

***Practising Research in Co-Composition: Sound and Performance,
PSN Bath Spa, 15.07.16***

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Video: excerpt from video 'Mitslalom: Sonorities of Shadows'

<https://vimeo.com/90950723>

Introduction

'Mitslalom', meaning 'sound shadows', is an audio/visual collaboration between Oded Ben-Tal, electronics composer, Rees Archibald, a/v artist, and myself as performer, made in 2014. It marked the final stage of a collaboration between us, one that had lasted roughly 3 years and began with live plenary presentations at conferences on the subject of time in Caen (Normandy) and the island of Crete, developed into a performance at Tete-a-Tete's Festival of new Opera in London, and finally featured as an installation within the gallery spaces of international multidisciplinary events such as a Conference on Synaesthesia, Science and Art in Spain last year.

I deliberately began with the end product of our work in order to offer a perspective on its earlier manifestations as they unfold in this presentation, examining the role that a process of ongoing research took as it moved away from an academic framework towards a more independent one. The data, methodology and results pertaining to the early stages of this project formed part of my PhD practice-based thesis completed in 2012.

Duo 2010
performance

Trio 2013
presentation

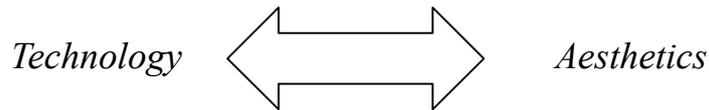
Trio 2013
performance

Film 2014
fixed a/v format

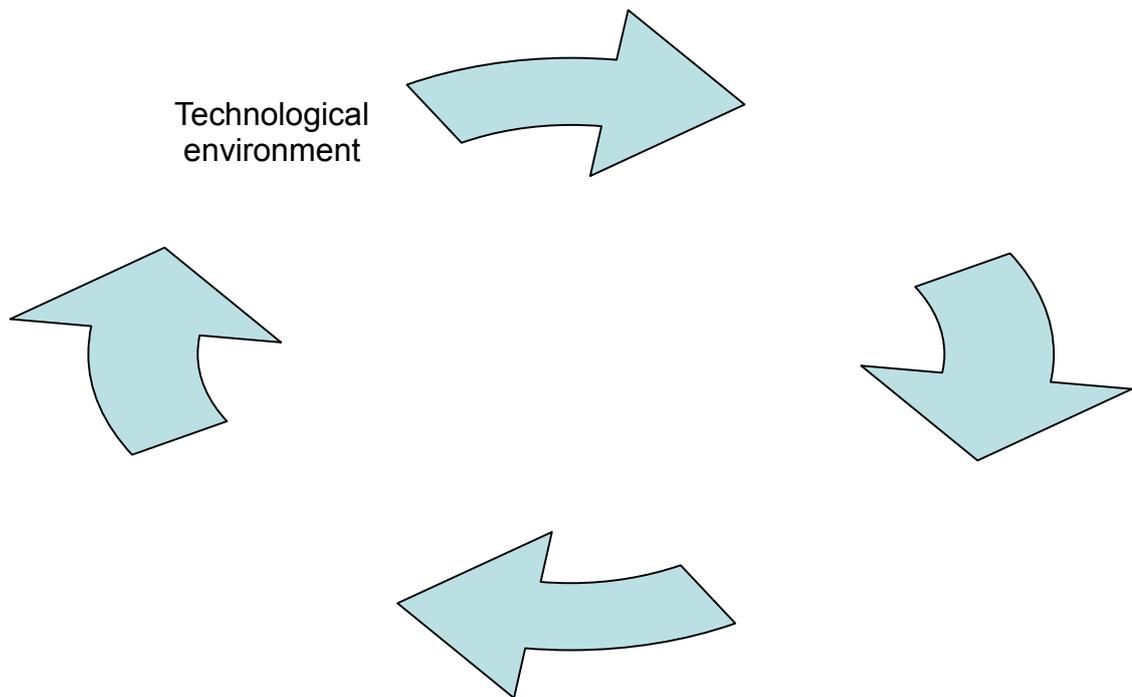
It had begun in 2010 as a duo performance between Oded and myself, coined under the term 'sound theatre' to describe a co-composition entitled *Zaum: Beyond Mind*. We were later joined by Rees to explore some film footage alongside the live performance, and extend this collaboration further to include his presence as a third co-performer

