Curating Experience: composition as cultural technology - a conversation

Dr Claudia Molitor & Dr Thor Magnusson

Department of Music, City, University of London, UK

Department of Music, Sussex University, Brighton, UK

Claudia Molitor: Claudia.Molitor@city.ac.uk

Thor Magnusson: T.Magnusson@sussex.ac.uk

Claudia Molitor is a composer, artist and improviser whose work hovers between music and sound art, extending across contemporary art practices, including video and installation. Embracing collaboration as compositional practice is central to much of her practice. Recent larger scale work includes *Sonorama*, a work for a train journey, with Electra Productions and Turner Contemporary, which received a British Composer Award in 2016; *The Singing Bridge*, installed at Somerset House during Totally Thames festival; and *Walking with Partch* for Ensemble MusikFabric at hcmf//. She is the co-founder/director of multi.modal records and Senior Lecturer at City, University of London. www.claudiamolitor.org

Thor Magnusson is a Professor in Future Music at the University of Sussex and a Research Professor at the Iceland University of the Arts. His work focusses on the impact digital technologies have on musical creativity and practice, explored through software development, composition and performance. He is the co-founder of ixi audio (www.ixi-audio.net), and has developed audio software, systems of generative music composition, written computer music tutorials and created two musical live coding environments. He has taught workshops in creative music coding and sound installations, and given presentations, performances and visiting lectures at diverse art institutions, conservatories, and universities internationally. Thor is currently running an ERC Consolidator grant called "Intelligent Instruments" where the research is on our human perception of intelligent musical instruments, embedded with machine learing and other AI. Further information here: http://thormagnusson.github.io

Curating Experience: composition as cultural technology - a conversation

This conversation between Thor Magnusson and Claudia Molitor introduces the idea of composition as cultural technology, where compositions are understood as systems that create spaces within which 'things' can occur and can be explored. In this conception of composition, the composer becomes the curator of an experience for an audience, shifting the focus of the work on the encounter of the audience. Talking about some of Molitor's pieces from the last decade the discussion explores how these ideas can manifest in compositional practice.

Thor Magnusson: Music has always been about the performance whole, in time and space, but with the advent of phonography and its commercialisation only a century ago, music is robbed of its situation, its situatedness, and we suddenly get a view of music as something static inscribed onto a medium. It becomes sound-only, and we accept it because of the precedence of the musical score and its materiality. Today we accept music in the form of streamed music, often listened to in mono Bluetooth speakers. However, at the same time, contemporary composers are creating work that reaches far beyond the sound-only, where performance, instruments, sculpture, theatre, etc. all become anchors of the music, an integral part of the audience experience. Your work is exemplary of this, but can you describe your extramusical influences and how they play a role in your work. Also, how do you feel about documentation, sound recording, releasing your music as sound only?

Claudia Molitor: Yes, for me music is never just about the sound and my work incorporates all kinds of elements that are on the surface considered to be unrelated to music. But even though we can conceptualize streamed music as sound-only, the experience of listening to this sound-only format is never purely sonic. In the act of listening we still engage in other sensory experiences, even if it is only proprioception as we lounge listening on the sofa. Once you begin to think of sound as a multi sensorial experience nothing needs necessarily be extramusical. And this is the way these other

aspects, that are considered extramusical, find their way into my work quite naturally. For me the medium of a piece, the way it will manifest, suggests itself during the process of making it. So it could become a work with film, choreography, sculpture, but it could also turn out to be a sound-file only. There is a great amount of artistic freedom in embracing a variety of technologies in your compositional practice.

In terms of composition, technology is often considered simply in terms of providing a tool to the compositional act. Although, surprisingly not a great deal has been written about the role of the pencil and staff paper in notated music, for example, how using notation software might shape musical language, or how the DAW's way of presenting in colourful uniform blocks, visually presenting sound as neat, delineated packages of sonic data, might influence compositional decisions, habits and processes. Or indeed how the concert hall or the use of headphone listening makes composers think of a particular listening condition when composing, inevitably shaping their work.

