

POST-DIGITAL AESTHETICS AND THE FUNCTION OF PROCESS

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Abstract

The theorisation of post-digital aesthetics in music and sound art seems to be split in two contradictory directions. One direction emphasises the foregrounding of digital processes through the use of process-based procedures, while the other tends toward a neo-modernist, sound-in-itself tendency that would seek to obscure the role of process in the work. This paper argues for a re-evaluation of post-digital music and sound art practices from the perspective of non-subjective modes of composition and making, where aesthetic intentions are suspended.

Keywords: post-digital, aesthetics, audio, neo-modernism, sound-in-itself, music, non-intention, glitch

In the process of researching the notion of post-digital aesthetics for ISEA2013, Florian Kramer stumbled across my 2002 paper “Post-digital Aesthetics and the Return to Modernism,” [1] and kindly asked me to participate in a panel discussion. Florian was curious to know how I would characterise post-digital aesthetics in 2013. While the phenomenon of post-digital aesthetics (at least in music) clearly lacks the momentum it had in the 1990s and early 2000s, there are still a substantial amount of creative practices that would fall into this category. In the 2002 essay I had taken an inside rather than an outside critical position, since I was (and still am) a great admirer of the work in this field. If anything has changed in my thinking it would be that I no longer believe that post-digital practices and conceptual art practices can come together (at least not in any simple way).

Post-digital Aesthetics: a recap

In 2002, in response to Kim Cascone’s introduction of the term ‘post-digital,’ [2] I argued that (i) a post-digital aesthetics represented a reaction to digital transparency through the act of emphasising or ‘foregrounding’ the flaws in digital processes, and (ii) that such an aesthetic direction is often characterised by a reductive practice often verging towards a form of minimalism. In the 1990s we had already witnessed a reaction among musicians, and within the recording industry, against digital technology. This reaction took the form of a return to analogue technologies such as multi-track tape recorders and analogue synthesisers. Here, the impure ‘warm’

sound of analogue is favoured over the ‘cold’ clean sound of digital. However, it must be emphasised that the aesthetic characteristics of this move are decidedly analogue in character. The post-digital reaction, on the other hand, instead of retreating from digital technology, finds beauty in the flaws inherent in *digital* processes. Thus, as I argued in 2002, post-digital music has developed a distinctly ‘digital’ aesthetic. In its aesthetic sense, the term covers a plethora of practices ranging from ‘glitch,’ ‘clicks & cuts,’ ‘microsound,’ and minimal techno (in music) to glitch art, audio visual art (AV) and net.art. It is characterised by an aesthetic made up of minuscule stabs of sound, clicks, glitches, pops, buzzes, hisses, and anechoic digital shards assembled into stripped-down molecular structures. In 2002 artists associated with this tendency included: Oval, Ryoji Ikeda, Carsten Nicolai, Mika Vainio, Christian Fennesz, Frank Bretschneider, Pimmon, Taylor Deupree, and Richard Chartier, to name only a few.

If we are to consider what post-digital aesthetics might mean a decade later, I think one of the most important ideas to consider is that within the post-digital tendency we see a move away from a certain idea of transparency. Rather than emulating the model of perfect transmission of a sonic idea in the artist’s/composer’s mind, post-digital refers to the acceptance and exploration of the flaws and artefacts inherent in digital technologies. In this sense, it encapsulates the kind of shift in attention advocated by the composer John Cage. Rather than wishing to transparently reproduce a pre-known and preconceived idea, the post-digital composer sets processes in motion to arrive at the unforeseen, and make aesthetic use of what would normally be regarded as deficiencies and errors in digital processes. In other words, what I think is at stake here is a methodology by which the composer/artist can, as Dick Higgins says, ‘place the material at one remove... [from their own subjectivity] by allowing it to be determined by a system he determined’ [3]. Such a practice becomes less concerned with ‘expression’ and more concerned with discovery.

The theorisation around post-digital art/music seems to be split in two directions. On the one hand, post-digital practices tend toward a non-subjective, process based model that moves towards non-intentionality and a phenomenologi-

cal imperative to bring forward the contingencies of the worldly background (assuming that ‘world’ here relates as much to the virtual as the physical). On the other hand, within the post-digital tendency there exists a strong neo-modernist reductivism that adheres to a sound-in-itself ideology. What is important for this latter tendency is not the foregrounding of process but the immediacy of sense perception and sound as form for its own sake.

Process

In the 2002 essay I observed that one of the hallmarks of post-digital aesthetics seemed to be a concern with processes. Post-digital processes include: altering the header information on different digital file types (text, pictures, etc.) in order to make their data audible, iterative bit rate and depth reduction and compression processes, and overloading software applications to create unexpected results. But does such attention to process constitute a form of process art, where expression and improvisation are displaced by letting the processes run their course to determine the form that the work will take? For example, as Sol LeWitt writes in “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (1967):

To work with a plan that is pre-set is one way of avoiding subjectivity. The plan would design the work.... In each case, however, the artist would select the basic form and rules that would govern the solution of the problem. After that the fewer decisions made in the course of completing the work, the better [4].

