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Participatory performance

A device for social and musical experimatation

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Abstract

Musicking, according to Christopher Small, is neither playing music nor even listening: whatever its modalities may be, the act of taking part in a musical experience is what makes it exist. This act unfolds in a place where a set of relationships exists, and it is within these relationships that the meaning of the act makes sense. Hence, we can think of music as a social activity if we consider the musical experience as a set of organized relationships, not only between sounds but also between the people who take part in it.

The notion of participation is paramount here because it makes us aware of the idea that everything can be music, because music is not only what we perceive in "exceptional" moments such as shows. Music is also an invitation to pay attention to all the things that the world has to offer, and it is a sphere of communication that is self-sufficient.

Due to the influence of media and technology on our world, digital media is constantly modifying all human activities. At the crossroads of artistic, technological and societal issues, it becomes interesting to confront both the meaning of performance and musical activity in the face of the development of the technological devices colonizing our public and private spheres. What is now piquing our interest?

In order to explore this notion of musicking and to reflect critically on our daily performative practices, whether individual or collective, this thesis will focus on the modalities of participatory performance as a device for social and musical experimentation. Its first approach will be through a historical study of performance as an artistic medium to understand its essence and how it exists. This fundamental learning leads us to study how it propagates outside of the artistic fields to manifest itself by extension in everyday life. Thus, the notion of device will allow us to consider participatory performance as an "open" framework where freedom and unexpected events spring up, echoing musical improvisation.

The challenge of this dissertation is to address the development of the concept of performance and its relation to technologies in order to conceptualize a "performative design". Designing participative musical devices is an opportunity to imagine new paths for the future, by expressing the idea that musicking together could be a new metaphor for "living together".

Action, indetermination and participation in performative and interactive arts

First of all, defining the concept of performance is not easy because this practice is one that abandons the stage as a space of representation, in addition to all established aesthetic values. Derived from the verb "performing", the word "performance" was coined in the early 70s by the US art critics vocabulary. It relates to "any artistic manifestation in which the act or gesture of performance has an intrinsic value". It is the reflection of a strong tension that marks the history of art: on the one hand, there is the vision of an art archived in the stability and immortality of the museum, on the other, the vision of an ephemeral art that exists only here and now. So, before becoming an artistic practice between the 60s and 70s, a performance was characterized first and foremost as an act, an "irruption of life" and its main purpose was, and is to reconnect with the present.

It is widely accepted that the Futurist movement of the early 20th century prefigured performance art as a medium in its own right. It was born at the crossroads of literature, music, theatre, visual and dance. In that respect, futurism developed a strong relationship between technology, performance and musical experimentation. It introduced a new vision of musical sound by considering the world's noises as being music. This new perspective marked the acceptance of new artistic materials and new aesthetic values.

Performing is "transforming" reality. Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades demonstrate this act of transformation: the example of *Fontaine* (1917) shows that the choice and act of exhibiting an urinal is precisely what becomes an artwork in itself. The object becomes an artwork thanks to the artist's action, it is not an object anymore: the artistic act changes its function and identity. Taken from an industrial reproduction, the object becomes unique because of its base and the caption "fountain" that sacralizes and values the object. This notion is essential for us, because this act of transformation has seen an increase in today's world. Decontextualized images begin to make sense because of the text they appear with, and thanks to the frame in which they are exhibited. The performative act of Duchamp's ready-mades exists first and foremost in the object's physical existence, but the emergence of performative practices have progressively abandoned the material dimension to become mostly immaterial and conceptual ideas.

Performing is "transforming", but it is also a way of "interpreting" reality. Performance is a pragmatic narrative form and an autonomous language of the "present moment". The French dramatist and poet Antonin Artaud is best known for conceptualizing a *Theatre of Cruelty* within he claims that theatre must be free itself from words because it is an anti-poetic limit. Thus, performance art convey most of all immaterial ideas rather than masterpieces: the attitude of the artist is the most important thing of the artwork, considering the idea that art should be spontaneous and that everyone is free to think what they want about it, since art is a way to question art. This concept of artistic *form-attitude* will lead us to reconsider and update the meaning of performance under the influence of media and technology, especially about the staging of ourselves as social performance.

