# Ad-Hoc Aesthetics: Context-dependent composition strategies in music and sound art

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Contemporary trains of thought largely denounce hylomorphism and a series of dichotomies of the past in favour of rather hybrid, all-inclusive and non-anthropocentric schemata. Yet, the former seem to still pervade our understanding of music and sound art in several respects. For many, composition is a primarily abstract process, musical instruments and audio-related technologies are fixed material means, and artists are creative individuals who are solely and primarily responsible for the artworks they produce. In this article a series of ad hoc and context-dependent compositional traits are scrutinised, with reference to theory as well as to actual artistic practice (both historical and contemporary), and are shown to transcend such assumptions in more or less straightforward ways. In particular, a series of practices is examined that revolves around material inquiry, anti-optimality, and hybrid, reflexive or 'meta' interfaces. More, DIWO (Do It With Others) approaches to composition are discussed and shown to echo adhocracy and contextual dependency in various respects and by means of emergent autopoiesis. Certain slants to DIWO are finally examined with respect to a series of powerful (in the author's opinion) metaphors, namely emergence, transience and post-selfhood.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the time of Aristotle, hylomorphism has governed occidental thought, proliferating an explicit dichotomy between matter and form, and proclaiming that everything is necessarily a compound of both (Kelsey 2010; Manning 2013). From such a stance, making in general is thought of as the imposition of forms that are internal to one's mind upon an extrinsic material world and, consequently, composition is understood as the externalisation of ideas/forms that are already formulated inside the composer's mind (at least to a certain extent). Hylomorphism, of course, is discrepant with a series of contemporary trains of thought which largely denounce a matter–form opposition altogether. Indeed, for several important thinkers, creative acts are not to be thought of in terms of form imposed to matter but, instead, in terms of hybrid synergies, agency, effect and affect. In tandem with a genuine post-humanist perspective, such schemata tend to undermine the importance of human will in favour of material and technological

affordances. For instance, according to Tim Ingold, the maker,

> far from standing aloof, imposing his designs on a world that is ready and waiting to receive them, the most he can do is to intervene in worldly processes that are already going on … adding his own impetus to the forces and the energies in play. (Ingold 2013: 21)

In a similar vein, Lambros Malafouris understands human cognition as ontologically inseparable from the material world (Malafouris 2005) and pictures things as cognitive extensions of the human mind – as 'thoughts', in the most literal sense of the word (Malafouris 2013). There is some correlation between Malafouris's ideas and Latour's well-known theses that there is no real object–subject opposition and that all media should be rather understood as parts of broader dynamic social networks (Latour 2007, 2012). From such a stance, compositional tactics and music aesthetics cannot be thought of independently of the technologies, the media and the social conveniences musicians rely upon to perform music; it is only with respect to the latter that the composer's mind is established, in the same fashion that the potter's mind is only established with respect to the potter's wheel and the clay itself, as succinctly illustrated in Malafouris (2008).

Yet, while certain compositional practices cannot be accounted for solely in terms of a hylomorphic model, the latter still pervades our understanding of music and sound art. For many, composition is a primarily abstract process, musical instruments and audio-related technologies are fixed material means, and artists are creative individuals who are solely and primarily responsible for the artworks they produce. Such assumptions have historically permeated musical thinking altogether, suggesting all sorts of oppositions; for example, between audiences and artists, between poetics and aesthetics, between ideas and their performance. However, while both historical and contemporary practices do affirm such oppositions in many, if not in the majority of, cases, there do also exist broad families of compositional strategies that challenge or transgress them in the most straightforward ways, suggesting instead a definite contextual

dependency with material, methodological or other traits. As to be further elaborated, certain of those practices tend to devalue the finished artwork in favour of research, material/methodological interrogation and performance, so that they share some common grounds with practice-based research methodologies.