I do not think of composition as *using* technology – as if the act of composing is something separate from technology, or could indeed exist beyond technology – but that composition is in fact a human cultural technology and individual pieces of composition are framed systems that explore "stuff", predominantly from a sonic perspective, that seem relevant at any given time in any given space.

Composition as cultural technology is an exciting notion. In his work, Latour demonstrates the social aspect of technology, that technological objects can have politics, whether it is a key or a speed bump. Your comment does though relate to the Latour collaborator Akrich's idea of anti-program, how musicians might reject the script of the technology given to them as creative individuals. What kind of technology is the composition? Is it the score, offering interpretations, or the piece as performed? Perhaps both?

To call composition cultural technology might sound like a big claim, but I come to that way of thinking by focussing on the process of, and maybe also the reasons for, composition rather than the "products" of composition. Firstly, I understand culture as

something that emerges from collective activity, and composing is a collective activity.[1] When we use the word technology, we often think that it has something to do with engineering, something non-human, even anti-human, or something not natural. But if we take ourselves back to the origins of the word, to the Greek *tekhnē*, meaning art/craft, then we can consider technology as a way of thinking through making. Tim Ingold, in his beautiful book *Making*, tells us that we learn through making with others and in relation to our environment. We start to understand our environment, our fellow humans, ourselves, through making.[2] And I think this is what much art, including composition does, it thinks through making and by doing so with and alongside others contributes to culture. Composition, like culture and technology, exists before any individual composer is born or decides to contribute their work to this ongoing cultural technology.

So, when I refer to composition as cultural technology, I am thinking of the human endeavour of composing, not the individual composed piece. The individual composed piece is, as I mentioned an exploratory framed system within this cultural technology. As a starting point to understand a piece of music in this way I would suggest a rethinking of the way we consider the relationship of compositions that use notated scores and the instruments that interpret these scores. Notated scores for an analogue instrument are often thought of as quasi-scripts that are executed by that instrument.[3] But we could also understand a composition as an articulation of that instrument, or in turn the instrument as a compositional proposition. This then suggests that we could propose that the practice of composing is the practice of framing spaces for instrumental exploration. Composing is then not so much an act of *using* an instrument (or any other technology) as a tool, but rather it is itself a technology of framing, of organising sonic activity. And if we understand such a technology to be a system that allows us to

---

[1] Even if we imagine a composition situation where there is one composer writing a score and then handing it to performers. Even then the composer will be already embedded in a culture that articulates sonic ideas in certain ways, and will respond to this in their own way. And of course the score still needs to be played and the sound listened to.

[2] Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, Routledge: London and New York, 2013

[3] Of course they are very often much more prescriptive than a script for a theatre play, though sometimes they are much more open, in the case of some graphic scores for example.

explore ideas and ultimately communicate these with each other, then we can think of compositions as 'systems that create spaces within which things can occur'.

Koray has just interrupted our interview and asked about the notion of cultural technology, prompting us to define the terms culture and technology. It would be interesting to reflect upon how technology is always culturally embedded, yet taking on a form that shapes culture, often in ways that were not intended in the design. He also asks about the role of digital technology here. Digital technology in your work. Does the qualifier "digital" even make sense anymore?

Yes absolutely, culture and technology are pretty impossible to disentangle or define separately, like time and space! As you say technology is always culturally embedded and cultural endeavours are mostly also technological endeavours, the two go hand-in-hand. And as for "digital" I cannot truly say that I experience an analogue-digital divide in the process of making work. After all I might be recording the analogue cello on a digital recording device, then work with it in logic and maybe eventually press it on vinyl. I am not saying that there is not or cannot be a distinction, but for me digital technology has always been there to some extent so that I feel equally at home with a DAW and a pencil. And I do not really make a conceptual distinction between the two in terms of digital and analogue, though I might make other distinction, such as in terms of the haptic experience for example.

I agree with this idea that composition is increasingly becoming a system in which the composer, the performer or the listener explore potential avenues of investigation and interpretation. My book Sonic Writing[4] explored how we are moving from composing works to inventing systems, with a stress on the shift in the verb from "composing" to "inventing," and here with reference to the idea of invention in classical rhetorics. But I'm interested in your idea of space, can you describe how a musical piece takes spatial properties?

