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Media History and Theory – Holly Willis  
12.16.05  
Final Paper: “Listen”

I am a recent laptop music convert. However, for what its worth I have spent most of my life feeling ambivalent about computer-generated music. Beyond the obvious analog vs. digital debate, I have always felt there was something missing from this music, an absence or void that left me feeling cold, confused, and dissatisfied. The music itself as a genre has developed a very strong presence, yet there is something about the approach, particularly in regards to music performance, that has been problematic for me. Laptop performance falls drastically short of my expectations for a genre that offers so much potential. Being liberated from the physical craft of playing a traditional instrument, coupled with an powerful tool for manipulating, recording, and playing back sounds in real time, seems full of possibilities, yet, one of the most common scenes at a laptop music concert is the performer sitting on stage, attention turned to a blue screen, while the audience watches the musician discreetly interacting with the computer. At best, this kind of performance has introduced multi-media components such as video projections, or more open-ended forms of composition and improvisation, to liven up the experience. Nonetheless, it is unidirectional communication hidden under a thin veil of distractions. However, aside from some notable exceptions of artists, live music performance in general has simply not been able to transform itself in truly innovative ways. I am interested in laptop music for the very reason that it exposes the problems and potentials of music performance.

There is an arising need for new methodologies and forms that transcend traditional linear, one-way communication (transmitter-message-receiver). The ideas of process, mutability, and the dynamic relationship between artist/art/audience offer productive implications for the future of media and digital culture at large. Sound, music and installation artists such as Yoko Ono, Cornelius, Sonic Youth, Ultra-red and Doug Aiken are examples of artists and performers whose transmedia work addresses a need for more productive interaction--using process to create an experience of transformation. All these artists play with the notion that things do not need to be fixed, defined nor even finished. John Cage's

“chance music” and William Burrough’s “cut-ups” used literal techniques to dismantle the predictability that results from linear structure, thwarting expectations. These non-traditional approaches are relevant and effective presently and can be seen in a variety of media forms, from films such as *21 Grams* to the music sampling approaches of Cornelius or Boards of Canada. Advancing technologies, such as laptops, locative media, wireless systems, and internet networks, should inspire and provoke liberating innovations to create compelling alternatives. A laptop performer does not need to perform with the computer on her lap.

Examining the larger cultural and historical framework of music performance, it is evident that we are at crossroads. Robert Moog introduced his portable synthesizer in the 1960s which altered what and how we hear. At the same time, John Cage and other experimental musicians were finding ways to push boundaries and create “new” music based on non-standard music practices. While computer-based music developed out of the theories of early electronic music, much music today seems to neglect the powerful capabilities of taking music out into the world via performance. Utilizing sounds and music in a transmedia environment seems to end at cellphone ringtones and mp3s for the general public.

Exploring the realms of process, mutability, and communication reveals flexible systems that can help us develop productive alternative ways to navigate and comment on our relationship to the people and world around us. Donna Haraway offers some interesting insights in her essay “The Cyborg Manifesto” where she offers a new model that is not rooted in tradition nor defined by boundaries or polarities. “Cyborg imagery can help express two crucial arguments...first, the production of universal, totalizing theory is a major mistake that misses most of reality, probably always, but most certainly now; and second, taking responsibility for the social relations of science and technology...and so means embracing the skillful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts.” (Haraway, *New Media Reader*, p.535) By not conforming to preconceived definitions, new forms can emerge. The work of designer Mieke Gerritzen is an example of an artist who has been successful in creating a new vernacular within

design. In addition, the relationship between artist, audience and artwork will become fluid and result in a diffusion of power.

Looking a process, the relationship between artist, art, and audience is no longer co-dependent. Chris Marker's film "La Jetee" is a prime example of how focusing on process breaks down the distinctions between artist control and audience passivity. A story told across time (non-linear) represented by single frames, filmmaker and viewer to work through a similar process to connect the images to create a story. Marker's process lets the viewer create their own meanings that are guided by personal experiences and recollections. Much like the main character of *La Jetee* is pulled through the story by his memories.

Because artwork that focuses on process is a more open system, like the Fluxus art "actions", the activity of making art is more important than the final outcome or the artist as sole creator. The work of Fluxus artists is not about resolution and conclusion, but rather, finding opportunities and allowing for the construction of meaning via interpretation. For example, in Yoko Ono's book *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions*, her "Laugh Piece" simply suggests, "Keep laughing a week." I recently saw a performance by Yoko Ono at Barnsdall Park. Before the concert started, each person in the audience was given a small white flashlight and a postcard with instructions for the "Onochord". A short documentary showed Ono discussing her recent trips around the world doing these "Onochord" concerts. Ono took the stage, encouraging the audience to click out a simple morse code with the flashlight that translated into "I Love You". The first half of her concert was a conversation of flashing lights, thousands of strangers communicating and connecting with Ono and others through the "Onochord". Ono encouraged everyone to keep the process going as long as possible. In a time when most music concerts closely resemble Hollywood feature films (big productions, packaged "illusions", hand-fed experience), Ono's performance was a powerful example of how process and the breaking down of the boundaries between artist and audience can be used in a performance setting to create a poignant meaningful experience.

Peter Lunenfeld discusses in *Snap To Grid* the intention of the artist is no longer the bottom line- participation and interaction are key. John Dewey writes in his essay "Experience Design": "Order is not imposed from without but is made of the relations of harmonious interactions that energies bear to one another." (Dewey, "Experience Design") If structure is a human-based need and a way for us to create meaning, then, Dewey argues, interaction between humans and the tensions, therein, are what creates that structure we desire. In those terms, experience is more about our relationships and less about following a linear narrative.

