Aesthetics of Turntable Art

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Abstract
This article explores the transitional and liminal nature of my work and examines the diverse theoretical foundations which inform my creative practice. The particular work discussed here, Wow&Flutter explores the intermedial relationships between that of ‘quotation’, ‘remediation’ and ‘plunderphonics’ within turntable art using acetate vinyl. This work was presented in the Irish Museum of Modern Art, (IMMA) and The National Concert Hall, Ireland, (NCH) between 2014 and 2018.

Introduction

The intermedial techniques have been utilised within visual arts for many years. Artists such as Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Roy Lichtenstein used remediation and appropriation for much of their work. Also, literary artists, William Burroughs and Brion Gysin used a similar technique, which they defined as cut-up and fold-in method [1]. Art historian Germano Celant wrote extensively regarding intermedial relationships between objects, particularly that of the turntable and record [2]. I contend that these methods of remediation originated with artist Marcel Duchamp and his concept of the ready-made, [3].

Plundered-sound has a complex character, in that it simultaneously questions authenticity, originality and plagiarism, while simultaneously it could also be defined as a sound event like any other. The use of digital audio sampling has been at the heart of many forms and genres of music for decades. The ongoing debate as to whether a work of art is original if sampling has been used is not an issue that concerns me here. I believe that through this borrowing, appropriation and manipulation of material, we can develop and evolve existing materials and shape these into new artistic expressions. The creation of any original work is a permutation and merging of disparate influences, from personal experiences to cultural backgrounds. As Bolter and Grusin best define it ‘all current media remEDIATE’[4].

Turntable Art

Phonographs, gramophones and turntables have been used throughout history not merely as a mediating device for the playback of music but also as electronic instruments, or as art objects in themselves [5]. As such, I believe they belong in this instance within the category of sound art. The following artists and their works have had a particular influence on my work involving turntables. The first known works using this medium are by Paul Hindemith and Ernst Toch in 1930, followed by John Cage’s landmark work Imaginary Landscapes No.1 [6]. The expressive qualities and interactive nature of the turntable also had a significant influence on the creation of musique concrète and were initially the primary mode of production for Pierre Schaeffer, and Pierre Henry in their seminal work Symphonie pour un Homme Seul [7]. Daphne Oram, a pioneer of musique concrète in Britain, created the highly original turntable work Still Point [8].
but this remained unheard for seventy years, until a contemporary turntablist, Shiva Feshareki, performed it with the London Contemporary Orchestra in 2016. Eliane Radigue also created works for turntable, I refer specifically to her work \( \Sigma = a = b = a + b \) [9]. Martin Tétreault is a free improviser and turntablist who has worked in this medium for many years [10]. Christian Marclay is also an excellent example of an artist who has moved seamlessly between the disciplines of music, installation and sound art. Russell Fergusson suggests that the majority of Marclay’s work is preoccupied with the concept of sound, yet the ‘overwhelming majority of his output makes no sound’ [11, p. 19]. His work with the medium of vinyl and record player, both as a performative instrument and as a sonic object, has direct bearing and influence on my vinyl pieces. I am interested in recognising the fleeting nature of the acetate medium, which is a delicate plastic that can only hold the sonic information for so long before it is eventually destroyed by the needle with which it interacts. This impermanence in relative contrast to digital technology was at the centre of both these works. For me, a record player is simultaneously a sound-emitting object, a musical instrument, and a sound art object. Artist Philip Jeck has also influenced my work with turntables. Jeck is a composer and multimedia artist primarily known for utilising turntables and old vinyl records, along with electronic processing devices within performance and installation settings. I was introduced to Jeck’s work while attending his Vinyl Requiem [12] sound installation in London. This remarkable large-scale installation used 180 record players, creating a wall of surging an ever-changing sound.

Repetition as Aesthetic

I use repetition, and more specifically, that of immediate ‘phrase’ repetition and the concept of ‘looping’ as an aesthetic device within my work. Chris Cutler notes repetition in music is a function of memory; it is a ‘creative reconstructive’ process delivered through the use of the loop as a ‘re-iteration’ of sound [13]. Most music employs some form of repetition, from the ‘stutter effects’ of electronic music [14]–[19], to the slow generative-variations of minimalism and ambient music of La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich and Brian Eno. Notably, Reich’s concept of process music [20] and Eno’s generative ideas [21] do have direct bearing and influence on many of my works. Another influence on my practice is Alvin Lucier, and particularly his piece I am sitting in a room [22]. I consider it to be the most elegant and uncomplicated piece of minimalist process music that demonstrates repetition, revealing the natural acoustic phenomena of ‘resonance’ through audio feedback. As Edward Strickland notes, ‘in its repetition, I am sitting in the room ranks with the finest achievements of minimal tape music’ [23, p. 199]. Repetition is a fundamental characteristic of all my work, although I do not create static loops that repeat linearly without change. Rather, I incorporate repetition of material as a type of evolving re-performance, or as Anne Danielson [24] terms it ‘a changing same’. This is demonstrated in the mechanical looping of my acetate turntable work Wow&Flutter. Here the printed repetitions on each plate are independent of each other, but when experienced as a whole, they become inseparable as the work evolves through slow repeated combinatorial cycles.