---

[4] Thor Magnusson, *Sonic Writing: Technologies of Material, Symbolic and Signal Inscriptions*, Bloomsbury: London and New York, 2019

The 'space' that I refer to here is both spatial, temporal and conceptual. Music of course unfolds in time and space, but the reason I believe we tend to focus more on the temporal aspect of music and often do not consider the physical space of music is because we mostly contain music either in a venue, in our homes, in our headphones. And then, when we do talk about the space of the music in a concert hall, for example, we talk about the acoustics of the room, therefore conceptually connecting the sonic space that is created with the room rather than the music. This is of course not so much the case in sound art practices, where the spatial aspects of sound are often central to a piece of work. I would argue that spatial considerations in music should be equally central, and my own work sits somewhere in between these two constructs—music and sound art—I say constructs, because I do not believe there necessarily needs to be a gap between what we might call music and what might be considered sound art, but that is a whole different discussion!

The 'space' is also conceptual in the sense that a composition could interrogate an idea, whether that be a purely sonic/musical one or a socio-political one. And in this understanding of the compositional space the composer is not so much the author of a pre-determined sonic entity, but rather becomes the curator of a system within which sono-cultural narratives are encountered by the participants.[5] Furthermore, this understanding of composition affords great creative freedom, as it allows for this expanded compositional space as well as acknowledges the sensory, situated realities and possibilities of compositional practice.

What this way of conceiving of composition affords is firstly a shifting of the focus from the self-contained work to the curated experience. An experience that takes place in time and space as well as in the sensory perception of the participants. Composing then is not a process towards a final fixed outcome that is finished before an audience encounters it, but rather a process of creating an experience for an audience, which is not finished until that encounter occurs. And, of course, this encounter can occur many times and can live on in people's memories and stories. No piece of music is finished, not even those we think of as fixed. Every time it is encountered by fresh ears or

---

[5] I understand participants here to mean both performers and audiences.

encountered again with ears who have heard it before, the piece continues to change its meaning for the individual and therefore within culture. Another consequence of thinking of composition in this way is that it encourages a greater focus on the physical space of the curated experience. And this then can lead to compositional practices that may encourage a relational connection to spaces and places. Finally, it exhorts greater collaborative methods in the developing of these curated experiences.

Inventing a system or curating an experience. We seem to be working with metaphors of space and time. Experience always unfolds in time. I remember you telling me about your parents being architects and how you see music as a place to enter into and explore. But how does this work with time, how do you see this connection in your work? Is space more the composition and time about the experience of it? Or is the composition about time in your works?

You are absolutely right, experiences always unfold in time, and always in space too. I would not want to separate the two, as they are so intimately linked that it would not make any sense to attempt such a separation. Architecture is a good example here. One can think of buildings as a collection of material, its walls, its ceilings, its staircases, in relation, or one can think of these materials framing spaces that humans navigate. So much, so obvious, but what is often not articulated is that these buildings also frame time, because humans dwell in them over time. I was always intrigued at the care my parents would take to talk with their clients, to find out how they lived their lives, not only how they moved through space, but also where they spent their time in that space. And they would design the space with this temporality of living in mind. So in the case of architecture we think of spacing things, but this spacing has also to do with the temporal aspect of navigating that space. And in music the equivalent of architectural spacing could be considered to be pacing, which is understood as a temporal aspect of music. But it is equally a spatial one. After all, pacing is about manipulating the time sound is given to resonate in space. In my work I am not trying to separate space-time but rather I intend to foreground the spatial aspects of music.

