

(Some Other) Notes on Conceptualisms

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I was asked to write about my relationship to conceptualism (including new conceptualism). I will start by talking about how conceptualism functions in my own work.

A wide range of the work I do might be described as conceptual. My latest project is *Historical Documents of the Irish Avant-Garde*. For this project, I worked in collaboration with a wide number of people to create a fictional history of Irish avant-garde music, stretching from the mid-1830s to the 1980s. All the materials related to this project are housed at aisteach.org, the website of the Aisteach Foundation, a fictional organisation which is positioned as “the avant-garde archive of Ireland.” The site contains hours of music, numerous articles, scores, documents and historical ephemera. Every detail of this project was composed, written and designed with the utmost care and attention to detail. It’s a serious exercise in speculative composition, fiction and world-building.

The roots of the *Historical Documents* project lie in *Dordán*, a work I began in 2009. I was living in New York and playing with Tony Conrad a lot. We had been discussing the argument around who is considered the inventor of minimalism and *Dordán* was made in response to that. In *Dordán* I position the inventor of minimalism as a traditional Irish musician called Pádraig Mac Giolla Mhuire. The work includes recordings which purport to be of Mac Giolla Mhuire and collaborators playing the trad-inflected drone music which they called “dordán” in Cork in 1952. The work also includes forged Ellis Island immigration records, explanatory text and other visual materials. In a nod to Seth Kim Cohen’s formulation, there’s a lot of non-cochlear activity going on. The extra-musical apparatus serves to prime people for a certain type of listening, a certain type of engagement which encourages reflection. All this intermedial apparatus is in the service of sound.

The conceptual approach only serves me as long as it facilitates the creation of new types of sonic material, allows me to engage more deeply with sonic material, and promotes new ways of working with sonic material. That sonic material might be concrete, realized, or imaginary, but the engagement with sound takes primacy. As such, I don’t identify primarily as a conceptualist because I don’t fulfill the criteria in the “purist” sense of conceptual art as defined by practitioners such as Sol LeWitt.¹

¹ In LeWitt’s “Sentences on Conceptual Art” (*Artforum*, June 1967) he writes “In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman. It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore usually he

On the other hand, the designation can at times seem appropriate because the term “conceptualism” in new music is now used in much the same way as “experimental” – a very loose designation which refers to an open, messy, incredibly rich and vibrant field of activity which can include composers as diverse in aesthetic and age as Maryanne Amacher, Joanna Bailie, G. Douglas Barrett, Janet Cardiff, Maria Chavez, Carolyn Chen, Hanne Darboven, Natacha Diels, Matthew Herbert, Mazen Kerbaj, The KLF, Alison Knowles, Christina Kubisch, Joseph Kudirka, Ingrid Lee, Matmos, Susan Philipsz, Marina Rosenfeld, Chiyoko Szlavnic, Laura Steenberge, Amnon Wolman and the Wu Tang Clan.

New Conceptualism is Johannes Kreidler. It’s his project, something he has fixed and defined. The conversation about it occurs for the most part in German, the articles are published in German publications and websites. When I talk with musicians outside of Germany, while they might be aware of Johannes’ work, they are usually unaware of New Conceptualism and the discourse around it in Germany unless they’ve been to Darmstadt.²

This is how it feels: New Conceptualism is proprietary. Conceptualism is open source. New Conceptualism is one position – an interesting, relevant and valid position – within a much larger set of conceptual positions. To paraphrase Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman,³ there are a plurality of conceptualisms being pursued right now.

The conceptualisms that interest me personally at this time are those concerned with the web. The last years have seen an influx of conceptual works that are produced through, with, on, about and as a result of the Internet. Composers use the Internet to source text, video or experiences; they make online installations and experiments; they employ sophisticated music information retrieval methods to create work. Composers working in this way include Holly Herndon, Neele Hülcker, Travis Just, Johannes Kreidler, Jessie Marino, Jonathan Marmor, Brigitta Muntendorf, Brian Whitman, myself.⁴ For me these pieces are part of what it means to try and figure out what it is like to be alive, today. They’re not always successful, they’re often problematic, but they’re always interesting. They are pieces which scream “THIS IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING! LOOK AT THIS!” on many different levels. Their texture is that of the “dark euphoria” Bruce Sterling characterizes as defining this point in history. The ways many of these pieces operate, the manner in which they’re constructed and disseminated, the nature of their sonic material – all often depart radically from traditional compositional practices.

would want it to become emotionally dry.” For me, the execution is never perfunctory, often involves a high degree of skill and craft, and is frequently emotionally rich.

