

Systems for Play

Musc0211 | Granoff Building - S4 | Tuesdays 4 - 7

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Overview

This course approaches systems as artistic mediums—worlds to navigate, animated structures, musical games, and experimental (inter)plays. Through weekly projects we will develop scores, rules, methods and patterns for organizing unpredictable sound situations and performance experiences. Readings and exercises draw from dada, fluxus, game design, cybernetics, geometry, computing, networks, rituals, and chance. This class is both a laboratory for experimenting with sound and a filter for listening to the systems with and within which we live.

Another View

Sound, like system, is everywhere, moving through and around us. We make new sounds, but we also play with that which is already sounding, pushing it around, folding it, pointing to it, amplifying, multiplying, cutting and randomizing it, leaving it be. Likewise, systems influence who we are and how we play, pushing us, amplifying, dividing, and patterning us. Systems can be linguistic, cultural, technological, ecological, illogical, generative, fictional... How do we make work that plays with them? What are our strategies? Are we scientists with an electron microphone, players navigating a soundspace, or actors adopting the methods of engineers, insects, logicians and mystics? This class is about attending to the noise, figuring it in and figuring within it. All systems *of* play and *at* play are *in* play, including this one.

Structure

Each session begins with a discussion of the readings; starting spaces for thinking about indefinite concepts like play, system, game, and process. The second half is dedicated to rehearsing and tuning our systems. When necessary, the class is an ensemble, playing game pieces, event scores, conceptual instructions, and improvised experiments.

You are expected to be on time for every session, having read, listened and rehearsed, ready to work & play.

Ongoing Projects

- Each week, choose a different location and spend a long time listening for systems.
- Read. Play. Record your reflections, sketches and figurings in a special notebook.
- Develop new systems for play in dialogue with weekly readings/materials/listening.
- Draw connections. Reconsider patterns. Make noise.

1/28

Introduction

Overview of the syllabus, say yes to the information, questionnaire, an experiment.

Conceptual focus rather than material limits define the system. Thus any situation, either in or outside the context of art, may be designed and judged as a system. Inasmuch as a system may contain people, ideas, messages, atmospheric conditions, power sources, and so on, a system is, to quote the systems biologist, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, a "complex of components in interaction," comprised of material, energy, and information in various degrees of organization. In evaluating systems the artist is a perspectivist considering goals, boundaries, structure, input, output, and related activity inside and outside the system. Where the object almost always has a fixed shape and boundaries, the consistency of a system may be altered in time and space, its behavior determined both by external conditions and its mechanisms of control.

~ Jack Burnham, Systems Aesthetics

Cybernated art is very important, but art for cybernated life is more important, and the latter need not be cybernated.

~ Nam June Paik

2/04

Frames, Spheres & Listening

Read

Deep Listening (Introduction) | Pauline Oliveros (4)
Cycles, Spheres and Suitcases | Seth Kim-Cohen and Andrew Morgan (1)
Generating and Organizing Variety in the Arts | Brian Eno (8)

Listen

"The Great Learning (Paragraph 7)" by Cornelius Cardew

Project

Bring in an example of work that you consider a system for play

As the structures that were thought to describe the operation of the world become progressively more unworkable, other concepts of organization must become current. These concepts will base themselves on the assumption of change rather than stasis and on the assumption of probability rather than certainty.

~ Brian Eno

I see and hear life as a grand improvisation—I stay open to the world of possibilities for interplay in the quantum field with self and others—community, society, the world, the universe, and beyond.

~ Pauline Oliveros

2.11

Systems, Processes and Complexities

Read

Systems Aesthetics | Jack Burnham (13)
Systemantics (Appendix 1 +) | John Gale (7)
Conditional Design Manifesto | Various (1)

Watch

The Ron Resch Paper and Stick Film

Project

Create a structure for group improvisation without instruments (voice, body & environment)

Systems are seductive. They promise to do a hard job faster, better, and more easily than you could do it by yourself. But if you set up a system, you are likely to find your time and effort now being consumed in the care and feeding of the system itself. New problems are created by its very presence. Once set up, it won't go away, it grows and encroaches. It begins to do strange and wonderful things. Breaks down in ways you never thought possible. It kicks back, gets in the way, and opposes its own proper function. Your own perspective becomes distorted by being in the system. You become anxious and push on it to make it work. Eventually you come to believe that the misbegotten product it so grudgingly delivers is what you really wanted all the time. At that point encroachment has become complete... you have become absorbed... you are now a systems person!

~ John Gale, *Systemantics*

In a world mediated through computing, our everyday lives are increasingly affected by complex and invisible systems. Some of these are algorithmic trades on the stock market, others are search results for information, movies, or a date. These systems often aspire to transparency, usability, and efficiency. Playful systems take a different approach, bringing the systems to the foreground as games, stories, narratives, and visualizations. Playful systems embrace complexity rather than conceal it, and seek to delight, not disappear.

~ Kevin Slavin, Playful Systems

2.18 Art, Play & The Magic Circle

Read Critical Play (Chapter 5) | Mary Flanagan (36)
Contribution to a Situationist Definition of Play | Guy Debord (1)
Dissolving the Magic Circle of Play | Anne-Marie Schleiner (12)

Watch *Quad* by Samuel Beckett

Project Create an interplay for three characters. One of them is named Microphone.

The notion of play can only escape the linguistic and practical confusion surrounding it by being considered in its movement.

