

# ***Momentum, Online Publishing and Creative Commons***

## Collaborative Possibilities of Working with Sound in a Digital Age

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The ability to record and document compositions, improvisations, and performances is a great gift for the modern sound artist. Recording audio and video from rehearsals and performances allows us to step back from our work and view it at arms length - something that is otherwise difficult for performance and time-based artists.

With time comes perspective and it is interesting to observe changes in opinions of a particular performance or composition at different times after the initial event, and to have recorded evidence to be able to contrast works from different stages of one's career.

Add to this the options of affordable home and field recording, plus instant publication via all the various online platforms, and it has never been easier to make, share, and collaborate on sound art projects.

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In the time that I have been making and documenting composed and improvised sonic works, I have been able to independently create, record, collaborate on, and share my compositions, recordings, and performances with friends and audience members around the world. "The digital stage can reach audiences who would never enter your gallery or theatre – including those on the other side of the world,"<sup>1</sup> writes ArtsHub Australia editor Deborah Stone. The ease of accessibility that social media and streaming platforms allow makes reaching out to show or share work simple and instantaneous.

My largest creative project to date, *Momentum*<sup>2</sup> (2012-13), is an enormous collection (400+ tracks and 5+ hours) of recorded sonic arts works, all shared online on the day they were created and released under a Creative Commons<sup>3</sup> license, alongside information about sound sources and creative processes used in each composition. I labeled this 'open resource' art, in that I was readily sharing not only the results of my work but information about the process, also, with an online audience.

From my own experience as an artist and audience member I know that people are interested in how creative work is made. I endeavoured to share as much of what I was doing and how I was doing it as possible whilst creating *Momentum*, and an engaged and

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Stone, "Five Ways to Make the Most of the Digital Space," [http://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/artshub-conference/grants-and-funding/deborah-stone/five-ways-to-make-the-most-of-the-digital-space-248698?utm\\_source=ArtsHub+Australia&utm\\_campaign=0c7085be23-UA-828966-1&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_2a8ea75e81-0c7085be23-304103629](http://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/artshub-conference/grants-and-funding/deborah-stone/five-ways-to-make-the-most-of-the-digital-space-248698?utm_source=ArtsHub+Australia&utm_campaign=0c7085be23-UA-828966-1&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2a8ea75e81-0c7085be23-304103629).

<sup>2</sup> Nat Grant, "Momentum," <http://momentumproject.blogspot.com>.

<sup>3</sup> "Creative Commons - Attribution-Noncommercial-Sharealike 4.0 International - Cc by-Nc-Sa 4.0," <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

interested audience grew around this process. I posted about each step of *Momentum* on a blog and sound hosting site with the aim of sharing the process of creating a sound work with an audience *as* it was happening – not only after the fact, in the form of a complete work, CD etc. This kind of end result was always in mind, however “the moment of publication (the moment, that is, of engaging with the public) was not deferred to some future moment when the artwork was deemed to be complete.”<sup>4</sup> My blog site also gave people the option to subscribe to receive an email with each new blog post. This resulted in audience members ‘following’ my progress each day throughout the project, and coming to a greater understanding of the kinds of processes involved in creating my music than from merely hearing finished tracks.

Similarly, books such as Joe Fig’s *Inside the Painter’s Studio*<sup>5</sup> give valuable insight into how, where, and why certain artists work the way they do, whether by choice or circumstance. Blogs like Noah Scalin’s *Make Something 365*<sup>6</sup> and Keith Stanley’s *365 Days of Ikebana*<sup>7</sup> also provide a snapshot of the evolution of an artist, sharing work and process at regular intervals over the course of months and years. For someone who often works alone this kind of insight into other artists’ creative processes can be really inspiring.

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My *Momentum* Project had a large collaborative element, with over 60 sound artists from around the world contributing recorded material for me to incorporate into the compositions. The resulting works have also contributed to many new mixes, remixes, and derivative works. At the conclusion of the project I was still receiving recorded contributions, which led to me setting up a collective group on SoundCloud<sup>8</sup> for sharing and repurposing audio recordings, so that the spirit of the project could continue, but with everyone having access to all the source material as well as re-mixed tracks (within the confines of a Creative Commons license).

The online nature of *Momentum* and the ability to send media files easily via email and dropbox made collaborating straightforward and instantaneous. When someone sent me a sound I would usually incorporate it into the work straight away, meaning I could also send them the link to a completed track with their sound included within a day or so. This made for several repeat contributors to the project, as it was a fairly quick and also fun way to contribute, collaborate, and hear a finished product without waiting months for an album to be released. Contributions came from ongoing or previous musical collaborators, from friends with no musical knowledge or experience, from followers on social media sites, from people who had learnt of the project by word of mouth, and from those who had found the project online or in other ways.

