Distributed creativity: what do we mean by it?

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Ethnographic vignette

Sonic Arts Research Centre (SARC), Queen's University, Belfast, concert Nov 2010 – (extract from current fieldwork)

Network or telematic music: 3 examples -

Felipe Hickman

Patricia Alessandrini

John Cage

Distributed creativity: a SARC concert

November 2010: a telematic music performance is taking place linking the Sonic Lab of the Sonic Arts Research Centre, to venues in Graz and Hamburg. Internet connections sustain for an hour or so live transnational interactions between performers in three remote settings - musical interactions that amount to a real-time distributed sociality. The composer, Felipe Hickman, has orchestrated interactions such that each group drops periodically in and out of the others' hearing and sight, eruptions of disconnection and absence. The audience in Belfast, where I am sitting, strains to catch the socio-musical and gestural theatre between the performers, perceptible live in the room and projected on giant screens. Another arena of sociality is engendered between performers and audiences, one that follows the conventions of silent and immobile audiencehood that for almost two centuries have governed the concert hall. The technical dimensions of the event are experimental; they depend on a further vector of sociality which predates and will outlive this concert: a division of labour between technicians, composers and musicians that is manifest in the room and in the event's networked infrastructure.

Both the nature of the musical sounds emitted and the constellation of corporeal, social, technological and discursive mediations in which they are embedded, not to mention the qualities of the venue, locate this event generically: it belongs to the genre of computer art music, although part of its experimentation consists in the way that it mixes this heritage self-consciously with adjacent genres – free improvised music, sound installation and new media art. The genre is, then, reanimated by the event and projected as an evolving entity. Musicians, composers and many audience members have a tacit understanding of this generic location, and share an identification with the genre: an affective relation – whether fascination or devotion, burgeoning or passing interest, or sceptical engagement - which has brought them to SARC this evening. This is an affective identification that is musical, cultural and social; the genre, as an aggregation of the affected, forges a heterogeneous musical public. And while it is manifest in the event, this public both predates and will outlive it. At the same time audience members, performers and technicians bear the demographic inscriptions of their individual histories such that the socialities of this event are crossed by the social identity formations to which their biographies belong by affiliation or involuntary association. Being an art-music-technology scene of the global North, a palpable if 'unmarked' race, class and gender profile characterises those who make and listen to the music: white middle-class men predominate. SARC is itself a complex social form. Part of the public University, connected to Music, Engineering and Anthropology, as well as internationally to other computer music centres, its ethos, staffing and funding are also hybridised through links to industry. Through its population, bureaucratic organisation and technical resources, SARC proffers a set of social-institutional conditions that afford certain kinds of musical practice, while discouraging others.

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Distributed creativity –
7 post-Cartesian meanings:

As…

1) Spatial

2) Social

3) Cultural

4) Temporal

…And 3 versions of mediation: recent efflorescence -

5) Bidirectional, subject-object mediation

6) Circulation and remediation

7) Assemblage > (neo-)vitalist ontologies

… But what of creativity?

Distributed creativity as
1) spatial

- Physical and corporeal distribution in space – call and response, antiphony, hocketing, orchestral spatialisation, ensemble playing

- … (and) virtual spaces – network and telematic music performance, online musical spaces (Second Life)

- Soundscape tradition, site-specific and sound installation art: 'exterior' spatialities - beyond musical sound ('interior' spatialities of pitch space, timbre space) and traditional performance site become significant elements in musical / sonic imagination

Distributed creativity as
2) social: the division of labour

- Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (1982)

- Art as collective action, cooperation among network of participants, based on conventions: 'there seems to be no limit to the fineness of the division of tasks' (eg film, television…)

- Foregrounds DoL: nature of the division of work or labour process between specialised roles and practices: both technical and social, historically variable, and often hierarchised – certain roles accorded more social, symbolic, economic prestige and value than others

- Musical DoL: eg Goehr on *Werktreue*: hierarchical DoL between composer, performer, audience

- Changes in musical DoL: eg Cageian and post-Cageian play with and alterations to composer-performer-audience relations; popular music's 'group'; invention of DJ, MC; EDM and electronica: label as collective actor, 'project' as collective work extended in time

BUT: 4 planes of social mediation in music

1) Immediate microsocialities of musical performance and practice: social relations embodied in musical ensembles and associations, in the musical division of labour

2) Music animates 'musically-imagined communities' or publics: aggregating its listeners into collectivities or publics based on musical and other identifications: 'aggregation of the affected'

3) Music refracts wider, pre-existing social relations: status hierarchies, relations of class, race, gender, sexuality..