onstage, along with the use of interactive visual material, in a subsequent live version of the piece in 2013. As performances of the work continued to evolve over a period of time, it seems valid at this stage to reflect on and evaluate an equally relevant form of ongoing research that took place outside of academia. Thus I intend to trace a changing path that knowledge, methods and impact took during the numerous occasions on which the practice of research manifested itself through performance.

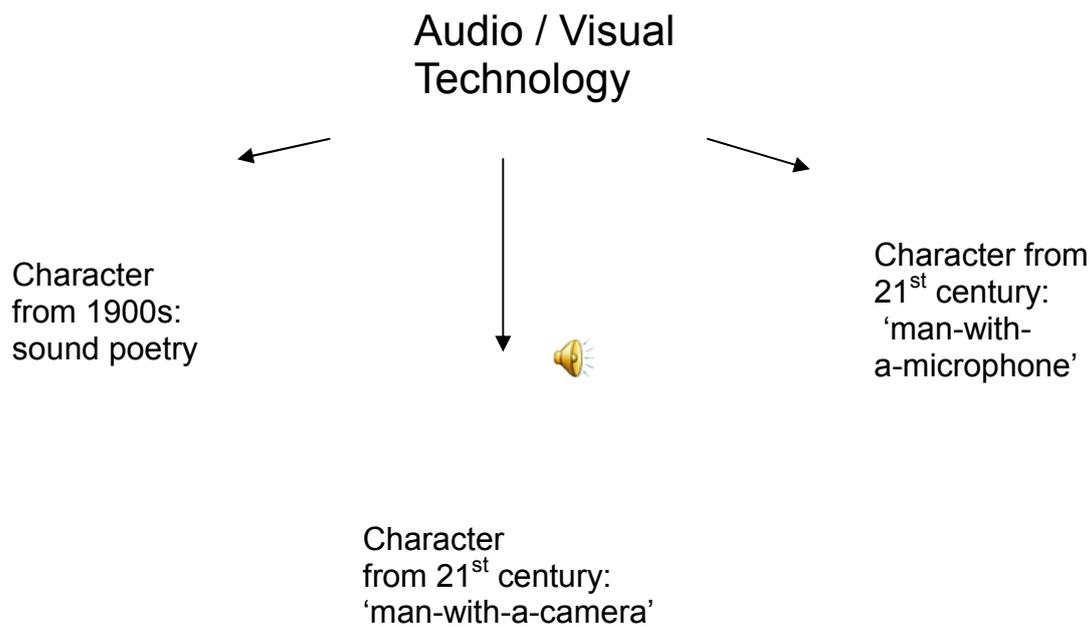
Technology as Mediator



One of the main concepts that brought us to work together was an interest in *interaction*, the technologically mediated one in particular. The process of programming this type of interaction – at the semantic level – required close discussion between us and took on the form of a meta-discourse.



Indeed, the dynamics of our collaboration became increasingly complex because of the addition of a new, visual medium.



The configuration between my essentially live role, providing chaotic, nonsensical sound poetry from the early 1900s, and Oded's digital sound world, converged into a new, highly complex medium that went beyond former aesthetic limitations.