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<sup>4</sup> Lucas Ihlein, "Framing Everyday Experience: Blogging as Art" (Deakin University, 2009), 58.

<sup>5</sup> Joe Fig, *Inside the Painter's Studio* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Noah Scalin, "Make Something 365 & Get Unstuck," <http://makesomething365.blogspot.com.au/>.

<sup>7</sup> Keith Stanley, 2011, <http://keithstanley.com/?p=312>.

<sup>8</sup> "Momentum: Collective's Stream on Soundcloud," <https://soundcloud.com/groups/momentum-collective>.

In addition to this there were inadvertent collaborations along the way between various contributors, as on occasion I would receive contributions to the project several days in a row. Sometimes these contributors knew each other, other times not, and at times I was able to introduce artists to each other in this way. Conducting *Momentum* also gave me the confidence to approach other artists and ask for a contribution. Given the small request, that there were no limits on the type or length sounds to be contributed (it could be as little as a few seconds), I felt able to ask, and most people obliged. New connections were made and new collaborations were borne out of this; creating work collaboratively has been a springboard for many new and shared ideas and projects.

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*Momentum* sought to explore the ways in which artists engage with their audiences and communities via the networked world utilising non-traditional and community oriented approaches. Social networking and media platforms such as Facebook, SoundCloud, Bandcamp, and Twitter allow instantaneous interaction and data sharing. There are an abundance of different sites and apps that harness the collective knowledge of others in the fields of art, science, and technology to develop open source and open resource creative tools – tools that have become the “Swiss Army Knives”<sup>9</sup> of contemporary artists and professionals.

For me, creating work in an accessible and transparent way was about building a community around the creative work as it was being created. By the time *Momentum* was ‘finished’ there was an audience ready to receive the final product. They had been along for the journey and perhaps even contributed in some way to the project. “Participation is the key, and that means that not only the end result is shared, but the whole process,”<sup>10</sup> observes Maja Kuzmanovic in the open source handbook *FLOSS + Art*, on getting the full benefits of an open source, or at least partly open source, situation.

This can involve some level of trust and letting go of ego, as well as blurring of authorship if others are allowed to contribute to a project. In the case of *Momentum* I felt completely able to do this, as final creative control did rest with me, and I experienced the benefits of what Charles Green call’s the ‘third hand’ – where the outcomes of my work, with the contributions of others, turned into something that none of us would have necessarily done or thought to do on our own.<sup>11</sup> Open source black metal band Nahvalr has a crowd sourcing process for collecting musical material that is similar to *Momentum*. The band invite recorded contributions via their website, resulting in unseen collaborations between dozens of fans, audience members, and fellow artists on each release.

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<sup>9</sup> "Open Culture:

Participatory Practices in Art & Science," Subtle Technologies, <http://subtletechnologies.com>

<sup>10</sup> Aymeric Mansoux and Marloes de Valk, eds., *Floss + Art* (France: GOTO10, 2008), 27.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Green, *The Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), x.

They describe their process as “several people, operating anonymously around the globe, have their work hacked, chopped, distorted, fused and recorded over to create something altogether new.”<sup>12</sup>

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All the *Momentum* tracks remain freely available to stream, share, and repurpose but with the restrictions indicated by an Attribution-NonCommercial-Share-Alike Creative Commons license.<sup>13</sup> This means that anyone can download my work, and use it in derivative works, but not for commercial purposes. This applied also to any external contributions, and I always made sure that contributors were aware of the nature and restrictions of the Creative Commons license. In addition to this, I advertised that I would like to be informed of any external use of the music from the project.

Creative Commons, in their own words, is a “nonprofit organization that enables the sharing and use of creativity and knowledge through free legal tools.”<sup>14</sup> The freely accessible and easy to use licenses “provide a simple, standardized way to give the public permission to share and use your creative work — on conditions of your choice.”<sup>15</sup>

I choose the Attribution-NonCommercial-Share-Alike license for my recorded compositions, because I would like to know how and where my work is being used, utilised, or repurposed. I choose the non-commercial option because I feel that if someone is going to make a profit from the use of my work, they should really be paying me as well. People can still contact you and ask to use your work for free, but ideally they do so ask instead of just stealing it. There’s no real deterrent here apart from one of conscience, but Creative Commons at least encourages users to share and appropriate digital content with proper attribution.

Licenses like Creative Commons make works of art “open to transformation, modification or reappropriation ... When governed by these new licenses, works become part of an ongoing process, they are ‘in progress’, part of a multi-layered process, an idea, originated by others.”<sup>16</sup> Creating *Momentum* involved taking the audience along for the journey, and inviting feedback and engagement with my creative process. A deliberate transparency of process combined with free and easy access to the work itself promoted regular conversation, feedback and collaboration with my audience throughout the entire process. Although the formal part of the work itself is now finished for me, my hope is that it will continue to evolve in the public domain.