Nowadays the idea of composition-as-research is well laid out in certain academic milieux. In his seminal essay 'The Trojan Horse', Marcel Cobussen argues that artistic practice can indeed produce valid knowledge of some sort (Cobussen 2007). Such knowledge, of course, cannot be of the discursive kind, as is the case with scientific or philosophical reasoning, yet this is hardly a disadvantage – science and philosophy may have been given historical and social value but both remain bounded to linguistic limitations (Wittgenstein, Hacker and Schulte 2010) as well as to various social and methodological contexts (Kuhn 1970; Latour and Woolgar 1979). Feyerabend has demonstrated that the universal scientific standards are far from accurate irrespective of context; instead he observes that scientists often create themselves the phenomena they are supposed to study (Feyerabend 1993, 1996). He further argues that (scientific) progress could be instead driven by all sorts of other alternative rationalities. In my opinion, 'research-through-design' – that is, research by means of pragmatic hands-on interaction with materials (Zimmerman et al. 2011) – can constitute such an alternative rationality. Research-through-design concerns

> research where the end product is an artefact – where the thinking is, so to speak, embodied in the artefact, where the goal is not primarily communicable knowledge in the sense of verbal communication, but in the sense of visual or iconic or imagistic communication. (Frayling 1993: 5)

Of course, 'visual or iconic or imagistic communication' can be thought of more broadly, so that it also accounts for music, as well as for the more complex aesthetic experiences that characterise contemporary media-art in general. Consider that, unlike a purely imagistic communication, music and sound art are often meant to be physically embodied and spatiotemporally practised in the most literal manners – for example, when dancing or soundwalking or in the cases of interactive sound-art, multichannel electroacoustic music and harsh noise walls. Then, in the case of DIWO (Do It With Others) practices, broader social contexts, mediation technologies and communication channels are typically embodied in both the compositional process and the final artistic output. In this way, 'research-through-composition' (paraphrasing research-through-design) may offer a certain kind of knowledge of non-theoretical nature: one that is situated to, and that revolves around, particular kinds of materials, technologies, methodologies and broader social hybrids. Context-dependent approaches to composition are

necessarily research-driven in that they embody broader concerns about particular contexts. As I have argued elsewhere, under certain circumstances artistic practice may transcend the limitations of discursive thinking to more effectively articulate ontological uncertainty, indeterminacy, space/time relativity, perceptual hiatus, tension and collision. To quote myself:

> Art can be an experimental laboratory for philosophy, where perception, agency, representation, mediation, space, time, memory, material, language, cognition and consciousness can be themselves 'researched-through-design'. Art can be a medium for presenting the fleeting, the uncertain, the indeterminate, the non-sensuous and the non-existent, as well as a site for the exploration of alternative methodological traits and of sophisticated interfaces so that new epistemologies may emerge. (Koutsomichalis 2015: 91)

In the rest of this article I plan to zero in on a series of context-dependent compositional practices of that kind. A series of relevant themes will be also elaborated upon, both theoretically and with references to actual artistic practice.

## 2. MATERIAL INQUIRY

Certain approaches to composition are primarily structured around material exploration. Consider, for example, field recordists Toshiya Tsunoda and Chris Watson; both have released albums that comprise largely unprocessed environmental sounds, typically with respect to some particular thematic axis; for example, Watson's *Outside the Circle of Fire* and *Stepping into the Dark* and Tsunoda's *Extract From Field Recordings Archive* series and *O kokkos tis anoixis*. As I have argued elsewhere, such kinds of albums account for a certain kind of 'catalogue aesthetics' in that the artists present a selection of sonic matter in the most straightforward way; that is, as a list of thematically relevant tracks (Koutsomichalis 2016). Generally speaking, practices revolving around environmental sound by definition raise concerns for particular sites and their associated contexts. Yet, in the above cases, composition literally collapses to a very straightforward sonic inquiry: the artists collect material in-situ that is relevant to some particular context, select those they understand as worth publishing among them, and distribute them to their audiences so that they can listen to them at their own discretion.

Materialisms of similar sorts are rather widespread among environmental sound artists and acoustic ecologists. Consider, for instance, Watson's *A Journey South* and *Alcedo Volcano* or Hildegard Westerkamp's *Kits Beach Soundwalk*. Here, too, composition collapses into material exploration, albeit of an improvised/performed kind, since the artists document their own interaction with their surroundings and/or with their equipment. Consider also the case of the

various soundwalking practices (Drever 2009). Be it for simple excursions structured around the listening of a given environment or for more sophisticated approaches – for example, in Viv Corringham's *Shadow Walks*, the artist is first guided through a place to then retrace and 'sing the walk' through vocal improvisations, or in my own *Schizoid Cityscapes* where audiences are invited to follow a predefined route in a city while listening through headphones to cityscape recordings made elsewhere – soundwalking practices revolve around the exploration of particular sites and contexts.

