

Agency and “object specific” creative processes in experimental sound practices

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ABSTRACT

This extended abstract presents strategies for the investigation of technology mediation in the context of experimental sound based practices. For that, terminology is proposed in order to determine how, on an “object specific” basis, creative processes are impacted when technical objects become agents in art making. The notion of “experimental” is also theme, by proposing a connection between the term and Heidegger’s concept of “enframing” (*Gestell*).

ENFRAMING CREATIVE PROCESSES

This paper is an investigation on *technologically-mediated creative processes in experimental music*. But if all art can be considered technologically-mediated on some level¹, my focus lies specifically on “aestheticized” technology (RUTSKY 1999), i.e., technical apparatuses that are taken as places for poetic speculation, objects of inquiry in a creative process. Art that comes to be *from* and *through* technology, as oppose to just making use of it.

Mediation has consequences for the creation process of a work, as well as the work’s final form. For the work itself, one can think in terms of an enforced *technographical mark*. An imprint that a technical device leaves on an art object by simply being part of its creation process. Examples range from early acousmatic music, where the length of loops were a direct consequence of the physical size of shellac disks available at the time, to the non-metric quality of most network performed music, as broadcasting latency makes it difficult for synchronicity between performers. Those are characteristics that are not present in the works as a reflex of the artists will, but quite the opposite - they’re imposed by the devices mediating the creative process. So it seems there is a form of *negotiation* established between apparatus and artist along (and through) this mediation, where the artist, by speculating creatively with a device, is presented with the terms in which that device *accepts* to operate. Technology then, when mediating art making, seems to show it’s boundaries.

I see this manifested in current experimental music, where there are both repertoire and practices in which what a work is (its final form) and how it comes to be (its process) are very much associated with the technical objects those works are made with. With that, a first broader question is presented: is technology *defining/imposing* things when turned into agent in creative processes, and if so, to what extent?

A first hypothesis might suggest that yes, there is a level of *unnegotiable* imposition from technical objects. A flute cannot physically reproduce 100Hz. That’s a giving, from the get-go and no flute piece will ever have 100Hz as a sonic component². In this context, technology can be seen operating in a way as to “enframe” (*Gestell*) (HEIDEGGER 1977) the creative process. It “locks” things in place, delimits a zone of possible actions.

This frame appears to present itself not only as *unnegotiable*, but also as *immutable* (i.e., a flute will never be able to reproduce 100Hz) and *object specific* (i.e., other apparatus will present different boundaries, maybe of a completely different nature).

¹ A paintbrush or the violin bow are, to the same degree as Max/MSP or a piezo microphone, technologies that can mediate art making.

² For this example, we’re referring to a standard concert flute, with no electronic modification or extended techniques.

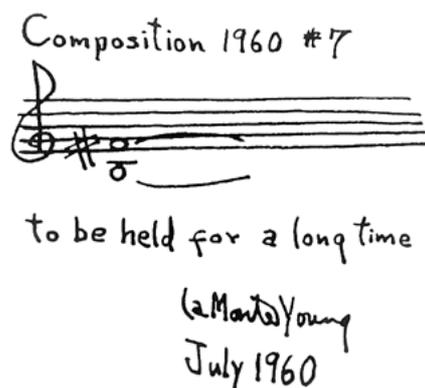
Conditional practice

Heidegger presents enframing as a *condition* one “cannot avoid its influence or sway”, where an “authentic relationship to technology is [...] simply beyond our control”. (GODZINSKI 2005) As discussed, to some extent that is certainly the case, and precisely what I mean by proposing the term immutable in this context. But a more pragmatic and just as valid argument can be made that if the artist stores his flute in a drawer to never touch it again, abandoning the investigation process, no piece will ever come to be since the technical object here is not just a tool to an end, but *the place itself from which the creation process derives*.

So there seems to be not just a negotiation between technology and artist when it comes to creative practices, but also a *shared agency*, where the artist has indeed voice in the process, and technology is not an all encompassing unanimous voice.

A thought experiment can be proposed to illustrate, where La Monte Young’s *Composition 1960 #7* (Figure 1) - which has no defined instrumentation - gains a “*For flute*” indication. What does it say about this device-creator negotiation to be able to propose a polyphonic piece that requires ideally infinite sustain, for a monophonic instrument, driven by human breath?

The frame as proposed by Heidegger is still there, but not as shackle. On the contrary, it is there as *poietic potential entity*, for it is exactly the artists decision of *how* to navigate those boundaries that serve not only as creative driving force, but actually make up for a large portion of the experimental processes. The boundary is always



there, immutable, but to be engaged with.

Figure 1: *Composition 1960 #7*

EXPERIMENTAL AS AN INVESTIGATION OF BORDERS

Here I refer to experimental as “not a school or even an aesthetic, [but as] a position - of inquiry, of uncertainty” (GOTTSCHALK 2016)³. Building on that premise, a proposition can be made of “experimental” as something that is intertwined with the bounds set by the technology at hand. Intertwined, as it relates to a *subversive* attitude towards an expected and accepted use case of an apparatus. Somewhat related to Flusser’s “black box” analogy⁴ and Simondon’s definition of “invention”⁵ which, through different terms, both deal with a closed system that gets modified/saturated and (more importantly) the outcomes of breaking out of said system.

But if a “subversive effect [requires] a stable order that is followed by a majority” (WEISSENBRUNNER 2015), it seems beneficial to point out that experimental processes don’t seem to operate simply on the basis of a mere misuse of devices. An argument can be made for example leveraging the highly technical and interdisciplinary nature of working with electronics and programming in the context of the arts: as

³ Which naturally resonates with Cage’s classical quote defining experimental as an action “the outcome of which is unknown” (CAGE 1973)

⁴ *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, p. 27

⁵ *Imagination et Invention*, p.21

artists are we formally thought how a certain algorithm or a transistor are *indeed* supposed to operate, in order to state we're subverting their original design?

A more nuanced (and to our purposes, more fitting) approach would be to ask "what is possible to do with a transistor, what does this object *allows* me to do to it?" and in a last instance, "how much is that *determining/revealing* to me what my work is?"

Can a composition mindset where the artist is *permeable* to the boundaries and impositions of technology, working with and not against them, be indicative of an experimental practice? Is it possible then to think experimental as a search and embracing of this place *beyond-frame*? It seems one can only grasp the shape of a border, by acknowledging its limits.

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