4) Social-institutional forms that provide for music's production, reproduction and transformation: elite, religious or state patronage, subsidised cultural institutions, capitalist markets and petty enterprise

• Irreducible, yet dynamic interrelations - conditioning, affordances, causalities…

Distributed creativity as
3) cultural: intertextuality

- Toynbee (2001): 'Social authorship': reconceives authorship as a social process taking textuality & material practices into account

- 'The social author is an agent who produces significant symbolic difference, difference that matters, in a taste community.... the small creative action [is] the basic unit... [in] larger episodes which culminate in new oeuvres, idioms and genres. [Thus] creativity is manifested across series of texts' rather than individual art works

- John Fiske (1987), after Bakhtin: text theorised in context of social and cultural inequalities, as 'site of a struggle for meaning': 'Each social group relates differently to the linguistic community' - ie dominant cultural systems

- Intertextuality depends upon existence of wider 'cultural memory banks', unequally distributed: texts/performances constantly add to and draw upon common cultural [musical] knowledge

# Distributed creativity as 4) temporal: genre (Jauss, Becker), Gell on oeuvre

- Genre: conceptualising creativity in art / music requires a positive account of genres, their productivity, evolution / mutation and longevity
- And musicians' / composers' role in reproducing or innovating in them > creative agency
- Agency as invention: potential to make a difference (as opp. to mere repetition) in evolution or transformation of genre
- Requires diachronic analysis of trajectories of genre, so as to analyse repetition / difference, aesthetic continuity or change
- …As well as evolving genre-specific aesthetics and ethics, embodied in theories, techniques, practices – that are generative and bear the 'positivity of a knowledge' (Foucault)
- Assumes the orientation of producers by reference to the given aesthetic and ethical trajectories or coordinates of the genres in which they work, an orientation that enables or affords agency and that is profoundly historical

Jauss: creativity, aesthetics and the dynamics of genre

- Jauss (1982): cultural analysis depends upon the 'reconstruction of the horizon of expectations in the face of which a work was created and received in the past'
- Illuminates production aesthetics immanent in art / media object, against any 'author or production oriented essentialism', by attending to the nexus of prevailing aesthetic, formal and ethical conventions – the horizon or 'foreknowledge' – within which it was conceived and created
- Historical process of the 'continuous establishing and altering of horizons determines the relationship of individual text to succession of texts that form a genre'
- Where any text is potentially performative in as much as it may protend the 'future history' of the genre (Husserl / Gell / Born)
- > Derrida, 'The law of genre' (1980): 'Every genre participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text,… yet such participation never amounts to belonging'
- Thus genre as always in process, emergent, becoming, as textually energising and as affording creativity and invention

Gell after Husserl

Art / musical object or event as enmeshed in a web of retentions and protentions: thus embodies and proffers or constructs an immanent temporality

Start of career — End of career

Chronological sequence
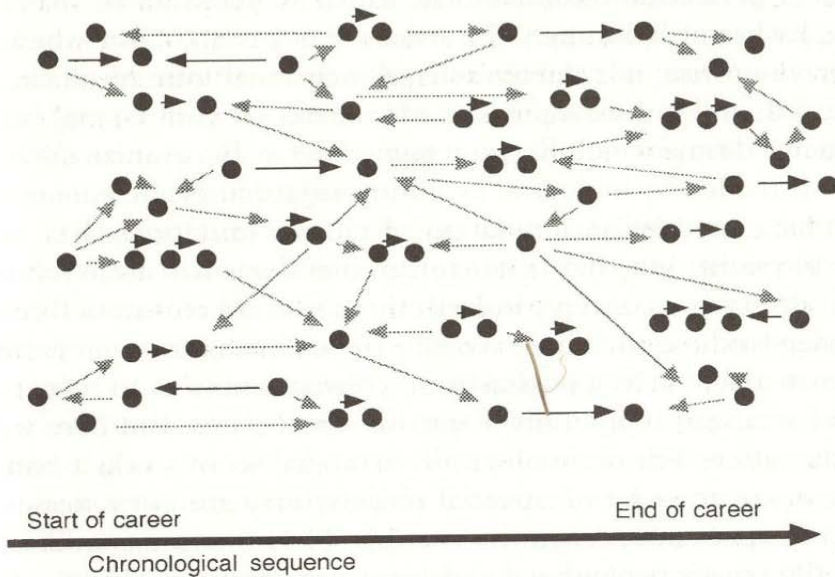
KEY

............▶ weak protention (precursor)