Material inquiry is not specific to artists working with environmental sound. There are numerous other cases of works that focus on how to expose or re-invent sonic matter and the mechanics of its generation. For instance, in Alvin Lucier's seminal *Music on a Long Thin Wire* composition collapses to the straightforward exposition of a simple physical phenomenon: a piano wire vibrating when an electrical oscillation runs through it. A series of historically important works of electroacoustic music, such as Bernard Parmegiani's *De Natura Sonorum* and David Tudor's *Neural Synthesis*, all revolve around the contingent output of audio-generating systems of various kinds and, thence, can be thought of in terms of material interrogation. Media-specific and media-dependent practices are bold cases of materialism in music and sound art, too; consider, for example, John Cage's *33 1/3*, where the audience is asked to select amongst hundreds of records and to interchange them using up to 12 simultaneously operating turntables, or Yasunao Tone's *Solo for Wounded CD*, where commercial CDs are damaged so that when played back the laser beam will jump at arbitrary locations scrambling their contents at the level of audio samples, or his *MP3 Deviations*, where corrupted MP3 files are used to trigger and playback audio samples at different speeds to produce unpredictable sounds.

Finally, consider my own *The Buchla Project* and *Marinos Koutsomichalis é stato eliminato*. Both projects revolve around a systematic and unconditional exploration of modular synthesis systems (a Buchla, in the first case, and a Serge, in the second), and in both cases I have attempted an all-inclusive material interrogation by means of trying out all sorts of (im)possible and uncanny configurations. My approach herein can be paralleled with what Andrew Pickering refers to as 'mangle', the cyclic process of a human prodding and probing some object in order to answer some question (Pickering 2010). Pickering argues that objects typically resist human inquiry and, in this way, the questions to be appropriated and modified so that new forms of resistance are uncovered. It is exactly upon such a resistance that some of the hidden facets of an object can be accessed – in Katherine Hayles's words: 'Resistance is crucial because, although objects cannot tell us what they are, they can tell us what they are not' (Hayles 2014: 169). In both of those projects, the synthesisers' resistance – which in this case is to be understood as the instruments' tendency to settle at already known or otherwise uninteresting (in my understanding) sounds – has been paramount in developing new strategies to interrogate the instruments.

All the works mentioned above zero in on the exploration of particular material/media contexts in very straightforward ways. In that sense, it can be argued that they intend to articulate ontological aspects of the material/media they revolve around, yet in non-discursive and not necessarily descriptive ways.

## 3. ANTI-OPTIMAL MUSIC, ANTI-INSTRUMENTS

In a number of disparate cases, the very act of listening is consciously hindered, questioned, or disrupted – be it in order to aestheticise notions that transcend first person phenomenological embodiment or to articulate anti-optimality of some sort. Consider for example Roc Jiménez de Cisneros's *hyperobject* series of compositions. According to Tim Morton, hyperobjects are

> objects so massively distributed in time and space as to transcend localization … They are difficult to observe … They outscale us and/or outlast us in disturbing ways, disrupting our notions of world, horizon and environment. (Morton quoted in Cisneros 2015)

As of this writing, Cisneros has published two *hyperobject* compositions, both having a duration of 62:18 and both characterised by aggressive repetitive or quasi-repetitive sounds so that listening to them in their entirety is at least challenging. The reference to Morton makes it explicit that Cisneros's intention is to aestheticise estrangement, disassociation, disengagement and other attributes that may characterise one's experience of hyperobjects, thus raising a concern for the latter in a rather meta-phenomenological fashion. *Hyperobjects* can be thought of as attempts to articulate in sonic terms speculative reasoning about materials or phenomena that are impossible to comprehend in merely phenomenological terms. Accordingly, in order to aestheticise what transcends the phenomenological, Cisneros attempts to out-perform our sensory apparatus with sonic patterns that are both hard to follow and largely unpleasant to listen to.