Sonic phenomena such as echo, delay and reverberation are all essentially time-based repeats of an original sound event, which are perceived as a type of impressionistic memory by the listener. When the transmission is of spoken word and processed in this manner, it can change the prevalent meaning, becoming almost musical, in a phenomenon known as ‘semantic satiation’ [25]. This simple act of repetition or ‘speech-to-song’ can make the most mundane spoken
phrase become almost ‘musicalised’, as noted by psychologist Diana Deutsch [26]. As each repeat gives way to the next, we are exposed to the micro-timing, articulation and the speaker’s pitch-inflections. This has the effect of making an everyday spoken-word radio broadcast acquire new contextual meaning. To illustrate the importance of repetition within music, cognitive scientist Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis [27] carried out an extensive empirical study of the aesthetic responses to repetition, which she claims it was preferred even within what is considered complex Western art music [28], [29].

A consequence of using repetition and generative principles within my work means that the installation projects are non-teleological and open artworks, the concept which is described at length by Umberto Eco in his book The Open Work [30]. I place the attribution of meaning with the participant instead of attempting to create a completed or finalised piece; in essence, the works are left open. For example, I will set up an environment where a process will begin, and the audience will essentially become a type of collaborator for the duration of their interaction with the piece. My work is not built around a programmatic narrative, with a beginning, middle and end. It does not involve grand gestures or musical climatic points, but rather it is durational, repetitive and non-teleological, and as such requires the participant to interact actively with it.

In many ways, it is a focused perceptual state I’m interested in achieving. I want the audience to experience and be aware of the sounds and how they develop; this is somewhat similar to the concept of deep listening by Pauline Oliveros [31]. So the idea of leaving a work open, means that even I, as the creator of this piece, would have a new experience every time I was exposed to it. In many ways, this echoes Eno’s principle of generative music, where he contends, ‘generative music is like trying to create a seed, as opposed to classical composition which is like trying to engineer a tree’ [32].

**Wow&Flutter**

*Wow&Flutter* is a site-determined spatial installation consisting of eight turntables that create a 360° sound-field. As mentioned previously, I consider the record-player to be an objet d’art in its own right, particularly the older version with the built-in speaker, which is the type I chose for this installation. I designed a sculpted-stand and lighting system to accompany each turntable, which enhanced the overall visual aesthetic of the installation.

The approach to designing the sonic elements was twofold. Firstly, I composed the material from the ground-up, using synthesis, recordings of acoustic instruments and voices. Secondly, I used methods of sampling to take a fully formed section of music and manipulating it to achieve the results I needed, primarily utilising the technique of plunderphonics as discussed previously, here is how each side was constructed for each plate. Four sections of audio for each side, ranging from original recordings to ‘plundered-sounds’, a small section can be hear here [33].

Tracklisting for Side A:

1. Recording of an upright piano
2. Sample from the track ‘things’...and after Optimism by amusement [34]
3. Processed Waldorf Pulse bass synthesiser
4. Sample from *Collage #1 (Blue Suede)* by James Tenney [35]

Tracklisting for Side B:

1. Children’s spoken words ‘wow’ – ‘flutter’
2. Sample from ‘Part 3’ *Metal Machine Music* by Lou Reed [36]
3. Sample from ‘Überfahrt’ from the album 3 by Pole [37]
4. Sample from ‘Tjatrick’ by Java the Jasmine Gamelan Music [38]

Side A: There is a purposely long silent gap at the beginning of each side and also left between each track, so that the audience can experience the acetate slowly ‘scratching,’ ‘popping’, and ‘crackling’ – sounds which become progressively louder with each play. I included a sample of Tenney’s ‘plundered’ version of Elvis Presley’s interpretation of the original Carl Perkins track from 1955. However, I would consider it unrecognisable in this instance. The gesture is tongue-in-cheek but also acts as a signpost to my recognition and acknowledgement to what is considered to be the first plunderphonic artwork [39].