――――▶ strong protention (sketch)

◀............ weak retention (recapitulation)

◀―――― strong retention (copy)

● Individual work of art (painting, sketch, etc.)

PRESENT
(Perception)
B

A ----▶ ↓ ――▶ C   D

A'   B'   C'   D'

retentions   protentions

A"   B"   C"   D"

PAST   FUTURE
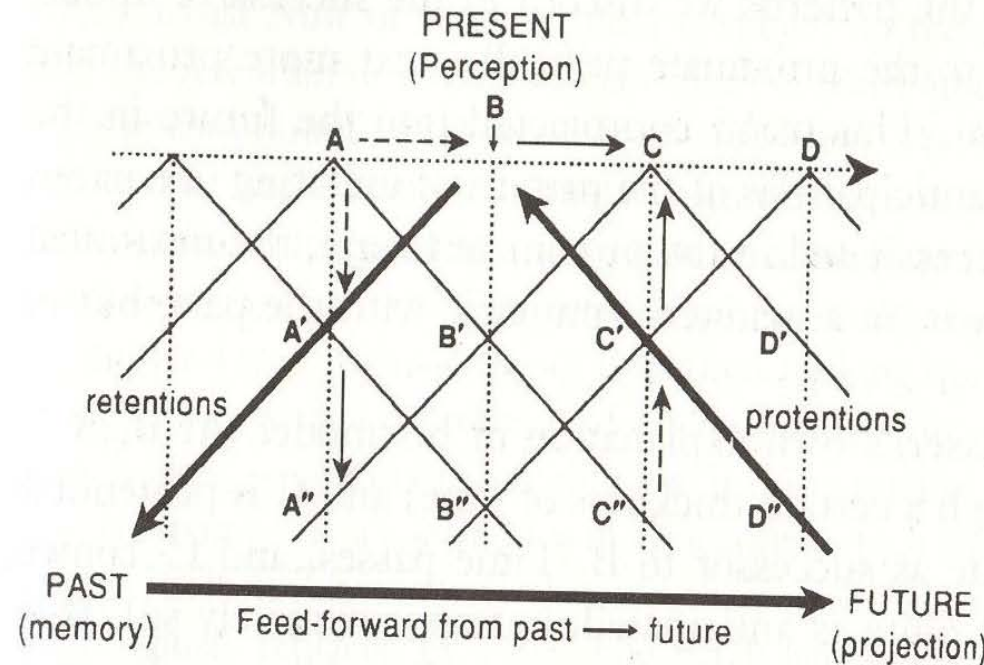(memory)   Feed-forward from past → future   (projection)