Similar in spirit is the famous *Longplayer* by Jem Finer, a piece which is to last about one thousand years and which is, thus, situated in the no-man's-land between the non-phenomenological and the speculative. According to Ikoniadou, *Longplayer* is

> simultaneously a numerical machine of precise calculation and an abstract machine of serene ambience;

absolute duration woven together with mathematical precision; and the concomitant precision of an event in which many things happen … and almost nothing emerges to perception. (Ikoniadou 2014: 8)

*Longplayer* both relies upon and is responsible for experiences of a meta-phenomenological kind, where what does not happen is equally, if not more, important that what does happen. In this way *Longplayer* allows audiences to peer into notions of time and, I believe, mortality in a rather visceral way, which is what distinguishes such an approach from a conceptually driven one. Both *hyperobjects* and *Longplayer* do not simply draw content upon extraneous contexts but, instead, incorporate, or at least intend to incorporate, those contexts into their very musical fabric. Indeed, Cisneros's *hyperobjects* are not *about* hyperobjects; they are, instead, meant *as* hyperobjects. In a similar fashion, *Longplayer* can be thought of both as an attempt to present, rather than re-present or describe, finitude and mortality, and as an apparatus that speculates about the very nature of time. However successfully both works may spawn experiences of a meta-phenomenological kind, they remain not (easily) listenable so that they also celebrate a certain kind of musical anti-optimality.

There are numerous cases of anti-optimality in music; for example, whenever some work is meant to be ignored, avoided, unwelcome or otherwise dysfunctional. Historically, such an anti-aestheticism was rather common among Futurists, Dadaists and Fluxus practitioners, and can be also traced in Eric Satie's 'furniture music', Brian Eno's 'ambient music', in conceptual art and, of course, in many cases of extreme electronic/electracoustic music. For example, Romain Perrot, a contemporary practitioner well known for his HNW (Harsh Noise Wall) performances under the moniker 'VOMIR', suggests an absolute anti-musicality when he describes the foci of his work as: 'no ideas, no change, no development, no entertainment, no remorse' (Batty 2010) or when he says that:

There is absolutely no message whatsoever in my work; I'm looking to provide no inspiration or encouragement in any direction at all. For me, HNW is a way of releasing something personal in myself in a way that negates the possible 'spiritual' development of music. (Williams 2014)

It is important to underscore that such a bold anti-musicality presupposes a concrete understanding of 'musicality'. It is arguable to what extent practices such as Perrot's are intended as dialectic oppositions to the latter, or as attempts to aestheticise, or to speculate about, traits that other kinds of music fail to account for. In both cases, nonetheless, the contextual dependency with 'standard' or 'ordinary' kinds of music (whatever these may be) is explicit when Perrot claims that his work 'negates the possible "spiritual" development of music'.

There have been many other cases of contemporary practitioners who successfully managed to aestheticise disembodiment, annoyance and estrangement, be it through aggressive noise music, as in the case of 'Japanoise' (Novak 2013) or through sustained generative (non-)rhythmical patterns, as with, for example, Mark Fell's *n-Dimensional Analysis* or *Action for sky dancers, generative rhythm and strobe*. In my understanding, the latter, albeit being a very intense and physically demanding work, is also a work meant to be boring. This brings in mind a series of attempts to theorise the (anti-)aesthetics of boredom and nonsense in experimental music (Priest 2013) as well as in a series of other arts, most notably cinema (Seo 2003) and photography (Narušytė 2010).

Much in the same way that works of Cisneros, Fell or Perrot question and disrupt musicality, a number of NIME (New Interfaces for Music Expression) research approaches question and disrupt the very notion of a musical instrument, thus celebrating anti-optimality of a different kind. Consider, for instance, 'infra instruments', that is, devices of restricted potential for interaction designed to enforce limited expressivity and hindrance (Bowers and Archer 2005). Infra instruments bring to mind John Richards's 'delegated performance': when DIY instruments are being made and played by non-experts so that a naïve, albeit authentic, approach to music can be established throughout (Richards 2013). Such kinds of practices profoundly question the hylomorphic model of the musical instrument as fixed means for expression, immediately raising questions of virtuosity, agency, material/technological affordances and (non-)intentionality. Consider also the case of 'ad hoc instruments', that is, instruments constructed in the course of interacting with them (Bowers and Villar 2006). Herein, instrument making, composition and performance all collapse into a monolithic process so that the musical instrument becomes the very composition and the intended aesthetics, rather than simply the means to realise/perform them.