Side B: Has more percussive and transient material; the intent here was that either side could be played and would complement the other. This side starts with children’s voices saying the words ‘wow’ and ‘flutter’ and relates to the concept of *semantic satiation*. The material here is self-referential, and the fact that it is two children speaking gives the work a sense of playfulness and lightness that could not be achieved with an adult voice. This slowly fades into a sample from a track by the artist Pole. This sample is again an appropriation of the artist who sampled from a dance hall reggae record, King Tubby’s *Herbal Dub* [40]. Tonally, its inclusion pulled the work into a more rhythmic area. The final section is a percussive track of gamelan music. I cut the sample into a very rhythmic 5:4 time signature, as the development of the accents would be fascinating within the turntable octet. The rationale for choosing and working with all of these specific materials is based on wanting variation in the timbral and harmonic content. Also, somewhat humorously, I wanted my work to sit side-by-side with artists I highly respect. The fact that the majority of the sampled material is highly processed and unrecognisable is also a deliberate aesthetic choice. This could be said to be an extension of the plunderphonic principal, rather than the purest representation of the artform as illustrated by the art collective Negativland [41]. Structurally there were three overarching aesthetic principals at play within *Wow&Flutter*:

I. Turntable as an instrument and sound art object.
II. The concept of phase-shifting as a generative compositional tool.
III. The disintegration of the surface material as an aesthetic.

Essentially, each turntable contains a duplicate acetate plate, and it is the asynchronous interaction of the record players over time that creates the generative aspect. In an attempt to eliminate the division between artist and audience, I emphasised and exploited the interactive nature of the turntable, as I believe they inherently invite tactile use. Primarily, I intended to create a responsive and reactive environment, albeit a playful one. Acetate is a very soft plastic medium that coats a metal plate, which, when held, is surprisingly heavy. I wanted participants to feel, touch, and experience acetate both as a sound carrying medium and as an object in its own right.
The installation was designed with this audience interaction in mind. If a participant wanted to change the speed of a turntable from 45rpm to 33rpm, they could do so. It would pitch shift by approximately a fourth, so it would still be consonant within the overall work. I used some rudimentary mathematics. When designing the piece that enabled me to understand how each turntable would interact in terms of pitch shift. The equation used was: \( n = 12 \times \frac{\log (f2/f1)}{\log (2)} \), where \( n \) is the number of semitones from original to new frequency. Equation: 33.33 to 45 rpm \( n = 12 \times \frac{\log(45/33.33)}{\log(2)} = 5.20 \) (semitones, rounded up). Importantly this meant I could better understand the interaction of each section prior to the final print. The technique of phase shifting, in which two or more identical musical patterns are played simultaneously but at slightly different speeds, was expanded upon further by using eight turntables playing asynchronously. My point of departure was in the exploitation of the inherent characteristics of acetate as the medium, which is tangible, malleable, but also very fragile, which imparted a singular uniqueness to this installation. The fact that the work is interactive, performative, and could also be viewed as a sculptural object, distinguishes my work from many other artists working with turntables. In this instance, the turntable is both a piece of visual art and a haptic instrument. It is corporeal, in the sense that the stylus, the record, and the participant are entwined into a physical relationship which engenders the discovery of new perceptual sonic experiences.

*Wow&Flutter* exploits the innate sonic characteristics of acetate vinyl. One particular attribute of an acetate record is the fact that the sonic material is bound to the physical object, albeit in stasis, and the degeneration of the plastic occurs in real-time, as the turntable needles scratch out the groove. This disintegration of the object is at the centre of this work. Surface noise gradually appears, and the sonic quality of the original work slowly disappears, becoming almost a palimpsest, similar in principle to Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* [42]. I use acetate as it disintegrates more rapidly than standard vinyl and therefore the printed material ages with each successive play until the surface noise itself has become intertwined with the printed audio. Eventually, the original recordings that were on the acetate almost disappear under the surface noise, ultimately turning the work into an accelerated aged piece. In a world in which digital accuracy and clarity is everything, I want to make people aware of these temporal idiosyncrasies and imperfections of a beautiful legacy medium such as acetate. Finally, I believe my point of departure for this work is my novel use of acetate vinyl coupled with the techniques of plundered-sound, repetition and spatialization. In a world in which digital accuracy and clarity is everything, I want to make people aware of these temporal idiosyncrasies and imperfections of a beautiful legacy medium such as acetate.
Figure 1 – Wow & Flutter, National Concert Hall, Dublin. (© Jimmy Eadie)

Figure 2 – Detail from Wow & Flutter, Irish Museum of Modern Art. (© Jimmy Eadie)

References and Notes


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