



University
of Glasgow

Dixon, M. (2006) *Echo's body: play and representation in interactive music software*. *Contemporary Music Review*, 25 (1-2). pp. 17-26. ISSN 0749-4467

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/4975/>

Deposited on: 25 February 2009

Echo's Body:
Play and Representation in
Interactive Music Software

We are thrown, despite ourselves, into a consideration of the *true*: the truth of art. The truth of art? Let us hear this question not as an intimidation, a raising of the stakes, but as “what does art *bring into the open*?” and “what can be *brought into the open regarding art*?” Thus would art and our thinking of art be understood in an original sense of bringing-forth – the *poiesis* of Greek and Heideggerian philosophy, as practices that are cognitively significant, as practices of truth as unconcealment. The question is sobering. To call upon truth is to dispel a wavering or hesitation over the task before us, a wavering discernible in the harassing of phenomena for data and information or in the plundering of theory for new perspectives and possibilities. Rather, truth requires of us a sobriety that opens us to the essence of what is already before us. Truth requires of us that we look deeply into the phenomenon, for what is originary in it. And we encounter art only in the fullness of its truth. There is no consideration of art outside the truth since we go to art, we attend to it, we make and perform it, precisely because we seek what is true in it. The posture of detachment from the phenomenon – called abstraction and objectivity – is therefore in bad faith and affords only a false clarity since we artificially suspend our full engagement with the phenomenon, an engagement, without which art, in any case, emaciates to nothing.

Unless the question of aesthetic truth is foregrounded I cannot begin to illuminate the domain under consideration in this paper: interactive sound softwareⁱ. This is because my intention here is to recapitulate Hans Georg Gadamer’s procedure in *Truth and Method* whereby on his way to a consideration of the truth claim of the human sciences as a whole, he analyses the special case of the *truth of art*. In this paper I wish only retrace a short section of his argument, a section which takes as its starting point the illumination of the being of the work of art through and within the concept of *play* and then proceeds to a dialectical definition of the work of art as *play transformed into structure*. I attempt, *mutatis mutandis*, to discover if this method can also illuminate the aforementioned technologies. What is brought into the open when we think about music technology in this way?

The intuition that initiates this inquiry is that when we are faced with interactive music technologies we are given, immediately, to *play*. Interactive technologies seem to afford play and playfulness and, I suggest, it is this very property that has so accelerated interest in their use in improvised performance. This is what appeals to us about this technology. What is brought into the open by this technology – its truth – is this very recovery of play within technological contexts that had previously only been antithetical to play, requiring, as they did, much greater planning and labour to affect a sonic resultⁱⁱ.

Let us take as an example a MAX/MSP patch which, using delay lines, produces a series of attenuated echoes from a given live sound input. Before this patch, and especially if we are new to the software, we invariably demonstrate a kind of playful exuberance as we discover what it does and what it can do for us. By accepting our input and by apparently “responding” to it, it offers itself for play. According to the method I am pursuing here, the *truth* of this technology is concealed in this moment of play and it is in analysing the concept of play that we draw into the open the essence of this specific technology. In doing this we do not for one moment part company with the technology by addressing ourselves instead to a mere concept; rather, it is through the concept of play that we can understand this technology in its fullness.

Gadamer's approach to aesthetics in one of radical and determined de-subjectivization. Attempting to redress two centuries worth of aesthetic thought constructed on and fixated upon subjectivity, he is always at pains to return thought to the being of the *artwork* and not mistake the disposition of the subject that encounters or produces the artwork as the locus of theoretical interest or the source of aesthetics. And in *Truth and Method* Gadamer treats the concept of play – a concept often treated by subject orientated post-Kantians (in particular Schiller) as the pre-aesthetic origin of fully autonomous art – in precisely the same manner and thus rehearses aesthetic de-subjectivisation in one of its grounding principles. But how can we conceive of play without also considering a *subject* at play? Play is a fundamental human (indeed, mammalian) behaviour and it must, it seems, continually draws us back to the needs and disposition of a subjectivity.