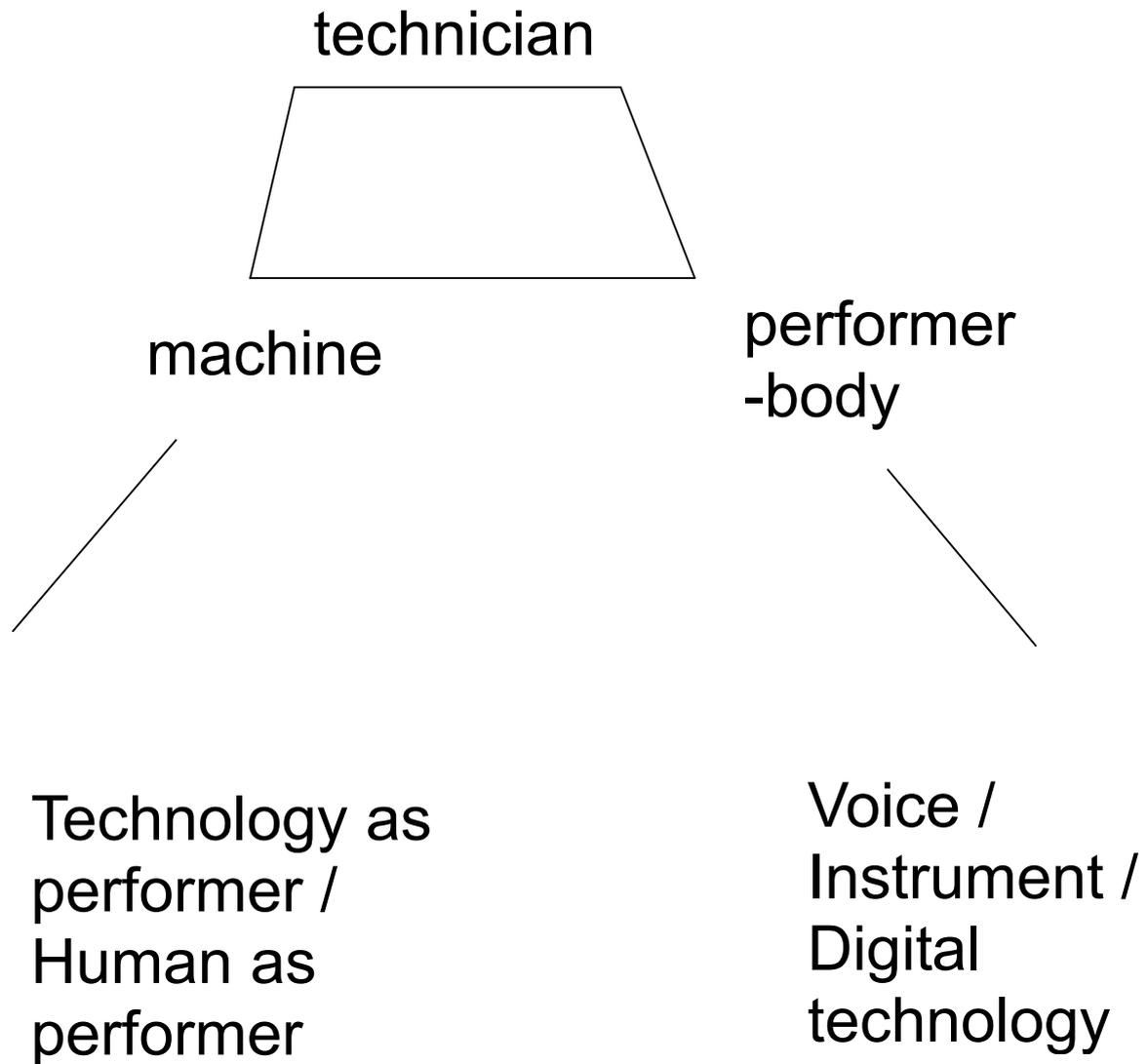
Audio example: Zaum 1, voice and electronics (sound file attached)

A poetic language, *zaum*, stemming from the historical avant-garde Russian Futurist era, cast off former worn-out literary meanings, and arose con-currently with early technological developments in film and sound that used montage, cutting and juxtaposition. Indeed as Klaus Gruber argues, the encounters of new media with contemporary digital cultures could be seen from an archaeological perspective as an extension of the critical avant-garde trajectory:

'intermediality in performance in digital culture might be seen as an extension – into an encounter with the digitisation of signs – of a process begun in the early 20th century' Gruber, K., 'Early Intermediality: Archaeological Glimpses' (2010), in Mapping Intermediality in Performance, Amsterdam University Press, p. 247.

