common-stairwell-wailing: a punk performance by will barlow

part-1: <https://youtu.be/bKzQpl1l2ak>

part-2: <https://youtu.be/RXdqfF_EmO4>

I decided to pursue this “performance” because I find the nature of DIY performance and DIY ethic in general interesting. I have always adorned music as a manner for expressing myself, yet I have not always felt comfortable expressing myself through music, whether its due to lack of talent, or simply the effort required to produce something of aesthetic value that I would even enjoy sharing. My goal with this assignment is to manifest punk DIY ethic into a radically different performance. My hope is that its observed as wholly original, though I acknowledge that any perceived originality in the final product is a façade for, I have been inspired by punk tradition. The final product is a video of myself performing in a stairwell. I enjoy harmonic resonance and I think that it has an impressive spiritual quality of transcendence. My rationale is to share this emotional transcendence by drawing on the ideas of punk performance and music and DIY ethic. My goal is to craft something unique that catalyzes some sort of emotional response.

In a world where we are constantly pestered by a noisy world, this performance is an effort to take a break from the noise and focus on raw beauty. Raw beauty for me exists in vibrations because, well, everything is moving and vibrating at different frequencies. Harmonic resonances occur when different vibrations synchronize together. The idea of punk musical performance as a unifying medium is something that I have grown slightly obsessed with. Music, by its sonic quality of vibration is a manner in which one can “conduct” emotions. The essence of this performance is that no matter what tones I play, there is still feedback and response even though I am alone in a stairwell. So, while its nice to have an audience that responds to music, it is also nice to listen carefully to that which we cannot see and how it responds to music. Call it a spiritual mission or whatever, but there is truth in the feelings that emerge from a performance of this nature. This is incidentally a very punk thing, I believe.

I engaged with this performance as an experiment in divulging my emotions through music. Because I have a musical background and have had the opportunity to receive training in jazz and blues styles, I have learned how to play music and improvise. However, the music that I have learned is not my music. This is why the DIY nature of punk ethic is a focal point for this performance; to make music myself, to let it convey raw sound and vibrations from my heart instead of neatly composed music from my mind. Raw sound in a confined place is the symbol that I am framing. I am pouring out my feelings from my heart into my horn and into the world around me and listening to it echoing off the concrete. A perfect performance is not the goal; being and feeling is.

My wailing in the stairwell is an experiment that embodies punk DIY ethic because it quite literally is my approach to doing it myself. Where the ‘it’ is music. I have not been practicing. I did not even warm up for this performance. Which, as a trained musician seemed somewhat sacrilegious. But my goal was not to sound rehearsed or even good for that matter, it was simply to let sound out of my body. I recorded the performance with my phone because its what I have and it made the DIY music video easier to do myself. In the spirit of hardcore punk, I sought out a “no-frills”, raw feel with no rehearsal. The video captures the entire process from turning on the camera to turning off. I wanted to create a raw space, so that any audience would also feel my vulnerability.

I think that my wailing in the stairwell does a decent job of accomplishing my goals. The process was the most rewarding aspect of this project. I think it was rewarding because of the nature of being vulnerable in a public space. Its public yet hidden, and my audience is not large. I think that is a key feature of this performance. I am not concerned with the quantity of people who engage with the performance, but I am concerned with the few that do behold it. While I do have an idea of what it means, my hope is that the performance inspires others to ‘let it out’ from time to time. Whether or not I accomplished this is beyond me, all I have is this video of myself unloading in a stairwell that sounds somewhat neat. Its not much, but perhaps one may hear it and think critically about why its different. An area for improvement would be finding a way to share the video outside of the system of Google and YouTube. It would be fitting to have a physical object such as a flash drive or CD that would allow anyone to watch it and make it more portable. But YouTube is at least free and easily accessible for people with computers.