One example might suffice to indicate the tack and plausibility of Gadamer's thinking. Consider play in contrast to what might be called the “serious”. Play is counterposed to the serious: we might play in order to distract ourselves from more serious and pressing problems. Play lacks the seriousness of (say) our work or social responsibilities. Play, we like to imagine, is recreation, an escape from the strain of existence. But seriousness returns in play because the game must be taken seriously or it ceases to be a game. If the players neither played to win nor feared the consequences of losing, there would be no contest and no emotional, physical or intellectual excitement. Gadamer writes: “Seriousness is not merely something that calls us away from play; rather, seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play.”ⁱⁱⁱ

All this seems to point us back to subjectivity since seriousness or the pleasures of idle play describe mental states or intentional stances. But what must be grasped here is that the seriousness proper to play is not a decision on the part of the players, it is the mode of being of play as such. Play changes those that play and occasions those emotional states of tension, elation and disappointment that are proper to play. Play calls the players to seriousness and we lose ourselves in this seriousness. If the game sets a task we must take it seriously and it holds us in its sway absolutely. For example, the game of charades is engendered as a game because I must communicate without speaking; football because I cannot use my hands, blind-man’s-bluff because I must negotiate a space without using my eyes. The games are played within an absolute respect for these self-imposed limitations; if should we rescind this commitment, the game vanishes. So, *play engenders players* not the other way around, and this is an insight that Gadamer reformulates again and again: “The players are not the subjects of play; instead play merely reaches presentation (*Darstellung*) through the players”^{iv} and “[T]he attraction of a game, the fascination that it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players... What holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself.”^v And “[T]he player experiences the game as a reality that surpasses him”^{vi}.

If play is once again contrasted with work or lived existence, the attraction of play is the fact that we are drawn into a closed situation, our efforts and energies are more coherently and precisely coordinated than in the amorphous, unstructured situations of everyday life. If toil is turned into a game (if the tiresome journey from A to B becomes a race) there is immediately a lightness and a focus which seems to propel us further and faster. If we learn well when we play it is probably also for this reason.

Once we refrain from seeking the essence of play in the subjectivity of the players and locate it instead in play itself, a deeper, more inclusive understanding of play emerges. At first sight the fact that the verb “playing” is discovered in such dissimilar phrases such as “playing Hamlet”, “playing the piano”, “playing chess”, “light playing on water”, “playing on words” might be a curious but theoretically uninformative observation. The metaphoricity of the last two phrases might even be thought to distract us from cogent grasp of the concept. Within hermeneutic traditions however, such phrases, especially if their historical context and formation is taken into account, can be the source of very real understanding; these instances of language use can be trusted to be eloquent and meaningful. Indeed, Gadamer insists: “The metaphorical usage has methodological priority. If a word is applied to a sphere to which it did not originally belong, the actual “original” meaning emerges quite clearly. Language has performed in advance the

abstraction that is, as such, the task of conceptual analysis. Now thinking need only make use of this advance achievement.”^{vii} It is, in fact, with the metaphorical uses of the word that we are encouraged to begin. So, if machinery and mechanisms “play freely”, if there is an “interplay of components”, what do such phrases tell us about the essence of play? Fundamentally, play describes a movement and a quality of movement. Gadamer emphasises a sense of “to-and-fro” within play, a circular – more especially a non-telic – movement of free, unencumbered passing and exchange. There is also a sense here that the “play” of a system describes its range, its extent, the field or domain which a movement can cover.

And because of this peculiar binary, to-and-fro movement, their “mediality”, games are not played alone. This does not mean that one necessarily needs an opponent, but rather there is usually something that one must play *with*, something that responds to our move with a counter-move. A to-and-fro movement is typically manifested in ball games. The ball is batted back to me, or the ball becomes the possession of one side, then the other. And the ball itself plays its part because it behaves unpredictably and requires us to judge and adapt to its trajectory. Even in card games the deck itself becomes an opponent of sorts as we anticipate what it might reveal. And with an intentionality all its own, it appears to work with or against our desire. All games have this quality of movement which defines from within the extent and the nature of the terrain upon which they are played. This quality determines their character and closes them off, as worlds in themselves, from the world “outside”. And in these sealed worlds, meaning, forces and passions congregate and are focused. Even children who are playing not pre-established rule governed games, but are formulating games of their own (and this is what “playing” often means to them) are working to secure the often fleeting coherence of their invented worlds and scenarios.

