciousness. I've found it happens for multiple reasons. Sometimes it's when I'm driving on the highway and forget I'm driving for a moment, or in stressful situations like public speaking, where dissociating helps ease the stress in the moment.

In my own life, I have used dissociation as a coping mechanism for uncomfortable situations, and have had to unlearn that behavior over time to become more in-touch with myself. In the process of becoming more in the present moment, I found ambient music to help me reach a sense of 'soft focus', where I was experiencing the current moment without the anxiety. As someone who has gone through the process of dealing with a dissociative habit, I wanted to create a piece of music that is dedicated to that feeling, and that could help the listener feel more grounded.

Concept Development

This project was not the first iteration of my thesis. Throughout my time at Calarts, I've struggled to conceptualize my thesis. The work I've been primarily involved with has been studio recording, concerts, music production, and teaching drums alongside music theory. I've had trouble putting these interests into a final thesis, so I wanted to describe my process of trying different ideas, and the decision-making behind this album becoming my thesis.

When I arrived at CalArts, I was primarily an Ableton producer focused on hip-hop production, wanting to learn more about the recording process to begin a career in audio engineering. The work itself consisted of taking recording classes, then becoming the teachers assistant for John Baffa, as well as working at school shows on concert crew. I also spent my time running sessions in the school's two recording studios. Later on, I decided to pursue an Arts Education minor, taking an extra year at Calarts and focusing more on teaching private lessons drums and music theory to prospective students.

As I started the process of conceptualizing the plan for my thesis project, I realized that none of these pursuits immediately gave me ideas for a project. I wanted my thesis to be personal, and encapsulate the development of my artistry and skills at CalArts. Before getting into the final resulting album, I had worked on two previous ideas for a thesis, which helped me better understand what I was looking for.

The first of these projects arose during my first two years at CalArts. I was much more interested in producing hip-hop with sampling in Ableton. I was in the practice of finding songs to sample online, and then flipping them in different ways to create hip-hop beats and dance music tracks. One day, I found the track *Invitation* by Cal Tjader, and was immediately entranced by the vibraphone, choir, and somber tone of the track. I wanted to take a different approach to sampling the piece, and made a 2-step garage song, taking short chops of the transients in the piece. When I finished the track, I was surprised by how unrecognizable the resulting song was from the original. This realization inspired

me to complete an album dedicated to the sampled track, *Invitation*. I wanted to make a project exploring the artistic ethics of sampling, and ask the question: “Does sampling detract from the artistry and soul of the original song?”

After having finished the album, creating hip-hop, dance, and ambient tracks all sampling *Invitation*, I found myself at a dead-end. I had turned my album in as a final project for one of my classes, and felt the project was not as deep in concept as I had thought it would be. I wanted the takeaway to be: “Sampling can detract from the original work because most listeners will not put in the effort to discover the original or care about the history.” This assumption was entirely incorrect, and the major take-away I received from my peers was: “Sampling preserves the history of music that would otherwise go unnoticed by younger audiences, and can be a way for artists to display their influences.” This realization was interesting, but disappointing as I wanted the album to challenge the ethics of sampling in modern music. I ended up leaving the project there, and started brainstorming different ideas for my thesis, where the project had a larger scope of ideas.

The next idea for my thesis was an interactive installation combining hardware and software elements. Because of my prospective degree being in Music Technology, I felt it was important to utilize the skillset and concepts I’ve learned throughout my education. I wanted the thesis to be challenging, multi-disciplinary, and conceptually distinct from other projects. I settled on the idea of ‘the sounds within objects, and the places they inhabit’, being inspired by my field-recording class and experiences in the recording studio. My plan was to bring a large piece of driftwood from a local beach, and attach an array of piston solenoid motors to it. This would act as a percussion instrument, playing rhythms generated by Ableton and transmitted through Arduino to the solenoid motors to play against the wood. I also envisioned a computer-vision system that would read the audiences movements around the space, and translate that into when and how the solenoids would trigger. I didn’t get very far past the planning stage of this project, however. I felt an extreme lack of motivation to complete the project because it was something I had designed to be a ‘good’ thesis for my major, and not something I had an actual desire to work on day-to-day.