Another aspect of time and space in the process of composing is that the act of composing takes place in and over time and space, and the experience for a listener unfolds in and at a different time and space. A piece that collapsed, not literally but

conceptually, compositional, filmic, editing, rehearsal and practicing time into the performance is the piano piece *You touched the twinkle on the helix of my ear*.[6] The echoes of these different temporalities describe the interrelationships that exist between the haptic realities of composing, filming, recording, practicing, performing that all look towards manifesting in the future in a moment where a piece's ideas are shared with a listener. The piece audio-visually explores the interplay between performing, notating and sounding and is conceived as a contemplative dialogue between the present pianist and the absent composer, each 'haunting' each other's creative space. Another example of this is my *Remember Me*, where the space and time it takes place in are not simply the inevitable background within which the piece is experienced, but they become central to the narrative of the piece.

What is *Remember Me* about? How come you use your desk in a musical composition? Is the desk a score? An instrument? It is like you are discovering the piece through performing it, the operation of cutting through the paper, but that performance looks like composition on its own. The distinction becomes blurry.

Ah, well… I am never too keen to say exactly what a piece is about, because then I might steer the listener into a particular direction. Of course, *Remember Me* has very specific meaning to me, but I intend there to be enough room for the audience to bring their own thoughts, experiences, memories to bare on their understanding of it. But let me give you a flavour of the work. In *Remember Me* the audience first encounters a short film as they enter the performance space. I then guide them to a small group of chairs (it could only have a maximum of 20 audience members) where they see a büro-desk onto which another film is projected. Eventually the büro-desk opens to reveal a space that over the course of the piece becomes the quasi stage on which the narrative takes place. This narrative is certainly not a blow-by-blow account of a story, but rather a collection of related sonic, visual, taste and olfactory[7] moments.

---

[6] http://www.claudiamolitor.org/#/you-touched-the-twinkle-on-the-helix-of-my-ear/
[7] I serve each member of the audience a piece of rose Turkish delight during a section halt-way through the piece, which is about 50 minutes long, that is a nod to the convention of the ritual of the interval.

Remember Me is in essence a continuous process of revealing itself and in that way the desk takes on the role of a score, an instrument and the performance space. The second film in the piece for example is a process of cutting paper until a score is revealed. At one point during the performance, actions on the desk are amplified by a pic-up mic wrapped around my finger. Eventually the desk opens to become the stage on to which different object emerge from drawers, a story is told about the friendship between Dido and Euridice. Both women are fed up with their respective existence, Dido as her job in life seems to be simply to pine after Aeneas who gets to roam around the world having adventures, Euridice because she has to sit in the underworld because Orpheus could not help himself to look. Finally, a drawer is opened to reveal the orchestra pit. In that way, although the narrative elements are unconventional, the sense of gathering more and more information as the story unfolds is actually a very traditional story telling experience. The way we make sense of the world and of who we are in relation to that world is by telling ourselves stories. Naturally when we think of storytelling we mainly think in terms of spoken and written language, but our experience of the world is of course much more than only a linguistic one, and so we find other sensorial ways of telling each other stories about what it is to be human. In order to do this we make use of two things, technologies and systems. Technologies in the sense of pencils, instruments, DAWs, cameras, and systems that allow us to frame these stories, such as drawings, compositions, installations, films. These systems create internally logical worlds, without necessarily having to adhere to the real world, and in so doing they are free to explore, reflect upon and challenge aspects of our existence.

Link to film 2 of *Remember Me:*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yREMAZls_F0&feature=emb_logo

Nice, I get how the piece is navigated and explored. But what about narrative, intensity, energy? How does a music like that build and progress?

Let me come back to the idea of *curating* in relation to composing here. Curating to me is an activity of imagining the sequence of encounters an audience experiences whilst moving through time and space. In terms of the conventional gallery setting, to which we most often attach this word, this means hanging paintings/images in a particular sequence for the audience to walk past. The art is "static", the audience moves through space/time. In terms of the conventional concert setting, to which we rarely attach this word, this would mean performing pieces in a particular sequence for the audience to sit through. The audience is "static", the music moves through time/space. For me, it is this sense of curating, of considering a sequence of events or moments, that creates a *narrative*[8] experience for an audience. But to curate also suggests a sense of creating a

---

[8] Not necessarily in a beginning, middle, end sense – thought obviously it can be that too – but rather in the sense of 'relating something to someone'

space into which the composer/performer invites the audience and within which they encounter each other.[9] Considering the etymology of curate, from Latin *curare* "to take care of", it also calls upon the composer to be thoughtful of the experience of the audience in this encounter. And as I just mentioned, in *Remember Me* I quite literally invite the audience into a space where they dwelled with me for 50 minutes in an experience that has some internal logic, even if it is not conventionally narrated.