Without linear narrative, there is no longer the need for a final outcome, resolution or conclusion. Lunenfeld writes "The importance of unfinished cannot be overstated: digital environments encourage an unending series of updates, upgrades, retoolings and revampings." (Lunenfeld, *Snap to Grid*, p. 127) As the world evolves at a quickened pace, we need to be open to flux, not be attached to the permanent, the static, nor the fixed. Things beg to be altered, manipulated, reorganized, remediated, deconstructed and distributed. As mentioned earlier, artists historically have worked with many kinds of mutable systems. William Burrough's "cut up" novels encouraged a "systematic recording- a playback of everyday life", a method of "altering reality". The Surrealists also worked with similar techniques to shake things up and put things into new light. Ultimately, what makes this interesting for artists is the creation of something truly unique. Like Database artwork, the process of manipulation is something purposeful, personal, and meaningful.

Musicians have experimented with similar approaches involving chance and creating in the moment. Improvisation works upon this flexible system of quoting, expansion, rearrangement, and cueing. Other forms include rolling dice or throwing coins to determine the outcome of a performance, and the use of musical composition scored on cards to be manipulated during a performance, often in a random manner. In turn every performance is unique, as opposed to the pre-packaged techno-fab concert of today's MTV lip-sync world.

Students from the Royal College of Art in London have created an experiment in sound that offers an approach of merging sound with technology to produce unexpected results. The object is

called the “Audio Shaker”. It is a electronic tumbler that records and traps noises inside. The tumbler can then be shaken in various ways, and when you ‘pour’ out the contents, the sounds have been transformed. Similar to a sampler, but is interesting in the physical metaphors it suggests, not just the process of cutting up, altering, and putting back together. Technology we can enable transformation. By envisioning sound in new ways, in this case as a liquid, rather than a time-based medium, we are able to see, and hear, things in a different light.

The Audio Shaker website states: “Put simply, it is a tactile container to capture, shake up and pour out sounds. Creating a rich, intuitive experience that is purposefully open to interpretation and imagination.” ([http://www.interaction.rca.ac.uk/alumni/03-05/tom/lstyr/audio\\_shaker/frameset\\_as.html](http://www.interaction.rca.ac.uk/alumni/03-05/tom/lstyr/audio_shaker/frameset_as.html))

The kind of play and serendipitous exploration that occurs forms the new landscape (and soundscape) of the digital world. John Cage writes, "This play is an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos, nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we are living, which is so excellent once one gets one’s mind and desires out the way and lets it act of its own accord." (Cage, *Silence*, p. 9)

Not only are these kind of imaginative responses significant in the construction of meaning but it also opens a realm of political and social commentary. Collage, cut ups, repetition, spatial manipulation, signal processing and sampling have all been used for political means and can be used to invigorate actions. Mieke Gerritzen is a designer whose iconoclastic letterforms and bold statements have created a new language for transmedia design. Working across a variety of media forms from books to films to paintings, her technique has evolved from a cutting up of text, pulling out quotes, rearrangement, and wallpapering with icons and images. Her work is not to be read in one way—it begs to be digested and interpreted in fragments. In her new movie “Beautiful World” Gerritzen translates her style cinematically in collage, montage, soundscape offering an alternative genre of filmmaking, one with its own language, style and set of criteria. To use the analogy of music, elements can be sampled and remixed to allow a new reading. Giving the power to the reader/user/audience helps resist existing

forms of domination. This is Gerritzen's intention. It is that kind of pioneering spirit that transmedia design embraces.

"It is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action"  
—Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p.9

We are more integrated, connected & flexible in today's global world. Humans process this large flow of information by talking and interacting with people. It is through a sharing of information that we are able to digest large amounts of information. On the one hand, this kind of collective intelligence might result in a "herd" mentality, on the other hand, it can foster community and become the very fabric of our relationships. Music can be argued in a similar fashion. While experimental music might alienate some people who think it just sounds like noise, these communities have shown that their provocations inspire discussion and analysis.

Ultra-red is a sound/music art collective that supports alliances and networks based around performances in urban spaces that are politically and socially charged, such as at Needle Exchanges and public housing. The potential of connecting sound with an environment is an effective tactic for transmedia experience and for further breaking down boundaries between art, artist and audience. By breaking down the transmitter-message-receiver modes of communication, performances function out in the world. It is a modern example of Baudrillard's "street" where true discussion and action can effectively take place. By limiting our ability to respond we are pushed into a state of isolation. Therefore, by breaking from the standard traditions of music performance, Ultra-red succeeds at creating "joint production through interaction." (Baudrillard, *New Media Reader*) They also demonstrate that music performance has the potential to integrate a variety of media properties, architecture, filmmaking, visual art, to effectively address the issues of a digital world. What results is media as a force.

Walter Benjamin asserted that mechanical era ushered a new set of issues that need to be addressed by the culture at large. Similarly we must rethink approaches to our current situation, lest we submit to a culturally defined state of passivity, blind acceptance, and apathy. What is essential to consider is that instead of thinking about navigating within these positive and negative polarities, one

alternative is to find new approaches entirely. By thinking about the world in terms of process, mutability and the fluid relationship of art/artist/audience, we must be open to finding new forms of expression and communication. For laptop music, perhaps that means liberating oneself away from the performance space or interacting with the laptop altogether. As technologies develop, it is essential that we construct affordances and tools to work with them to create positive interactions. Meaning does not solely exist because someone tells us all the answers, but arises out of an understanding of this continuum of raw data to how we construct meaning and value. Current issues and technologies beg us to dive into the unknown and explore territory full of potential. Maybe now is the time to really listen.

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