Interesting was the addition of Rees as a 'man-with-a-camera' into the

configuration, complementing Oded's 'man-with-a-microphone', and in reference to the early Russian film by Dziga Vertov 'Man with a Movie Camera' from 1929.



We asked ourselves: 'What happens in this confrontation between the voice, the instrument and digital technology; between the technician, the machine and the performer-body? What if technology assumed the role of

a performer and entered into a different dialogue with its human counterpart?’

Image 1. (attached): ‘Rees as Man with a Camera’, Caroline as Bandoneonist from performance of ‘Zaum: Beyond Mind’ (2013).

Joined by theatre director Joe Austin from Opera North for this production at Tete-a-Tete Festival in 2013, we were urged to develop a narrative line into what had been hitherto a series of juxtaposed scenes. We explored a journey from conflict to resolution in this temporal relationship between the 3 characters, one that deliberately exposed us to the inner workings of its components. Multiple identities and the blurring of borderlines between the real and the virtual transformed each protagonist into a curious blend of body-instrument-machine.

Co-composition

Our practice straddled the border between improvisation and composition, *co*-composition at that, since we were all contributing audio and visual material either in the form of a ‘score’ or in purely visual / sonic terms. It thus posed some questions regarding authorship and the possible parameters of a score-script, as well as the issues of creativity and the creative process. The score-script materials included graphics on paper,...

example of the above - choreographic sketch (image 2, attached)

notation,... *graphics plus notated elements (image 3 attached)*

pure data and max patches, audio files and raw video footage. The structure of the piece took on the role of a performance text, providing us with guidelines.

A very useful device for analyzing our creative process proved to be the transcription of improvisational material into a rough score-script:

transcribed score sketch (image 4, attached)

It allowed a comparison to be made between the graphic trace and the model of reference, whereby hitherto unknown relationships within the audio / visual material became clear.

As a trio of performers with tools and instruments we enjoyed a situation of unpredictability during our process of working, one that provided a

creative ground. Patterns of audio and visual material emerged in unknown complexity, resembling in turn the perpetual processes of an organism. As humans we interacted with our machines without the factor of dominance or autonomous will, exploring new configurations that were opened up as a result of experimentation. Thus the process of composition, something that has been formerly internalized in traditional practice, became distributed across the media of technology.

‘the abstract pattern can never fully capture the embodied actuality unless it’s as *prolix and noisy* as the body itself’ (Hayles, N.K. *How we became Post-human*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992: 22)

Data as expressive means

This last point brings me to examine the role of data as an expressive means. For me the key to this lies in generating a dialogue between cognitive and unconscious knowledge, gesture then becoming a tool of communication in any medium, one that retains all of the body. Meaning as such is therefore contained within the signifier. Knowledge is not separated from expressive force but part of it, and indeed a way of accessing expression. The distance between object and subject is dissolved. Thus, a process that allows for the disposition of time to carefully collect data and change the artistic content of a work accordingly, means that its progression becomes embedded in knowledge. Pierre Bourdieu sums up this issue of understanding embodied knowledge in the light of analysis in his book ‘Outline of a Theory and Practice’.

Bourdieu, P. (1977), ‘The Dialectics of Objectification and Embodiment’ in Outline of a Theory of Practice, (trans. Richard Nice), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 87-95.