The format of your musical scores are always quite intriguing, innovative and aesthetic at the same time. Could you describe how you see the role of the musical score in your work. They seem to be at times artworks on their own, and even objects used directly in performance. Can the score exist as an end in itself as an aesthetic object?

Yes, absolutely it can. For me the score is an incredibly flexible medium that has the ability to communicate sonic ideas to an instrumental performer, but can also communicate ideas directly to an audience. And that is what draws me to return again and again to the score to explore its possibilities. *no-where land* for example is an installed score, that in its gallery setting is not accompanied by sound or interpreted by performers, though of course it could absolutely be interpreted, I would have not issue with that. *no-where land* is a response to the growing anti-immigrant sentiment that has reared its ugly head over the past few years. As a bi-lingual, bi-national person, whose cultural DNA is migratory, this is a desperately depressing and dangerous situation. What is human culture if not an age old collaboration between people from every corner of this earth, who bring their varied experiences and thoughts to inspire and enrich each other?

---

[9] The choice of venue, the lighting, the interval drinks, the programme notes, the set-up of chairs and instruments, all of this can play a part in creating such a space.

Link to *no-where land* walkthrough video: https://vimeo.com/391229911

I can see how your pieces are written as systems that offer exploration and interpretation, but how do you consider the role of the performer or listener? Do you write precise instructions with your pieces or is it all open? If the latter, have you had experiences of extremely good or bad interpretations? And who judges that anyway, can you?

Every piece is different, but *You touched the twinkle on the helix of my ear* which was created for and with the pianist Zubin Kanga is perhaps a good example of one way of working. The piece consists of a film, pre-recorded material and a score. At times in the film you see me notating music to which Zubin then responds to. In the pre-record you also hear me playing the piano at times, as if shadowing the live piano sounds. The score is a combination of instructions of how/when to follow the notation/images on the film, some precisely notated moments, and some openings for improvisation. Before the work was finalised Zubin and I met on various occasions to talk through the ideas. So the role of the performer in this case is firstly a very particular person who was part of

the conception of the piece, and in terms of performing the piece the performer is the live collaborator with me as the mediated collaborator (through film, pre-record, score) in the creation of the piece. The listener is the reason for the actuality of the piece, it is in their listening that the piece exists. For me, a work is not complete, even one that exists as a 'sound-only' file on my laptop, where I have been the only person involved in its making, until someone who is not me is listening. In this conception of composition as a curated propositional system, where the listening by an audience actuates the work, I cannot know what the work might be to each human's individual, idiosyncratic experience.

All musicians are of course interested in the reception of their work, but how does this affect you when the experience can be so different depending on the specific performance or situated context? Do you try to gather a general understanding or conclusion of the piece or does it still live freely to be defined?

Compositions, even those that look very much like a 'work', are inevitably an embodied and personal experience because the experiencing entity is a human being. Thinking of composition as creating a curated system is not so much a break with the past, but allows for a greater focus on this reality. Take *The Singing Bridge* for example. This is a headphone piece to listen to when walking along and around Waterloo Bridge. It is a fascinating structure for many reasons, though the fact it was built by a predominantly female workforce, a history that has, unfortunately not surprisingly, been pretty much ignored, was particularly important to my conception of the work. But bridges in general have a special place in our imagination which is explored in a spoken interlude in the piece. Furthermore, the physical experience of walking over Waterloo Bridge is to me one of the great spectacles of London. Walking towards the magnificent National Theatre and Southbank Complex delights in its architectural ambition. Standing on the bridge allows one of the few un-interrupted views in the city without climbing upwards. In the work I do share the things that fascinate me about this bridge, but I also conceived the work to open up a little pocket of stillness for the listener—to take them temporarily out of the pounding urban environment. Maybe to re-connect them to the *non-space* of one of London's bridges, but more importantly to offer a space and time to reflect on their relationship to and experience of this urban environment. This will inevitably mean different things to different people. When it was installed and we asked