Thus, the performative act raises the question of the aura of the work of art depending on technical reproducibility. This notion has been conceptualized by Walter Benjamin in an essay dating from 1936. Once the automatic and technical reproducibility is possible, this aura is reconditioned by space and time. If every performance, object or experience is filmed and mediatized, is the aura of these things transformed? How is their value impacted by our technologies?

It is worth considering emptiness and randomness in performance art. Performance is a medium that comes across determination and indeterminacy. The silence of 4'33" (John Cage, 1952) is the perfect example that shows this performative situation. In the composition's emptiness, randomness can be considered as a musical expression and a collective performance that gathering people together in silence. The framework of the performance art makes us attentive to the experience of sounds, to randomness and to the present moment. The performance of 4'33" is a way of experimenting another type of sensitive relationship to the environment. We accept to listen to the silence of 4'33" because its situation is delimited over space and time. This notion of framework brings us back to the essence of performance: "transforming reality".

These findings lead us to consider performance as an open device. This open-mindedness corresponds to the freedom of interpretation within performative acts. Creations can be interpreted from multiple perspectives: consumers use their own personal sensitivity, their own culture, tastes, tendencies, that orient their aesthetic experience. Umberto Eco showed in *The Open Work* (1962) that the multiplicity of artistic interpretations corresponds to various world experiences and this is something that relates to the field of music, especially within minimalist music. However, the notion of "open work" conceptualized by Umberto Eco will be concretely manifested in digital arts through interactivity.

Then, it becomes interesting for us to question the relationship between performance art and the notion of device. Performance claims the freedom of language as Artaud and the avant-garde movements understood it. On the contrary, the term "device" (Note: in French we would have said "*dispositif*") refers to the notion of control. In a philosophical sense, this term is used to describe the governance strategy of action by Foucault. Giorgio Agamben updated this concept in the current contemporary context where our everyday technologic devices (smartphones, computers, social networks, etc.) are colonizing our social lives. Technologies are environments that transform the experience of the world into digital performance. How then are our individual and collective performances in society modified by our uses of technologies and our daily digital social interactions?

Performance in social life

The practice of performance art is spreading in the art world as an autonomous artistic medium, but it is also spreading outside the artistic field to manifest itself in everyday life. It manifests strong boundaries between "institutional" art and daily life, between the erudite and popular fields. *Musicircus* is a performance proposed by John Cage in 1967 that highlights these boundaries and stems from a desire to push them. It is a glorious and chaotic piece of music where an unlimited number of participants, musicians and non-musicians, have been invited to perform the music of their choice in the form of a circus opera. All the individual performances put together become a unique large collective performance. There is an implicit cultural and political discourse about opening up the field of institutional music to a more democratic form.

Musicircus brings the idea of participatory music, in contrast with "presentational" music. In music, the notion of collective architecture and autonomous organization can be found in participatory forms such as the Indonesian gamelan. This traditional instrumental ensemble is considered as a unique instrument. It is a collective *instrument-orchestra* that functions as a single entity, in contrast to a classical orchestra where each musician has an instrument of their own. What if we confront the gamelan system with the expressive potentialities of interactive technologies? Can we use interactivity to let the visions of Antonin Artaud, who was inspired by Balinese culture, come true? Through interactivity and emotions, can the digital tool bring the expression of a collective psyche where performance is expressed through a physical language based on signs, movements, shapes and colours, vibrations and attitudes?

This question leads us to notion of celebration. Partying is close to a performance because it has nothing else to offer but its unique presence. It is an intensification of the present that is distinct from everyday life, like Allan Kaprow defined performance as "living and acting with an additional

burden of consciousness". Celebrating, partying and musicking is a universal phenomenon. But is it possible to build a device for partying and for musicking together? Can we consider Musicircus as a device for musicking, like a free and open performative music score made to gather people? In other words, does the performance provide a collective and individual framework for freedom, emancipation and letting go of everything in an intensified range of space and time?