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<sup>12</sup> Enemies List Home Recordings, "Nahvalr - "Nahvalr" (Digital)," <http://enemies-list-home-recordings.myshopify.com/products/nahvalr-nahvalr-digital>.

<sup>13</sup> "Creative Commons - Attribution-Noncommercial-Sharealike 4.0 International - Cc by-Nc-Sa 4.0".

<sup>14</sup> "About - Creative Commons," <http://creativecommons.org/about>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Mansoux and de Valk, *Floss + Art*, 30.

The open resource format of *Momentum* is similar to how the ABC's Pool site used to operate. Pool was an open, online community of artists and musicians who would upload work to the site that they were happy to share and to have re-purposed by other Pool members. Subsequent works would be posted back to the site in an ongoing series of collaborations, sharing, and reworking of artistic material. Pool operated for five years, with more than 8,000 artists contributing more than 25,000 creative works.<sup>17</sup>

By opening up my project to external contributions I was able to learn new technical skills that I could then apply elsewhere in my work, stretching me and taking the project in new directions. The existing community of artists that Pool provided to springboard ideas and work off was really valuable in the development of my work at that time.

There are potential benefits to artists who are prepared to share process and let go of ego. Mansoux and de Valk, in their preface to *Floss + Art*, give the example of free and open source coding communities, where "artists frequently show each other bits of code, inspire each other, and most of all, teach each other."<sup>18</sup>

The rise in recent years of crowdsourcing for everything from company start-ups to art projects and grassroots political campaigns has occurred alongside other developments in social networking and participatory culture. I was able to harness the power of the engaged audience I developed throughout 2012-13 to pre-sell a box set of 4 CDs from the 366 project. I easily raised \$1000 (\$200 more than my target) in a little over a week on the Indiegogo site.<sup>19</sup> A lot of people who purchased the CDs were active members of my audience throughout the previous 2 years, and they were as excited as I was to see the online project make a foray into a physical product.

I have applied crowdsourcing strategies not only to financial support but ideas and contributions to my creative works. The next big project I am currently working on, titled *Precious*, involved collecting hundreds of old or unwanted keys to be used as found objects in a new recorded composition and installation work.

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The reality of working with sound in the way I do in this digital age is that it has probably never been easier for people to steal my creative work. At the same time, the ease with which I can share and collaborate and on new projects can make the risks and pitfalls worthwhile. For this reason, I aim to be generous with my collaborators and with my audience, and not precious about sharing details of my creative process.

Being transparent about the ways in which I make music has really helped me to connect with my audience and with fellow creators. Additionally the online nature of all the *Momentum* collaborations allowed me to work with others on making music without having to physically get together in situations that geography may prevent or where

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<sup>17</sup> collective, "Pool," <http://pool.abc.net.au>.

<sup>18</sup> Mansoux and de Valk, *Floss + Art*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Nat Grant, "Help Nat Make Momentum Box Sets," <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/help-nat-make-momentum-box-sets/x/2795452>.

personalities may get in the way of the work. This resulted in a process that was international and very much focused on the art itself.

This is, however, just one of the ways in which I work. Not all my music is given away for free, nor created in the public eye. For those projects that are, however, there are myriad benefits to doing so. I was able to harness the collective knowledge and creativity of my audience to feed back into the work and further develop my own practice. Bringing together my audience and other artists opened streams of dialogue leading to new collaborations and an engaged and participatory culture around my projects.

Creating *Momentum* was an experiment, in terms of collaboration, transparency of process, and exploring new and different modes of authorship. I didn't know who (if anyone) would contribute, what kinds of musical material I would be given to work with, what kind of feedback and following, if any, would develop as a result of my putting myself and the project out into the world and being open to contributions, feedback, and suggestions.

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Involving my audience in the process of creating *Momentum* was a big drive to continue to create and share my work. Showing where I was up to every day, getting feedback and encouragement to keep going, perhaps even inspiring others to do the same, and receiving so many contributions that turned my audience into collaborators and took the project in new and exciting directions – these were all vital elements in the success and, I believe, completion of an enormous creative undertaking. Working in this way gave my audience deeper insight into my art and my process, and provided me with inspiration to continue to work in this way in the future.

## Related links

- "About - Creative Commons." <http://creativecommons.org/about>.  
collective. "Pool." <http://pool.abc.net.au>.
- "Creative Commons - Attribution-Noncommercial-Sharealike 4.0 International - Cc by-Nc-Sa 4.0." <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.
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