~ Guy Debord

It's crucial to understand that play isn't solely a juvenile activity, though we often associate it with the young. Play is how mammals learn. Babies and children play as a way of developing their understanding of the world – but as John Seeley Brown, the former chief scientist of Xerox Park, told me recently, it's essential that adults be able to play as well. We've “transitioned into a time of transitions,” Seeley Brown argues – and the only way we can adjust ourselves to the present-day speed of change is to become as adept at play as a baby, dropped into a world about which she knows nothing.

~ Eric Zimmerman, *Manifesto for a Ludic Century*

2.25 Pattern, Randomness & Open Forms

Read Chance Imagery | George Brecht (15)
The Poetics of the Open Work (Chapter 1) | Umberto Eco (15)
Rules of Play (Chapter 15) | Katie Salen & Eric Zimmerman (3)
Anthology of Chance Operations | Various (skim)

Project Practice *in C* by Terry Riley

Chance in the arts provides a means for escaping the biases engrained in our personality by our culture and personal past history, that is, it is a means of attaining greater generality.

~ George Brecht, *Chance Imagery*

“I'd rather chance a choice, than choose a chance.” ~ Lou Harrison

3.04 Intermedia, Context & Concept

Read Dada Manifesto 1918 | Tristan Tzara (4)
Intermedia | Hannah and Dick Higgins (4)
On Sound and Context | Davíð Brynjar Franzson (16)
Paragraphs on Conceptual Art | Sol Lewitt (5)

Project Prepare 2 pieces from the *Fluxus Workbook*

The hybrid or the meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation from which new form is born. For the parallel between two media holds us on the frontiers between forms that snap us out of the Narcissus-narcosis. The moment of the meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed by them on our senses.

~ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*

Event Scores, involve simple actions, ideas, and objects from everyday life recontextualized as performance. Event Scores are texts that can be seen as proposal pieces or instructions for actions. The idea of the score suggests musicality. Like a musical score, Event Scores can be realized by artists other than the original creator and are open to variation and interpretation.

~ Alison Knowles, *Fluxus Artist*

3.11 Games, Rules & Navigation

- Read Rules, Play and Culture by Frank Lantz & Eric Zimmerman (5)
Can Video Games be Art? by Samantha Murphy / Various (2)
Notes for Cobra | Stephen Drury (4)
- Listen *Cobra* by John Zorn,
- Project Build a musical game.

Games are abstract, mathematical systems. They are aesthetic and material systems. They are social, linguistic, and semiotic systems. And they are part of larger systems of history, politics, and culture.

~ Lantz & Zimmerman, *Rules, Play and Culture*

What are games? Are they things in the sense of artifacts? Are they behavioral models, or simulations of social situations? Are they vestiges of ancient rituals, or magical rites? It is difficult and even curious when one tries to answer the question "what are games," since it is assumed that games are many things and at the same time specific games are different from one another—but are they?

~ E. M. Avedon, *The Structural Elements of Games*

3.18 Repetition, Multiplicity & Dimension

- Read Music as a Gradual Process | Steve Reich (2)
How to Make a Dadaist Poem | Tristan Tzara (2)
Difference and Repetition (Excerpt) | Gilles Deleuze (20)
- Listen *Book of Days* | Meredith Monk
- Project Create a sound piece using many iterations of one thing.

Repetition changes nothing in the object repeated, but does change something in the mind which contemplates it.

~ Hume, via Deleuze

While performing and listening to gradual musical processes one can participate in a particular liberating and impersonal kind of ritual. Focusing in on the musical process makes possible that shift of attention away from he and she and you and me outwards towards it.

~ Steve Reich

4.01 Words, Programs & Programming

- Read The Grid | Michael Betancourt (1)
Program or be Programmed (Introduction) | Douglas Rushkoff (20)
Selected Writings | Gertrude Stein
- Watch I Love You | Mimi Cabell
- Guest Caroline Park, *Generative Systems*

For silicon, the material of both quartz crystals and glass, to become digital is to literally become opaque, the process of sight no longer being a matter of seeing-through, but of seeing-within: insight, transcendent vision; this transition is the digital. The ideology it creates is one that takes Arthur C. Clark's observation about advanced technology and magic and turns it from imaginary futures to the lived experience of the present, in the process filling the space of the digital with both imaginary, instrumental forms of "life," (from computer viruses, to worms, spiders, bots and spyware), whose function is parasitic. At the same time, the lifeworld become machinic: "lifelifehacking," and DNA as a variety of digital code, manipulated and modeled within the digital technology that enables its manipulation.

~ Michael Betancourt

(last month of classes subject to play)

4.08 Cyborgs, Automation & Animation

Read Interacting with latter-day musical automata | George Lewis (8)
Cyberated Art | Nam June Paik (1)
Cyborg Manifesto | Donna Harroway (20)

Project tba

4.15 Geometry, Algorithm & Space

Read Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions (excerpts) | Edwin Abbott
Into the Continuum | Tumblr Blog

Watch *Donald in Mathmagic Land*

Project tba

Guest Chris Novello, *Networks for Play*

4.22 Fictions, Dreams & Free Improvisation

Read The Knife Thrower - The Dream of the Consortium | Steven Millhauser
Free Jazz | Ornette Coleman

Project tba

Guest Sophia Brueckner, *Science Fictions*

4.29 De-, Re- & Failure

Read *Hacker Manifesto* | McKensie Wark
Hackers & Painters | Paul Graham
The Aesthetics of Failure | Kim Cascone (5)
The Cut-up Method | William Burroughs

Watch *Charlie Rose by Samuel Beckett* by Andrew Filippone Jr.

Project Refigure Systems

5.06 Open Session

Project Rehearse Systems

Tbd Systems For Play

Final Presentations
for people