## 4. HYBRID, DISTRIBUTED, REFLEXIVE AND META INTERFACES

While not necessarily introducing new contexts, telecommunication technologies and the internet have profoundly influenced music-making and distribution (Williamson and Cloonan 2007; Manovich 2009; Jones 2000). Amateur-driven music, in particular, has undergone dramatic shifts in both its sociological make-up and its means of production due to both the proliferation of music-making software and the emergence of a series of platforms enabling the distribution of UGC (User Generated Content) (Van Dijck 2009; Goriunova 2012: 89–110). While it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the

complexities of present-day amateur-driven music practices, it has to be underscored that they have both raised and advanced concerns of reflexivity in media interfaces, in this way playing an important role to the eventual formulation of certain DIWO approaches to composition. Consider, for example, the case of Nine Inch Nails' *Ghosts I–IV* project that has been realised in three phases: first, the band made a number of songs available exclusively through its website and encouraged all interested parties to remix and to redistribute them in a multitude of different formats; then, individuals would upload their own remixes to a special section in the band's website, listen to them and review each other's remixes, vote for their favourites, and so on; finally, a dedicated YouTube channel has been launched, so that individuals could also contribute their visual interpretations of the songs (Wikström 2009: 1–3). Apparently, *Ghosts I–IV* owes a lot to present-day amateur-driven music tradition and the UGC distribution practices.

*Ghosts I–IV* introduces a certain kind of meta-contextual dependency, since the original songs constitute the very context for third parties to creatively re-fashion and appropriate at will. In that sense, the project blurs the traditional opposition between listeners and composers. Blurring or eliminating this boundary is central to those DIWO approaches to composition that revolve around some explicit call for participation, be it for UGC (as in the case of *Ghosts I–IV*) or for production workshops (as in the practice of John Richards's, or my own). Such kinds of practices largely denounce the hylomorphic view of the artist as a maker/creator (Nahm 1956), or even as a supervisor of workers (Sera 1992), in favour of the cybernetic understanding of the artist as a node situated in a broader production hybrid – one which is no longer under the artist's direct control. Even if the artist is typically assigned more important responsibilities in such a hybrid (e.g. in the case of a workshop where s/he is also supposed to share some special know-how), their primarily role is neither to create, nor to supervise; s/he is rather expected to creatively engage and to interact with other human and non-human agents, in this way establishing ad hoc poetics. Such kinds of practices celebrate socially empowered and emergent aesthetics that are enacted on top of participatory schemata.

According to John Richards, in the case of DIWO workshops the true artwork is neither some artefact nor some final event, but, instead, the whole workshop experience that leads us there: audiences are not simply expected to witness or to survey art but are, instead, asked to participate in it – this necessarily accounts for a completely different type of phenomenological experience which spreads well beyond the limits of an artwork, or better, one that extends the artwork beyond a single artefact to become a 'living installation' (Richards 2013; see also Jo, Parkinson and Tanaka 2013). DIWO approaches of this kind can be, then, thought of as a 'meta' interface in that they essentially present a work to individuals primarily by means of having them (co-)create it. It can be then argued that such practices share common grounds with 'relational aesthetics' which also suggest the contextual dependency of the eventual artwork with broader social systems (Bourriaud et al. 2002).

Another important case of DIWO is that of the numerous laptop – or their successor, the mobile phone (Wang, Essl and Penttinen 2008) – orchestras in their various contingencies. According to Smith (2012: 1–2), works set in the networked domain largely follow either of two approaches: employing computers and network topologies as musical instruments or exploiting the unbounded social and telematic capacities of the former. Over the last decade laptop orchestras have been an experimental playground for exploring both of these slants as well as the unmapped territory between them, exploring what improvisation, agency, conduction and control may stand for in the context of network-driven music performance (Albert 2012; Smallwood et al. 2008; Smith 2012). Consider for example the case of *Electrode* where SLOrk (the Stanford Laptop Orchestra) and a series of dislocated guest artists employ EEG headsets to control digital sound synthesis. Or the case of PLOrk's (the Princeton Laptop Orchestra) *nets 0* where the orchestra members interactively train neural networks to build personalised (ad hoc) instruments using a series of controllers, in this way suggesting an 'on-the-fly learning' paradigm as a plausible way to both improvise within, as well as to conduct, a laptop orchestra (Fiebrink et al. 2009). On-the-fly learning, at least in the above case, hybridises and distributes the concept of the ad hoc instrument discussed in the previous section: instead of instruments constructed in the course of interacting with them, we are herein dealing with instruments (or other control schemata) that are dynamically created in the course of interacting with a broader network comprising both human and non-human agents that dynamically interact with one another in all sorts of complex ways. Laptop and mobile-phone orchestras, however, do neither foster nor presuppose audience participation – at least not in the majority of cases. Reflexivity herein is largely limited to the way the orchestra members interact with each other.