To give an example from our own practice, I offer this equation:

electronic modification + sampled material (data) = re-embodied musical gesture (expressive means)

Followed by an audio example from our own practice:

audio – Zaum 2: voice and electronics (sound file attached)

Audio / Visual relationship

Rees’s contribution as both co-performer and video artist offered an

extension of interplay and exchange between us all. The physical absence or presence of my own character was manifested in the form of a virtual sound-body or image-body interacting with the live performer-body.

image (5) from performance: attached.

All three maintained their own characteristic facets. We deliberately de-connected these 'bodies' from each other during a live performance as independent lines, in order to re-connect them into a new, composite meaning.

Image 6. (attached)

Thus, in a process of medial dislocation between what is seen and heard on the part of the audience, we as players were free to explore another dimension, another reality.

Image 7(attached)

In terms of tempo, the sound or images could enter into a counterpoint with each other, accelerating or decelerating their speeds as independent lines. In terms of audio or visual amplification, a live perspective of a sound or image could be magnified or miniaturized accordingly, whether in terms of dynamic or size.

Aesthetics of Exteriorization

This leads me to the governing aesthetic paradigm of the piece, one that exposes its inner workings as a complex machinery of action and sound. The stage set comprised an array of undisguised technology, such as video cameras, loudspeakers, monitors, laptops and microphones, all placed in key positions as 'co-performers' that would be put into action by a human counterpart. Thus, any pre-conceived notion of subservience between representation and disguise, between the technical tools and the human bodies operating them, was turned inside-out like the equivalent of a Moebius strip, whose exterior surface is in continuity with its internal one. This practice relates, in turn, to Deleuze's theory of the 'fold', in which a traditional relationship of subject and object, in this case with regard to the audience and the performance of a work, is refuted. In its place is offered the possibility of multiple perspectives that shift audience perception from a position of observation to one of encounter.

Impact

Duo 2010
performance

Trio 2013
presentation

Trio 2013
performance

Film 2014
fixed a/v format

Live / interactive
Audio electronics

Multi-medial
a/v + 1 performer

Live/interactive
a/v +
3 performers

Abstract
moving
images
+
Audio
recording

So to return to my previous chart showing the gradual evolution of our collaboration, what began as an academic research project between 2 composers, (namely myself and Oded), extended to become a multi-medial presentation at conference level as Rees joined us on, what was by now for me, an independent, post-doctoral level. The shift in medium from a performance context, in which all three of us were onstage, towards a fixed audio-visual format of the film version entitled 'Mitslalom', led to a more abstract presence of the main performer. Ultimately, this final format allowed for a more refined fusion of our technological and aesthetic aims. Less successful was the live format with all 3 performers, whereby more development of the characters 'man-with-a-microphone' and the 'man-with-a-camera' was needed. Here the time factor in working with a director was severely limited, one that could not allow fully for this process to occur. Indeed, the demands made by combining technology with embodied learning are enormous in terms of their repercussion on a time level. Given the extent to which my own research practice involved such a degree of experiential immersion over years, it is not surprising that much

creative work of this nature does not easily transfer, if at all, to other performers. Thus it raises issues not only with regard to the work's life-span, but also to its evolutionary process over time.

Regarding the outcome of this research, from an academic background to one of independent artistic enquiry, it seems more applicable to apply criteria in qualitative rather than quantifiable terms. I would suggest that the paradigm level be described as performative, whereby meaning and experience are imbricated within each other in the contemporary performative culture, and not separable with regard to historical sequence.

*' the performative turn in the contemporary arts[...]as a **radicalization** of the performative aspects of art in order to reinforce the materiality or expressive qualities of the aesthetic utterance, to emphasize the aesthetic situation as a staging and world-making event taking place in the presence of the here and now, and to intensify the aesthetic experience as an embodied experience'. (Kattenbelt, C. (2010), *Intermediality in Performance*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p.33.)*

In terms of a contextual evolution – from early presentations at academic events to performances at arts festivals - our work successfully met both intellectual and artistic challenges in its quest for new departures, constellations and forms. Thus it continues to contribute towards the future development of a genre that can extend to include a wider socio-political reception within the public domain.