This led me to the realization that I needed to frame my thesis around something I actually enjoyed doing! It sounds obvious, but at the time I was struggling with perfectionism, and designing projects with lofty and complex concepts that ‘sounded’ good on paper, but weren’t things I actually cared deeply about or felt motivated to work on. This brought me to the current iteration of my thesis, with only a couple months left at CalArts. I write this explanation not as an excuse for why my thesis is short, but as a detailed report of my process getting to this point, and the lessons I learned along the way. I truly feel that I would not have been happy with my thesis if not for the versions I scrapped along the way, and the lessons I learned from doing so.

Artistic Influences and Research

Minimalism and process music were the largest inspirations for the sonic content of my album. Artists such as Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Alvin Lucier, and Brian Eno were my largest inspirations for this project. Minimalism was a movement of music in the 1960's that directly opposed the intellectual rigor and rapidly changing musical ideas of Serialism. Minimalism emphasizes gradual transformations and spareness over rapid changes and cacophony.

Process music is where the structure of the piece emerges through repeated gradual steps, transparently displaying the piece's structure unfolding in real time. Reich used phasing as a mechanism for process music to occur. In their piece *It's Gonna Rain*, Reich created a phasing effect by playing two identical tape loop recordings of a pentecostal preacher, then allowing them to drift gradually out of synchronization. Reich also employed a similar technique in their piece *Come Out*, which used a recording from a Harlem civil rights protestor. I wanted to incorporate phasing into my own compositions, and a few of the songs on the album have guitar loops that phase throughout the track, constantly changing the rhythmic synchronization of the parts throughout.

I was also inspired by the philosopher Franz Kafka, specifically their novella *The Metamorphosis*. I wanted my album to describe the absurdity of modern life, and how the cycle of daily life can feel monotonous and absurd. The ways that the novella explores these themes in a unique way. I especially appreciated the imagery of Gregor Samsa waking up as the giant insect, and wanted to have it as the central visual for the album's cover art.

Process and Methodology

As a drummer primarily, I wanted to focus on improving at guitar by composing single-section songs with a guitar and looper, and making an effort to compose as a form of practice daily. Even though I ended up only keeping eight of the tracks, I found the process incredibly liberating and helped create a central focus to the album. I've had issues in the past with feeling confident in releasing music, creating lofty standards for my own music and often scrapping songs or projects I've started.

Using the concept as an opportunity to practice guitar, I created a daily practice of creating looping guitar compositions, attempting to encapsulate the feeling of 'soft focus' that ambient music can provide. I was also inspired by the concept of process music, specifically Reich's *Come Out* as well as Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room*. I wanted to create a strict routine for my compositions, wanting to mimic the practices of process music. It felt like a stretch, but I wanted to make the entire process of creating the album a work of process music, or at least inspired by it.

My setup was pretty simple all things considered. I used Ableton Live with my Ibanez semi-hollow guitar plugged directly into a UAD Apollo x4 interface. In Ableton, I used the software's session view to create looping guitar parts in clips, and then layered them to create interlocking rhythmic parts. I used minimal production and effects, only an amp simulation plugin and some mild reverb and delay on certain tracks. The major creative restriction was only using guitar for the project, which made me focus more on the melodic and harmonic content, over the tone and production of the tracks. I made a consistent effort to practice composing these single-section layered guitar loops every single day, eventually keeping the ones I liked most for the final album.

Final Exhibition or Body of Work

After mixing and mastering the album, I released the eight track album via Distrokid. The link to the album can be found below. The album can also be searched for under the name "A Roach Without its Head" by Luke Williams.

https://distrokid.com/hyperfollow/lukewilliams8/a-roach-without-its-head?ref=release

Reflection and Conclusion

In my life, I've struggled with developing my artistry through composing and practicing music in my free-time. I've found that the most productive experiences I've had at CalArts have been hands-on experiences working recording sessions and concerts. This project has been an exercise in setting a specific goal and regime for myself, and developing a daily ritual of practice. I wanted this daily practice of composing guitar music to influence the themes of the album itself. The monotony of daily life often makes me feel dissociated, and I found that Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* was a poignant portrayal of the absurdity of daily life and its implications. I chose to combine the imagery from the story, with the concept of a roach without its head to represent the dissociation that we sometimes experience going about in our daily lives. I hope this album helps people who are struggling with dissociation from the monotony of daily life, and can find peace in listening to these guitar loops.

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