FIG. 9.4/1. The artist's *œuvre* as a distributed object

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Gell: collective corpus of works distributed in time-space via web of retentions & protentions
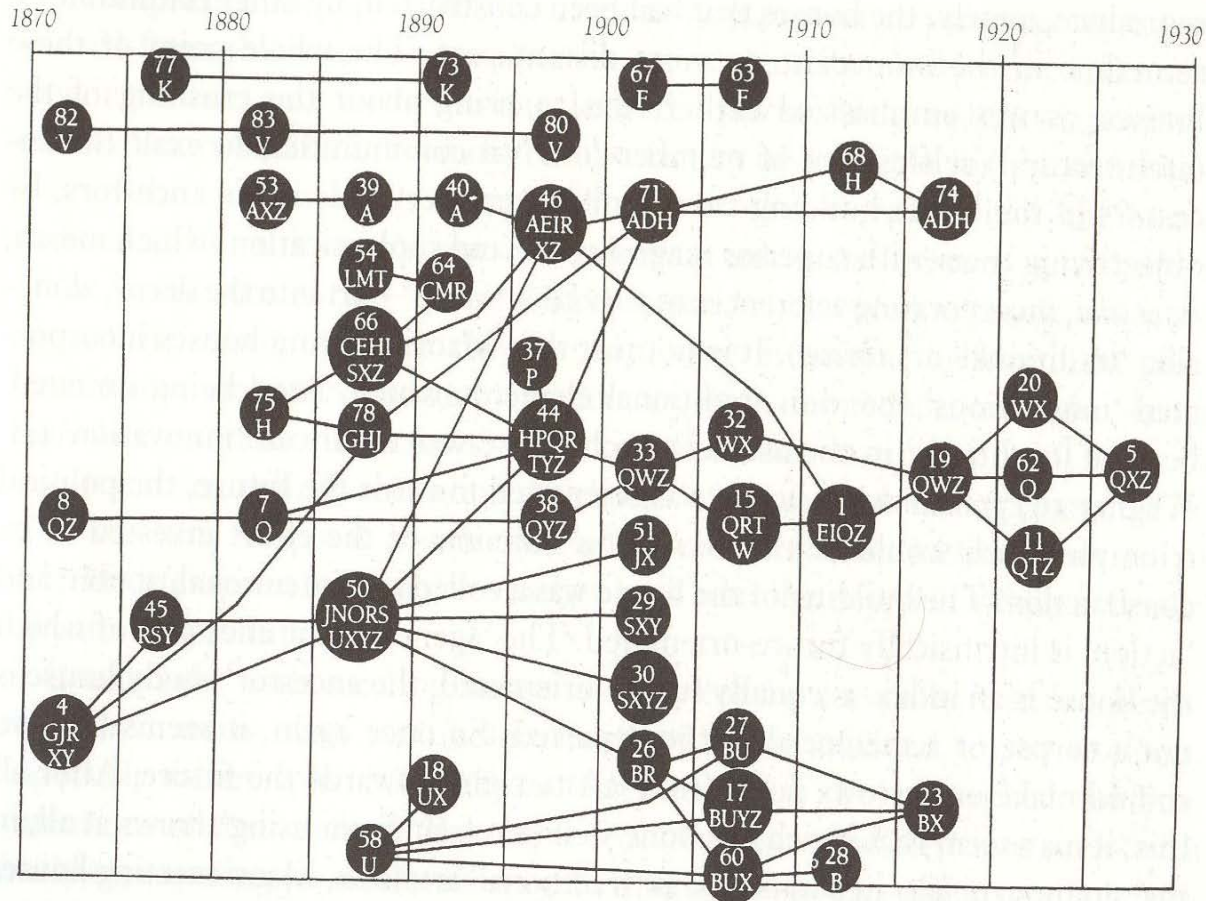

FIG. 9.6/3. The Maori meeting house as an object distributed in space and time. *Source*: Neich 1996: table titled 'The Transmission of Selected Figurative Painting Traditions'. Reproduced courtesy of Roger Neich and Auckland University Press.

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Theories of mediation: a recent efflorescence

1) Mediation as 2-way interactions between musical subject-musical object: Adorno, DeNora, Hennion… > Latour: non-human and human actors

2) Mediation via Peirce & Gell: as process, infinite semiosis > circulation, relay, transformation, remediation > to questions of temporality/ies

3) Mediation via Saussure: from arbitrary relation between music and discourse > to Deleuzian concept of assemblage: music as constellation of multiple, simultaneous heterogeneous mediations

Distributed creativity as mediation, 5) subject-object interrelations

- (NB: where mediation = transformative interrelations / interactions)

- Mediation as 2-way interaction between musical subject and object:

- Adorno: musical materials bequeathed by history (techniques, notations, performance practices..) with which musicians engage; agency of particular human subjects with given musical materials: capacity to transform those materials, driving the dialectic forward

- DeNora, Hennion's broader account: bidirectional nature of both human and non-human agency: music as constituting subjectivities and socialities, but music itself constituted in discourse and practice, via its copious socialities and socio-technical relations

- Hennion: 'Bodies, spaces, gestures, regular practice, technical devices, objects, guides, apprenticeship' – point to taste as an accomplishment. Music 'transforms those who take possession of it', achieving 'the co-formation of a music and of those who make and listen to it'