² These comments aren’t meant as a criticism of Johannes. New Conceptualism is an interesting project. I view the work Johannes does lecturing and writing about new conceptualism to be part of his broader compositional project as a whole.

³ Place, Vanessa and Fitterman, Robert, 2009. *Notes on Conceptualisms*. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse.

When it comes down to it, the Internet offers us a space for engagement which is historically unprecedented. It is up to us whether that engagement extends beyond posting documentation videos of performances. Say I make some ASMR videos and distribute them on YouTube, where each one is viewed over 1000+ times by ASMR fans, and I then take these videos and use them in my piece for Donaueschingen, what does that mean? What spaces does it open up? What are the implications? And how can I make it more robust? What if I make a Twitter feed of text scores as I imagine to be written and curated by hipsters? And what if I take famous text scores and use Markov Chain generators to analyse, replicate and crossbreed their syntax, so that the generators spit out directions like “pause: there are 10,000 pauses pause pause string quartet watched by dogs in sunglasses” and I try to play those pieces, what do they sound like? What does it do to my brain, my experience of text and sound? What’s the difference between text scores on Twitter and Snapchat? What if I improvise with someone telepathically, and ask people to e-mail me what they “heard”, then upload the results to Soundcloud? What if I invent an entirely fake “acoustic phenomenon” called ESFFA, post videos of it on YouTube and then make my Music & Perception class do an experiment to see if they can sense it? What if I do a cover of Olia Lialina’s seminal Net Art piece “My Boyfriend Came Back From the War”, conceived as an analogue silent rhythmic composition? What if I post key 1960s conceptual works on YikYak and argue with users about why they should play a B and an F# for a very long time? What does it mean when online experiments walk into compositions meant for the concert hall?⁵

Conceptualism is likely by its very nature be involved in these contemporary experiments with the Internet. Because as far as the Internet is concerned, what cats are to all other animals, conceptualism is to all other new music aesthetics. By this, I mean of all new music aesthetics, conceptualism is best adapted to Web 2.0. This isn’t a value judgment. There is not an evolutionary imperative which requires every artistic aesthetic to adapt itself uniquely for the Internet – otherwise we should kill off the novel (TL;DR) in favour of the epigram (Twitter). It is simply this - with its focus on easily-communicated ideas, potentially viral images, gags, in-jokes, provocations, short text scores and works that are not always necessary to a) hear/see or b) hear/see all the way through, conceptualism is best adapted of all new music aesthetics to the current iteration of the Internet. And it’s important to keep in mind the Internet is constantly changing – web-based musical conceptualism did not flourish until after YouTube, Twitter and Facebook were launched. Conceptualism may not survive Web 3.0. The Internet doesn’t know what it means yet. It’s a massive ecosystem in constant flux. So my first proposition is that we should reserve final judgment on new music’s relationship to the web – instead, let’s

⁵ These aren’t hypothetical questions, these are descriptions of projects I’ve made – YouTube user “softsoftmusic ASMR”; *THE TOTAL MOUNTAIN*; @archeolotrix; @supersuperthank; *THMOTES*; *PUTIF* (with Tomomi Adachi); ESFFA Aqua Trance 67’ 214” is one of the videos used in my classes at Brunel University London; Freya Birren: *Olia Lialina’s M.B.C.B.F.T.W. (Redux, At Rest)*; private documentation of YikYak uses in London and NYC.

just keep “doing” the Internet, with full mindfulness, questioning, observation and note-taking.

My second proposition is that we should consider web-based musical conceptualism in the larger context of a) the history of Net Art and b) the contemporary context of other web-based conceptual projects. Rather than pointing inwards and seeking only to discuss what conceptualism might mean for music, we should be looking outward to see how we connect with, diverge from, expand on and are diminished by the larger artistic conversation which is happening about/around/on/through the Internet. There are massive methodological similarities and overlaps - Eric Carlson's *Alphabetized Winterreise* and Thomson & Craighead's *The Time Machine In Alphabetical Order* use identical procedures, for example. Hans Ulrich Obrist's *Do It*, Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July's *Learning to Love You More*, Lucky Pierre's *Actions for Chicago Torture Justice*, TextScoreADay's Twitter feed and Darren Wershler-Henry's *The Tapeworm Foundry: andor The Dangerous Prevalence of Imagination* all rigorously investigate the state of the text score, despite the fact they would be labeled art, theatre, music and poetry. Considering that new conceptualism in music is so concerned with text, an engagement with developments in conceptual writing seems particularly important. Engaging with the work of visual artists, hackers and net-artists as well as conceptual and flarf writers has the potential to deepen and extend our practice as composers. Let's get it started.