We can recognise all of this in our experience of playing with the echo patch described above. Through a microphone I make a sound and I listen for the response. A sense of the playful arises because what I give is returned to me: my action has a response – a repetition – which creates, as it were, a problem for the player. Do I wait for the sounds to subside or go again with another sound? And which sound? I quickly notice that whatever I do will tirelessly be thrown back at me and this causes me to consider extremely carefully what it is that I should submit to the patch. A patch like this presents us with a task: “discover how to play me”. I am required to learn how to cooperate with its behaviour and this means deriving, through play, through the to-and-fro of experimentation and improvisation, rules that might inform and structure my performance. For instance, if the echoes are set to return at regular intervals, the player might explore the coordination their activity with the rhythm, metre and tempo that are implied in the patch's configuration. I am also aware that this coordination can go awry; rhythmically I can make a false move and the patch will only draw attention to my mistake. And we might notice that momentarily withdrawing and leaving silences allows the reverberations to assert themselves. Keeping silent becomes a meaningful performing strategy.

Because the sound I introduce into the system *plays* in the virtual reverberant space that is created by the software, the distinctive movement of play is easily discovered here. And so to is the challenge to my subjective decision. My activity is constrained by the behaviour of the system with which I am interacting. I am held in the spell of the game that I am enticing – through play – from the situation I am committed to reckoning with. I am aware that I am not solely responsible for this situation; rather, I am co-responsible: the game is the result of my activity and the functioning of the software. I therefore feel a lightness and a sense of anticipation and possibility and I am thus absorbed into the emerging game.

What the technology discloses here is actually something that is also essential to musical instruments as such. Everything that is said of this echo system can also be said of the instrument that might feed into it. There is a “play” that is associated with musical instruments which is here *doubled* by the software. Certainly, playing a musical instrument has all the seriousness of play – there is clearly nothing idle or non-serious in the playing of a musical instrument – the demands they make on us are in excess of anything we might encounter in everyday life. And we do not play instruments to escape difficulty but because we crave the tremendous task they set us. But part of

the pleasure we take in being with instruments is to experience a suspension of subjectivity in co-responsibility. The clue to this experience is reverberation. We recognise that the reverberant characteristics of musical instruments and the acoustically active spaces we play in give independent life and presence to the sound they make. Depress the sustaining pedal and the decaying sound of the piano suddenly belongs to itself and exists outside of us: we hear the recession of the impetuous that was once ours, the acoustic of the hall carries off “our” sound into the distance. At this moment, instruments cease to be extensions of our bodies, they have a being that stands up to us and flees from us. Their sounding is their own. Here we experience the reality of sound and the physicality of the instrument as a “reality that surpasses us”.

The question of presentation and *representation* can now be introduced here as this allows us to consider the intimate correspondences of play and art. “Play”, Gadamer states, “is really limited to presenting itself. Thus its mode of being is self-presentation. But self-presentation is a universal ontological characteristic of nature.”^{viii} Play and nature are, therefore, joined in this self-presentation and nature does not play as we do, rather we play as nature does. The echoes and reverberations described above – sound playing in a space – are the natural self-presentations of sound and space. Light playing upon water are the self-presentations of light and water. The echo is an encounter and interaction with sound in its indefatigable *natural* aspect. As I play with the echoes generated by software I am enjoying self-presentation in play.

However, according to Gadamer, representation is another matter: there is a *directedness* that is proper to representation that presentation does not occasion. In Gadamer’s analysis representation – and therefore art – begins once this presentation becomes a presentation for someone who is not immediately the player. Theatrical performance is the most conspicuous example of this. While the actors play their parts, while they perform the tasks that fall to them in their roles and are (ideally) absorbed by their interactions with the other characters on stage, it is only for the spectator, who is similarly absorbed in the play, for whom the play really exists. What does this absorption mean for the spectator?