We said that performance is a medium, but we also have to say that "The medium is the message", a phrase coined by the Canadian communication thinker Marshall McLuhan and introduced in his *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, published in 1964. It announced in 1964 a major transformation in the notion of media: it proposes that a communication medium itself, not the messages it carries, should be the primary focus of study. He showed that artifacts as media affect any society by their characteristics, or content. Getting back to "performing is transforming", we understand that the meaning of a performance is not within what is said. Performance makes sense by the act itself, that is to say the interrelation between the framework of the action and what is created within it.

The authority of technological devices in our society should be questioned, especially in our inter-human relations and digital social interactions. On the other hand they also induce about a control of the masses and a great complexity through the massive increase of the circulation of information. There is therefore a real ambiguity in interpreting the notions of interactivity and participation, between control and freedom. Thus, the influence of the media and technology on our world is responsible for constant changes in our societies, which constantly create new forms of human interaction and social contexts. In design, but also in musicking, we have to consider these changes that shape new behaviours, both in the fields of creation and in our daily practices.

Performative design and participatory music

We said that performance establishes a social bond through action or just through the act of presence. The advent of Web 2.0 – also known as the participative web – brought about a virtual stage of globalized performances, where the actors and actions are real but digitalized and where the issue of visibility marks social reality. This new participatory dimension relates to everyday practices (self-mediatization on social networks) as well as the emergence of new artistic practices (Net.art).

These practices have given rise to the concept of hyperspectacle. It corresponds to a context where the conscious or unconscious daily experimentations are meant to build a technologic "self" and its image. Individuals draw the self-images they want to project in an identity quest, where the recognition, visibility and validation by society are a big issue. When we expose ourselves on

the Internet, it's almost like making a ready-made: we decide to expose ourselves or our personal experiences and productions in our virtual museums. This act of transformation can be defined as the digitalization of our egos.

Even if there is a real enthusiasm to be able to express ourselves freely and spontaneously on social networks, the lack of spontaneity reveals an exhaustion because staging ourselves is always calculated, as if daily performances lost their liveliness. Perhaps we should reconsider the essay of Walter Benjamin. The loss of the aura of objects in the era of technical reproducibility is now related to our productions self-mediatized. If technology annihilates the value of uniqueness, what is its impact on our social performances? Is there a virtual filter that smoothes and standardizes them?

However, in design as in music, the participatory performances allowed by the interactive networks is the opportunity to imagine new devices for collective creations. The research of the Amsterdam-based studio Moniker focuses on the social effects of technologies. The *Conditional Design's* manifesto claims a working method adapted to our world. It is a way of thinking where process is the product, logic is the tool and contribution is the material. It is a way of thinking a "global design" and the issue is to reconsider our everyday life and our social interactions.

Then it is paramount to consider that, even before the futuristic movement, the development of performative practices has always evolved in symbiosis with our technological environments. Sometimes, technology produces performance. Sometimes, we collaborate with it. Jean-François Lyotard, in *La Condition Post-moderne*, was the first to consider a clear distinction between performative theories. He highlighted the opposition between the optimization of performance as a modern ideal (profitable and efficient) and the impotence of performance as an artistic act (ephemeral and emancipatory). The issues of artificial intelligence nowadays brings many ethical questions regarding creations algorithmically generated. Artificial intelligence is both fascinating and frightening because it tends to dehumanize creation. So what is the aura of a performance produced by artificial intelligence?

We said that the smartphone was isolating because of the hyperspectacle context. However, at *IRCAM*, research conducted by Norbert Schnell tends to de-individualize the act of creating or performing music through the use of the smartphone. The way Norbert Schnell explains that the smartphone is only a pretext is interesting for us: using smartphones is a hope that most of our digital devices can provide a medium through which each of us can perform, produce and participate in improvised musical situations.

There is a shift to consider from aesthetics to ethics in design and in music. It is a real challenge to imagine new collective practices through building interfaces, because we have to confront the "society of spectacularization". This concept can be updated from Guy Deboard's work. In 1967, he criticized "a social relationship between people mediated by images". This context of spectacularization appeared with the consumer society in the 30s. The more sophisticated recording and broadcasting techniques get, the more democratic access to images and culture become, the more difficult it is for the public to break free from the consumer society. It seems that if the public does not free itself from it, then it bends to goals such as consumption for consumption, production for production and thus growth for growth.