Distributed creativity as mediation, 6) circulation, relay, remediation

- From Peirceian semiotics: mediation in guise of infinite semiosis - of continuous processes of transformation of meaning via chain or relay of repeated re-interpretation or re-use

- Developed in different ways by Nattiez, Feld, A-M Ochoa and others

- Gell via Born: music's repeated relay through social relations and digital technologies in a series of digital music assemblages – from South Asian electronic popular musics, to George Lewis's interactive improvising piece, *Voyager*

- Gell, *Art and Agency*: 'the nature of the art object is a function of the social-relational matrix in which it is embedded' (1998: 7)

- Thus all cultural production constructs social relations between people and objects, and between people, relations that are relayed via the cultural object. Through the circulation of such objects, these relations are distributed and dispersed both spatially and temporally

Distributed creativity as mediation, 7) Assemblage > (neo-)vitalism

- Music as a multiply-mediated, immaterial and material, fluid quasi-object: its multiple simultaneous forms of existence – as sonic object and aural trace, object of discursive exegesis, inter-subjective and embodied, social and ritualised performance, notated or graphic score, technological prosthesis - indicate the necessity of conceiving of the musical object as a constellation of mediations: discursive and ideational, social and performative, visual, technological, and so on

- Assemblage (Deleuze): socio-materialist conception of constellation of (arbitrary) mediations that constitute musical experience

- Predicated in rejection of notions of totality or essence, in favour of enquiry into social complexity. An assemblage is a 'multiplicity… made up of heterogeneous terms… which establishes liaisons [or] relations between them…. [where the] only unity is that of a co-functioning'

- Components have a 'certain *autonomy'*, and relations between them are 'only *contingently* obligatory: a… result of their close coevolution'

Assemblage > (neo-)vitalism

- How to conceive of mediation or transformative interrelations between (human and non-human) elements of assemblage?

- Neo-vitalism conceives of this as a kind of distribution

- Beyond phenomenology – Merleau-Pontian stress on agency of corporeality, inter-subjectivity, embodied cognition – neo-vitalism (Stengers, Bell, Greco, Fraser via Whitehead) stresses agency of the environment, mutual mediation of organism and environment: 'the organism's elaboration of the environment's stimulus'

- Stengers: 'the ethos of an organism, its grasping together of aspects of its environment, cannot be dissociated from its ecology, that is from the way other organisms prehend and grasp together aspects of this organism, including the way they are themselves prehended and grasped by it. Each organism thus depends on what Whitehead calls "the patience of the environment".... Whitehead uses the beautiful word "infection" to describe the etho-ecological regime of reciprocal prehensions'

What of creativity? risk of banalisation?

- How do we understand creativity? As any and all intended creative practices? Or only a sub-set - as effective forms of creative agency?

- Explaining continuity or change in musical or artistic systems requires an account of agency as creative invention: of when it is that agency, embodied in artistic practices and resulting cultural objects or events, makes a difference by imaginatively intervening in a given aesthetic system, and when it does not – which depends on distinguishing between its more trivial and more inventive modalities

- Akin to wider soc. sci. problem of agency: distinguish between iterative, reproductive vs. creative, transformative agency (Emirbayer & Mische)

- From genre theory: focus on those practices, works or events that introduce a difference that makes a difference…

- Vs. Ingold: creativity is ubiquitous in social and cultural life, and necessarily improvisational; mimesis and creativity are intimately bound

- 'The improvisational creativity of which we speak is that of a world… "always in the making"'

From creativity to combustion and event

- But if music is conceived as an assemblage - including mediating relations between human subjects (musicians and listeners) and object (sound, performance, work) - then creativity might be conceptualised and assessed not in terms of a property of musicians' consciousness or intent, nor as a property of the relation between composer/musicians and resulting performance or work, but as a property of the assemblage between musicians, musical object or performance, and listeners

- For most listeners a significant musical experience is one in which the listener, entangled in a musical assemblage, feels and finds herself transformed: by producing particular engagements, confrontations or combustions between musical objects and subjects, musical experience can generate affect and create transformative effects

- Such effects are not universal but fragile, they can never be assured: in this sense musical experience *can* take the form of an event, one that effects transformations in the object-subject relation – in the assemblage