Let us develop this idea further by examining the theory of mimesis or imitation. Clearly the classical theory of mimesis understands art as an of imitation of something: mimesis represents; the actor imitates the madness of Hamlet, he is not actually mad. We can say that the software echo unit mimes – represents – the reverberant characteristics of a “real” space. This illusion, the discovery of an expansiveness within the dead space of the studio, is part of its appeal. The synthesis of natural sound is also mimetic. We are not trying to hide the artificiality of the sound by disguising it as natural, we want what we are trying to represent to appear to be, and be recognised as, what it “is”. I want the synthetic string sound I have fashioned to be heard to “be” the sound of strings. In playing Hamlet the actor wants to be recognised *as* Hamlet. The cognitive import of imitation is in this *recognition* for “imitation and representation are not merely a repetition, a copy, but knowledge of the essence. Because they are not merely repetition, but a 'bringing-forth,' they imply a spectator as well.”^{ix} Imitation is a genuine knowledge insofar as the thing imitated is understood in its essence. A fine portrayal of Hamlet requires the actor to understand the character, but he brings-forth Hamlet such that the spectator recognises Hamlet in his essence. And imitation is not without distortions. A mimic understands all too well the politician he satirises and the audience recognises what is imitated in his comic distortions and recognises them as the truth. Mimesis has value and absorbs the spectator only inasmuch as we recognise the cognitive import of the imitation.

A further consideration will bring this into relief. What is the dramatic function of a mask? Does the mask create difficulties for this idea of imitation? Only if we mistake imitation with verisimilitude. Mimesis distorts and yet remains true: the mask distorts and yet the portrayal remains true.

By obscuring the face the burden of the identity of the actor is lifted and this facilitates a playful reconstruction of a self. The mask sets a game-like task for the actor because it precludes the use of the face within the act of portrayal. How to represent a character without using the face?

This problem has the practical effect of redistributing representational responsibilities to bodily gesture and the voice. In the context of the theatre, this has a positive practical import since the projection of the voice and the assumption of gestures and movements carry more signifying potential than the detailed nuances of facial expression which could only be registered under more intimate conditions. It also allows the character to be encountered in its generality and it takes its place more easily within the structure of the drama. The *work* is therefore manifested more directly. But the point here is that the mask affects an exaggeration and a stylisation which though clearly distorted can nevertheless remain *true* as a theatrical representation.

Can we find speculative parallels between musical instruments (be they traditional or software) and the mask? Certainly it can be thought that at some psychological level musicians “hide” behind their instruments. But whether or not that is the case, we can speculate that all instruments *mime the singing voice*: they mask our voices but give back the expressive potency of the voice in a transformed way. And instruments also give the body. The hand, like the face, has a rich representational and expressive repertoire – it is a body in microcosm, it too can dance – but without the musical instrument, the communicative intimacy of touch could not be represented or projected to a wider audience. Musical instruments *give* the hand or the lip or the breath. Touch is given back to us as sound. Though disguised as it were, in music we *recognise* the body. (Not for the first time we stand in need of an erotics of the musical.)

Is the microphone a mask? Or the echo unit? What about amplification? We are used to thinking of amplification as mediating, a medium, and we can naively suppose amplification to be neutral or, after McLuhan, the message itself, but is it, in the terms outlined above, mimetic? If we can conceive of amplification (or reverberation) as distortion that represents the truth (brings into the open) of a sound or a instrumental performance then it too could also be functioning as a *mask*. I am disguised in order to present my self-presentation as play.

The speculations above seem to provide ample support to the intuition that the concepts of play and representation, both of which are proper to art as such, can illuminate the mode of being of interactive music software. But a further stage of our argument is reached once we begin to consider the playing of a *work* which is in principle repeatable and exists beyond the moment of performance and over and above the players. This immediately creates difficulties for this appraisal of interactive software because what has been considered so far has had no particular relation to the truth of a “work” as it is conceived by Gadamer.

In a fascinating passage, Gadamer explains that the power of our understanding of the closedness of the work is manifested in our ability to see episodes of our own lives as comedies or tragedies, to see life itself as unfolding as a “drama”, or existence as a stage upon which we “play”. This closedness lends a narrative finiteness to existence and is in stark contrast to a disturbing diffuseness (a nausea) which is a consequence of the superabundance of future possibility. In these episodes our lives seem more real and more coherent than at other times. To call life a comedy is already to understand the essence of the work of art: the work is just this transformation, it is the *sublation* of the world. “From this viewpoint ‘reality’ is defined as what is untransformed, and art as the raising up (*Aufhebung*) of this reality into its truth.”^x This is the real source of recognition within art and play: what we recognise is the sublation of the real into its truth.