LeWitt’s paragraphs reflect a trend in art since World War II where, as Robert Morris observes, ‘artists have increasingly sought to remove the arbitrary from working by finding a system according to which they could work’ [5]. Morris cites Cage’s use of chance operations as an example of this thread that has run from Duchamp through to Jasper Johns and Frank Stella and to Conceptual Art. Alongside this, Morris observes the continuance of another systematising thread of methodologies that he refers to as bearing towards a ‘phenomenological direction,’ where the system that orders the work is derived from ‘the “tendencies” inherent in a materials/process interaction,’ [6] rather than from a prior and external logical system. In other

words, forms are discovered in the activity of interacting with material properties. Considering the rather prevalent *ad hoc* approach that utilises a variety of processes, I would argue that a great deal of post-digital sound art or music finds itself in this category. In this way of working, epitomised for Morris by the work of Pollock, the material, in a certain way, determines the working process and, more importantly for Morris, the process is made manifest in the work. This is exemplified, quite literally, in Morris' 1961 work, *Box with the Sound of its Own Making*: a ten inch cube that plays back, from a tape player concealed within it, the recorded sounds of its own construction. In other words, encountering the process in the work effects the way we read the work.

In a similar way the minimalist composer Steve Reich argues for perceptible processes that can be heard in the music as it is performed, in fact 'pieces of music that are, literally, processes' [7]. In 1968 Reich composed a process piece entitled: *Pendulum Music: For Microphones, Amplifiers and Speakers*, which consists of three or more microphones suspended from their cables directly above speakers. The microphones are pulled back by the performers, and then let go in unison, allowing them to swing over the speakers, thus creating pulsed feedback according to changing phase relations. The piece ends shortly after the microphones come to rest. We are able to *hear* the process in such events, Reich contends, because they occur gradually and thus invite 'sustained attention' [8]. But, at the same time, according to Reich, the sound that one hears moves away from intentions, and what is distinctive of such processes is that they determine all aesthetic outcomes, making improvisation impossible. As Robert Morris puts it, this kind of work breaks with the arbitrary and the formalistic and, instead, lets the world in, and tends to provide its audience with an 'ends-means hookup' [9].

Neo-Modernism

In "Post-digital Aesthetics and the Return to Modernism" I coined the term *neo-modernism* to describe what I saw as a naïve return to an ideal of purity in art; a tendency observed by Lev Manovich in his "Generation Flash" (published also in 2002). Manovich rallies against the secondariness of post-modernism, advocating a return to modernism as the first step towards a new aesthetic comprised

of 'data visualizations, vector nets, pixel-thin grids and arrows' [10]. In 2003 the term *neo-modernism* was utilised by Christoph Cox to describe recent examples of 'sound art' where he observed a 'revival of modernist strategies of abstraction, Reduction, self-referentiality, and attention to the perceptual act itself' [11]. However, unlike my rather cautious approach to this new modernist direction, Cox's article celebrates it as an essential experience of 'sound-in-itself.'

Sound-in-Itself

As Seth Kim-Cohen points out, the sound-in-itself tendency is very much associated with a prevalent 'phenomenological' direction typified by many musicians and sound artists influenced by the ideas of Pierre Schaeffer. The aim of Schaeffer's sonic research and *Musique Concrète* was to establish a systematic methodology of listening in order to arrive at the fundamental structures of musicality. In order to achieve this it is necessary, according to Schaeffer, to radically displace the grid of visibility that normally determines our perceptual response to the sonic environment. This shift is achieved by a form of reduced listening which involves, for Schaeffer, an *acousmatic* abstention: where any concern with the spatio-temporal existence of a sound's source is suspended, and hence all reference, or context, is actively disregarded, in order to concentrate on sound as a purely aural experience. According to this position, we have no need to encounter the cause of a sound. Any extraneous information picked up by the other senses, or received outside of the *hic-et-nunc* of the performance/event, comes to be seen as an impediment to experiencing sound-in-itself. Morris' notion of the ends-means hookup is precisely what is eschewed by the Schaefferian imperative that is followed by many musicians and sound artists. The effect of this rejection of any causal connection or reference is to render attention to process opaque.