Our relationship to spectacularization has a strong impact on our daily practices and on design. Today's working world is characterized by a constant and fast technological developments, and it is affected by a "need" to produce more and more. As a designer, it becomes crucial to be alarmed by this question: are we creating needs or responding to existing needs? We must react to the "resignation of the critical spirit" and we will only succeed in doing so at the price of vigilance and collective awareness.

Musicking in design evokes the hope of using the potentialities of digital tools by generating communication situations. It is a way to imagine a new metaphor for "living together", because it is not a question of being a simple spectator, user or consumer of an experience. It is no longer a question of making a work but rather of benefiting from a support for collective musical activity in which everyone is able to participate. As *Conditional Design's* manifesto ideas, it seems more interesting today to claim the process as the product of an experience. Design should then be thought of as an invitation to create "positive friction" between people: in other words, mixing freedom and structure in a "performative design".

Conclusion

On several occasions, we contrasts opposed concepts: the distinction between "stable" and "unstable" arts, or the distinction between the impotence of performance as a narrative form and the optimisation of performance as a modern ideal of growth and profitability. We can also add: the control of the technological devices opposed to the freedom of performances, "presentational" music opposed to participatory music, and the tensions between the erudite and popular fields that Musicircus provoked. What would be the balance to be found between these extremes?

Through manifest acts, Duchamp, Artaud and Cage testified to an expanded vision of art that depended neither on the work, nor on the image, nor even sometimes on the artist or the spectator. The radicality of their posture is a source of inspiration to consider to face the complex transformations

of our current societies. Due to the influence of the media and technologies on our world, everything seems to be performative: amplified by the media channels of the globalized hyperspectacle, it imposes its existence according to our modern means of production and creates tensions between media-performed realities and real realities whose boundaries become blurred. Yves Barel says in this respect that we are going through a strange emptiness: behind this deceptive cacophony of information, there is in fact an enormous silence. This silence is a "breakdown in the production of meaning", a kind of social emptiness. What if, as what we learned through 4'33", this emptiness meant everything?

Thinking about the crisis of our societies is not an easy thing to do, but our generations indeed must propose solutions to transform our ways of thinking and acting. I feel a tension between these struggles, both internal and external, where the images and products we make and consume are sometimes too superficial in relation to the contemporary issues that concern us all. It seems interesting to me to go beyond an immense accumulation of spectacles and to question the impression that each human relationship is not just experienced in its spectacular representation.

These are questions that must be asked collectively and to which we should commit ourselves, even if not all the answers can be found. I am firmly convinced that music can be the medium for these reflections, because it can be a driving force in making individuals more emphatic, but also more attentive to contemporary issues – be they political, economic, social or environmental – and more attentive to themselves and their inner world.

Investigating participatory performance as a device for social and musical experimentation has been a way of questioning our everyday behaviours, both individual and collective. It has lead me to give a critical approach on the standardization of the social bond, on the standardization of practices in design and digital creation as well as on the meaning of musical experience in our current societies.

All over the world and throughout history, individuals have used music to express their inner emotions or to gather together. In *Musicking*, Christopher Small highlighted the fact that everyone is "capable of contributing in some way to the other collective musical activity". This thought accompanied me throughout my research work. This dissertation has been an opportunity to meet and discuss with different personalities and profiles. Yet, these exchanges all affirmed one thing most sincerely: music is often at the core of our deepest personal and social experiences.

My hypothesis here is that the lack of "participation" in design and music is an obstacle to our well-being and to relationships between people. I like to think of music not as a talent but as a social skill or an "emotional vitamin" that reflects a need within each of us. And I think it's important to question any form of performance: why do we perform? How do we perform? We need to develop

a lucidity in the face of the excesses of our lifestyles and overproduction (of our images, objects, performances and experiences) as well as an awareness of their impact on our personal and collective development, because the better we conceptualize these effects the less we will be fooled by them. Then we will become freer to experience what we ourselves provoke, individually and collectively.

Design is a surface for action and I think that it can be an invitation to bring us closer together, to rebalance us and to recognize the importance of sharing and participation for the good of ourselves and the world.