There is a class of unfinished “work” which is populated by such forms as fragments, sketches, works-in-progress, processes, experiments, notes, doodles, jottings etc., all of which are essentially incomplete, all of which remain open to, and therefore prone to the anxiety of, future undecidedness. And by this token one might add to this list the freely improvised since one begins without the security of knowing what or how an ending will be found. As I begin to interact with software or processing, I necessarily “improvise”. I try things out, I explore, without certainty, the limits of the field without a map, formal rules, without guidance from the higher authority of a composer or a work. This improvisation is the growth point of my learning but there is no guarantee that I will eventually learn to produce a “work”. Does the absence of a closed work block improvisation from a very powerful and distinct dimension of art?

But one can easily fashion a drama from this crisis. When this is set before an audience as a free, unplanned, improvisation, what might perhaps fascinate is the stylised drama of my negotiation with the interactive system, my relationship to the obscure or combative behaviour of the software. We suppose a contest of sorts is being played out and we are absorbed by the ensuing struggle. We do not witness the presentation of a work as such but my activity as an improviser takes place, nevertheless, within the closed narrative structure of a ritual. The drama concerns my ability to present myself, to find a way through the software. What matters here is not the presence or absence of a work, the security of the planned as opposed to hazard of the unplanned, but rather what, if anything, is *sublated*. The criterion, therefore, is not a *work* but the *true*; what is at stake is the drama of recognition and representation. And perhaps what is played out in this instance is the anxiety of undecidedness.

Summary

Interactive music software environments seem to afford play. All I know of play is immediately recognised in my interaction with these systems: I am absorbed and concentrated, I feel that I am set a task that is real worth participating in. The patch calls me to play, it sets me into playful competition; it constructs me as a player and I am thus relieved of some of the burden of decision. In it I encounter the naturalness of self-presentation. It is a mask and it distorts my performance in the direction of the true. Because the patch is also a virtual field and a constraint, the anxiety concerning the future course of my play, is mitigated. Through it I can represent and dramatise some significant aspect of my existence.

Without the uncovering of the truth of play, the danger is one of condemning improvisation in technological contexts as a permanently infantilised aesthetic practice: one that only plays and can only play. The danger is of mistaking improvisation as a practice that scrawls and experiments and rehearses and is irrevocably trapped inside itself as unsublated play. Indeed, theory might labour to dignify this assessment of improvisation and find the value of its experiment and its unfinishedness in dialectical opposition to the ideological claim to unity made by the traditional work. But the opposition is false. Both are processes, both are complete and incomplete, both are hesitant and over-bearing. What matters here is their relation to the real, to the world that is sublated in them. The criterion is the true and by virtue of this either can succeed or fail.

I have returned again and again to the echo. The echo is, I submit, the *Ur*-technology of sound interaction. If we wish to think of sound interaction in its origin, where else should one look than the myth of Echo? Echo must play with the words given to her by another in order to make known her thoughts. Echo can only respond through truncating and adapting what has already been said to her. Here at once is the gaming of interaction. Once her love is shunned by Narcissus, she withers away to nothing leaving only her voice haunting the landscape. When I place myself in a sonic landscape, be it actual or virtual, I experience sound as somehow bereft, belated, perhaps tragic. Even as I respond and play with my own echo, I recognise a difference from myself, a disembodiment, a loss. Technology, though it may distract us from the truths of these experiences, can nonetheless, and with a voice far gentler than one might imagine, disclose them.

ⁱ I interpret “interactive” as referring to that class of software environments that can process sound in real time; that can respond to external stimulus. This includes familiar environments such as MAX/MSP, PD and SuperCollider. But there are also interactive, “real time” processing features in sound editing software such as ProTools. The mix window of CoolEdit Pro allows for a relatively fast and responsive way organising of sound clips (especially when compared with the cutting and pasting of tape in the Radiophonic studio) and this too could be described as interactive.

ⁱⁱ I am thinking here of CSound in its non-real time incarnation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Continuum, New York, 1994), p. 102.

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- ^{iv} Ibid., p. 103.
^v Ibid., p. 106.
^{vi} Ibid., p. 109.
^{vii} Ibid., p. 103.
^{viii} Ibid., p. 108.
^{ix} Ibid., p. 114-5.
^x Ibid., p. 113.