While Cox regards the sound-in-itself tendency in a positive light, the same cannot be said of Kim-Cohen, who sees it as a function of Greenbergian formalism and Husserlian phenomenology. He contrasts this to 'the conceptual turn' initiated by Duchamp. As far as Kim-Cohen is concerned, the discourses around sound art seemed to have missed the conceptual turn that occurred in the visual arts. He proposes instead, a rethinking of the conception of sound art

on decidedly non-essentialist terms involving a 'non-cochlear sonic art,' which, rather than celebrating the immediacy of sound as presence, addressing itself exclusively to the senses, takes, instead, an inter-textual and conceptual direction [12]. The rather unwieldy term 'non-cochlear sonic art,' is, of course, the aural equivalent to Duchamp's notion of 'non-retinal' painting. It signifies a turn to an intellectual encounter rather than visceral plastic celebration. Just as non-retinal painting does not occur at the site of the look, a non-cochlear sound art, for Kim-Cohen, transcends the space of listening. But this does not mean that sound and vision are disqualified from the work of art.

The most notorious exponent of the Schaefferian acousmatic tradition would certainly be Francisco López, who—with the intention of prohibiting access to all visual stimuli in his performances—insists on his audience wearing blindfolds that he provides at each performance. López produces recordings of both natural and urban environments that involve minimal processing and editing. Kim-Cohen, who regards López's transcendental practice as an extreme form of essentialism, argues that: 'Although López's sound-in-itself tendencies are not an isolated incident in contemporary sound practice, the fundamentalism of his approach and his written justifications render his work uniquely unavailable to non-cochlear recuperation' [13].

But we must be careful here. After all, we do seem to be speaking about music rather than art, or 'sound art.' Surely there is a case for considering music (in its absolute form, without lyric or concept), whether traditional or expanded, as purely autonomous and formalistic? However, I would be careful not to extend such a model into the realm of what might be called sound art. Music and sound art, as I see it, are radically distinct disciplines. A shift in the site of reception from concert venue to art gallery does not automatically imply the rebranding of music as sound art. Here I find myself in agreement with Cox when he insists on a clear distinction between music and sound art. However, where Cox considers sound art to constitute a turn in listening toward the 'transcendental or virtual dimension of sound,' [14] I would contend that sound art is, rather, *relational* in the sense that it refers not simply to a practice that utilises sound as its material, but names a practice which

addresses sound in relation to something else: a space, place, environment, object, world, text, image, etcetera.

Conceptuality, Intention, and Non-intention

Process based practices can fit (in very different ways) into both sound art and music. We might say that in sound art the processes become explicit (where the work might be more *about* the process). But this does not mean that such work becomes automatically conceptual. Moreover, if post-digital ‘glitch art’ practices can be said to carry out a form of ‘techno-critique’ [15] or ‘critical media aesthetics,’ [16] where the technological apparatus reveals itself through the interruption of transparent normative operation, we must ask: to what extent are these ‘self-critiques’ merely metaphorical or symbolic? For the spectator/audience, is any ingrained ‘habitus’ truly displaced by the glitch? The process based procedural methodologies of post-digital practices rarely constitute a conceptual end in themselves. At the site of reception the processes yield largely aesthetic and formalistic outcomes. Yet the imposition of processes and constraints, outside of authorial control, performs the important function of displacing subjective values of taste, and explicitly shattering the idea of expression—as the idea of the transmission of feeling from within a sensitive subject (of genius) to an equally sensitive receiving subject. In terms of this operation, the more explicitly the work foregrounds its own processes the better.

A common objection, however, to the idea of non-intentionality in art is that the process of making art can never be entirely non-intentional, since there is always the decision to begin the work in the first place. Thus, many commentators have pointed to what they see as an irresolvable paradox of non-intention, where the desire to erase intention must surely be considered to be an intention itself. However, it would be wrongheaded to describe the non-intentional practices of Cage, and others, as an attempt to erase intention. The use of aleatory procedures does not prescribe, nor necessitate, the negation of intention. Rather, it proscribes its displacement. This displacement is achieved not directly through an act of willing, but indirectly through the imposition of a constraining system, procedure, or process. In the formulation of the chance operation de-

isions must be made. But after a certain point in these operations all decision-making tends to be suspended. The artist does not directly put intention out of action. Rather, the artist formulates a predetermined process, or set of rules, which then put intention out of action. The artist is always at least one step removed from the operation. This requires not a negation of will but a displacement from central to secondary: from the idea of creator-author-origin to that of enabler. Intention and agency come into the work in different ways, where intention and non-intention occur at different moments of the working process, and in different strata of the work. It is, perhaps, due to such misconceptions regarding the place of intention in process based art that the role of non-intention in post-digital practices has been largely neglected. Post-digital practices—rather than issuing a techno-critical challenge to the transparency of media information flows (by way of the figurative interruption of the glitch), or functioning solely in terms of formalistic aesthetic experience—take part in the displacement of the metaphysical notion of creative expression by foregrounding the processes that put authorial intention into question.

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