DIWO approaches largely tend to pragmatically explore the way humans (and non-humans) interact with one another within very concrete social contexts and production hybrids, rather than within some abstract symbolic space. In this way, what they eventually foreground is not that much an artefact or event but the socially empowered experience of its making. Up to a certain extent this is true both for laptop/mobile-phone orchestras, 'workshopping',

UGC-driven projects or (impromptu) artistic collectives – such as for example, the case of the Koumaria Residency (Medea Electronique 2013). It is of no surprise, then, that DIWO is very often relevant to community-driven practices, as in the case of the broader maker and open source movements (Kuznetsov and Paulos 2010; Tanenbaum et al. 2013; Hatch 2014). As I have argued elsewhere, there can also be important political/economical reverberations to DIWO, as, for example, in the case of Greece where a workshop culture seems to have emerged as an instinctive response to the financial austerity that has been imposed on the country the last few years (Koutsomichalis and Rodousakis 2015). More importantly, DIWO approaches, especially in the cases of 'workshopping' and UGC-driven practices, call for completely new kinds of audiences: ones that are willing to interconnect and, potentially, to collaborate with each other in order to actively engage with the production of art. Hartley has suggested that such kinds of audiences account for a completely different type of citizenship that follows a 'connect–collaborate–create' attitude (Hartley 2010).

## 5. EMERGENCE, TRANSIENCE AND THE POST-SELF

Up to a certain extent, DIWO suggests that teaching, creating, exploring, researching and collaborating with one another, as well as dynamically interacting with broad networks of materials and technologies, are inextricably interwoven at various levels of artistic production – from the conception of an idea to the specifics of its implementation. Such a schema brings in mind Bruno Latour's understanding of all media and artefacts as both the products and the parts of broader dynamic social networks (Latour 2007). It also suggests a certain kind of ad hoc aesthetics in that the very aesthetic foci of some project are forged in the course of implementing it and, more importantly, cannot be attributed to any particular end other than an entire DIWO ecosystem. Such ecosystems eventually exhibit cybernetic 'intentionality' of some sort – one that can no longer be understood in terms of their integrals alone. This can be more or less true whenever collective artistic creation and/or audience participation is at play, be it for a laptop/mobile-phone orchestra or for a workshop.

As an example, consider the case of *Damn Lab*, a workshop project that I led at the now obsolete 'Frown Tails' project space in Athens in 2011–12 and which eventually concluded in *DownTime: post-domestic fiction* – an interactive audio installation comprising various hacked (domestic) appliances (Koutsomichalis 2015: 22–4, 78–82). Therein, via extensive brainstorming, co-working and, of course, social interactions at a personal level, we managed, I believe, to establish and to articulate collectively an ad hoc

aesthetic intentionality – one that could not be extrapolated beforehand since we all experienced certain shifts in the course of interacting with one another, with technology and with various kinds of materials. Note that this can be easily corroborated, comparing *DownTime: post-domestic fiction* with the previous artistic output of the various Damn Lab participants, myself included. Consider also the case of ad hoc artistic collectives, such as the annual Koumaria Residency, where artists of disparate backgrounds are brought together (through an open-call) to create and to subsequently present new works of media art (Medea Electronique 2013). Similar processes are, of course, at play with all DIWO practices, and while they are not always sustained enough to cause the emergence of collective aesthetic intentionality, a certain element of adhocracy is almost always involved.