for feedback there was one comment by a young child in the form of a little drawing of the bridge with a gull flying over it, another person wrote that they had crossed this bridge for 40 years to go to work and had never thought about it until they experienced this work. Both of these reactions to the work are very personal and to me wonderful. I imagine that during the recent lockdown if someone downloaded the piece and walked over a near deserted bridge and Southbank area the piece would have taken on a very different meaning to that person, one that I could have never predicted!

Thanks Claudia. It has been wonderful to learn more about your ideas as a composer. Did I forget to ask you a question that you might want to talk about? What would you ask yourself if you could?

Thank you for asking Thor, it was very interesting to think through these ideas with you! I have one question for you if I may? Some of your work might be described as sound-only, as not involving any extramusical aspects, as it emanates directly out of speakers. It is evident from our conversation that I would not agree with this description of your music, but I would like to hear how you think about your work in this respect.

Ok, I'll try to be brief. I do all kind of musicking but a large part of my research relates to computer music performance, including live coding and the use of AI in music. These can be (or seem) quite disembodied and cerebral activities, but the interesting thing with live coding is its strong intervention to all conventions and understandings of musical practice. Are we composing or performing? Building an instrument or playing it? Is it solipsistic or social? Etc. But there we are, bodies on stage typing music into a computer, and the audience watches the score, in the form of code, on the screen behind us. The code becomes the performative body, in the form of dancing letters on the screen. In my Threnoscope system, I visualise the sound and there is a graphic animated score that defines the music. I understand this as an audiovisual system, where the visuals are integral to the performance.

I also collaborate with other performers and perform in some ensembles. This is always improvisation, perhaps with some maps defining the musical landscape we will navigate, but not the routes we take. Those are the results of interaction, of

body language, of learned embodied semiotics that we find in all music, but are highly personal and developed as a language in a group dynamic. For example, I was playing the guitar with my mates in Reykjavik the other day, a hard core improvisation resulting in some psychedelic stoner metal jazz, but here body language is very important in shaping the development of the piece: are the drummer's eyes closed, as he's in the zone, or is he eying us to build up the next transformation? Does that bassist look bored or are we going deeper into some musical valleys? This is communication outside sound, through gestures, but these are not theatrical (as in Kagel). And when this is augmented with the behaviour of the audience, the specifics of the acoustic space, the ecology on the stage and beyond, this all becomes about much more than the sound itself. Which becomes so apparent when we subsequently listen to the sound recordings of the sessions. Whilst they might be good, they never capture nearly all the magic that happened. I think post-pandemic musical practice will help us to realise the magnetism of time and space and shared experience, much like you have talked about in our conversation here above. So whilst I very much enjoyed watching your streamed piece at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival yesterday night, I am very much looking forward to attend a concert of your music in a physical social space dedicated to musical practice.

Oh absolutely, I cannot wait to go to a live gig again! But I agree, we have had to rethink a lot of our practice during lockdown, when we were not able to do the things we are drawn to and that are so important to us in our musicking activities. During this year's spring, when we had a strict lockdown in the UK I instigated a project called *Hausmusik Kollektiv*.[10] This project is a collection of one page scores that can be contemplated or performed at home, some on their own and some together, through video conferencing technology. The pieces are also accessible to non-musicians, as most of the scores do not require musical knowledge or access to any music instruments. *Hausmusik Kollektiv* used the digital possibilities to connect with each other in order to disseminate work that could be created individually in any person's

---

[10] http://www.claudiamolitor.org/#/hausmusik-kollektiv/

home. In effect making someone engaging with it a performer and an audience member in their own personal live event. This project in a very simple way touches on much we have just been discussing: it is curatorial, collective, collaborative, collapses analogue and digital technologies and is site-specific, though obviously no one who made a pieces for it knows what space and time their work might be realised.