Ad hoc aesthetics can be better understood in terms of emergence, transience and post-selfhood. They are emergent in that they are only established with respect to hybrid social systems and their respective contexts and, hence, are specific to and dependent on them. More often than not, such contexts are fleeting and transitionary – as in the case of *DownTime: post-domestic fiction* or the Koumaria Residency. DIWO ecosystems typically exhibit their own initiatives, their own equilibria and their own aesthetics that are not necessarily approved or even understood by their members – much in the same way that a system may 'speak' fluent Chinese even if its individual constituents do not, as in Hutchins's elegant interpretation of Searle's famous 'Chinese Room' thought experiment (Hutchins 1995: 361–2). This means that individuals within DIWO hybrids are more often than not found in a transient stage, experiencing all sorts of shifts with respect to individual psychology, beliefs, thoughts patterns, technical expertise and, of course, according to the affordances of the materials and technologies at play. The overall schema suggests a certain kind of self-erasure within a broader being-in-a-system – a broader hybrid and distributed post-selfhood. While this is not relevant, of course, to all DIWO practices, it seems to be at play in several well-documented cases, such as the Koumaria Residency, *Damn Lab*, *5 dimensions* (*5 dimensions* 2009), or *We have a situation* series of participatory performances (*We have a situation* 2013), to name a few. Consider also the case of PLOrk's *nets 0*, where on-the-fly learning seems to suggest both aesthetic adhocracy and cybernetic post-selfhood of some sort.

Cybernetics and cognitive studies offer a series of useful metaphors that can help further contextualise the idea of post-selfhood. According to the theory of 'autopoiesis', self-consciousness and, implicitly, selfhood arises from recursive 'autopoietic' – that is, self-producing – processes (Maturana and Varela 1980). Further extending Minsky's modelling of

cognition as a complex ecosystem of discrete, semi-autonomous agents which collide and clash in various ways causing consciousness to arise as an epiphenomenon (Minsky 1986), Varela later proposed that there cannot be any kind of unified self – mind is to be understood as a necessarily dis-unified, heterogeneous collection of processes (Varela 1991). In a compositional context it is possible, I believe, to explain ad hoc aesthetics as emergent autopoietic processes which both sustain and requisite some kind of socially constructed, distributed and hybrid mind. It may be argued that there is a transcendental quality in the establishment of such a post-selfhood: individuality needs to collapse, or at least to retreat briefly, for a cybernetic whole to emerge and manifest independently. However, post-selfhood is not necessarily the result of some explicit quest for transcendence. It can be better understood, I believe, as a phenomenon of our times that owes a lot to the particular nature of contemporary media and to the particular affordances of contemporary societies.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As shown throughout this article, certain compositional practices cannot be accounted for solely by means of the traditional hylomorphic model which has governed occidental thought for centuries. As a matter of fact, contemporary trains of thought tend to denounce the traditional object–subject, human–matter and individual–society oppositions of the past in favour of all-inclusive, hybrid and network-driven schemata. Yet, while composition is necessarily dependent and interwoven with the materials, the methodologies, the technologies and the media traits it relies upon, this is not necessarily reflected back into the way practitioners think about music and sound art. However outdated certain assumptions may theoretically be, they still seem to pervade our understanding of how music and sound art is composed, distributed and eventually experienced. There is a series of disparate compositional paradigms, nevertheless, that seem to consciously advance context-dependency and adhocracy in many different respects. These include broader families of practices such as the various materialistic and anti-optimal approaches to music and sound art, as well as purely hypermedia approaches revolving around hybrid, interchangeable, reflexive and meta-interfaces. Throughout this article a number of such practices, with references to actual artistic projects, have been scrutinised, finally suggesting that context-dependent and ad hoc approaches to composition do challenge our fundamental assumptions on what music/sound art is and how audiences are expected to engage with it. Laptop orchestras have been shown to embody a series of similar concerns, albeit in a very different way. Indeed,

works such as *Electrode* and *nets 0* do celebrate hybridity, DIWO, decentralised improvisation and cybernetic (dis-)embodiment in very straightforward ways, yet it is arguable to what extend they favour non-hylomorphic reasoning. From a certain stance they seem to largely revolve around the same questions of technological prosthesis, expressivity, interaction and localisation as the more 'traditional' kinds of orchestras/ensembles they remediate do.

All in all, material inquiry, anti-optimality, emergence, transience and socially constructed post-selfhood have been shown to be valid compositional traits for contemporary artists and audiences to engage with. The exact ways in which such traits relate to each other, as well as to the still topical compositional practices of the past, is a prominent field for future research, as is the exploration of the largely unmapped and ungoverned territory between formal composition and web-powered (amateur-driven) participation.

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