Now I'm Digital, Where Is My Ritual?

Exploring Postdigital Performance Objects as Totems for Agency and Ritual

NEAL SPOWAGE

ABSTRACT

The author argues that significant aspects of electronic music performance have been diminished in the rush to incorporate the latest, often discreet (as in intentionally unobtrusive) technologies. He identifies these aspects as agency, ritual and, to a lesser extent, serendipity and mess. Using references to his own work, he suggests that applying an understanding of how actors create totems to present agency and affordance is essential to regain, and possibly acclimate, these tools and practices so they are relevant to live electronic music performance practice in a contemporary technology environment.

There is a phrase that often comes to my wandering mind: "Rituals are disappearing from live electronic music practice as a direct result of the convenience offered by digital devices." In this context, I am defining *ritual* using Bruce Lincoln's fundamental descriptor of religious rituals, which asserts that they are activities that convey "the sense of reconnecting things, beings, and spheres of existence that once were close but somehow have come to be distant" [1]. Rituals pervade aspects of human life beyond religion and usually involve a physical object; in the context of music performance, they often focus on the instrument, manifesting as maintaining, cleaning, modifying, assembling and warming up with the instrument. They also apply to bespoke system setups, although many of these systems and instruments exist as virtual digital objects. This latter sphere of existence is where I have observed these rituals becoming less prominent over many years. This is not to say rituals or totems have not developed in new virtual digital spaces; however, I am arguing that their effectiveness has been greatly reduced, because of the loss of agency and affordance upon which rituals and totems are historically reliant. I speak from my perspective as an early-career academic, post-punk musician, self-proclaimed subversive technologist, self-proclaimed antiestablishment

Neal Spowage (artist, musician, deviser and maker), Music, Technology and Innovation Institute for Sonic Creativity, The Clephan Building, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester, U.K., LE1 9BH. Email: nspowage@dmu.ac.uk.

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thinker and critic of the early technology adopter. Everett Rogers describes the latter (which I was once) as a person who is often one of the first in their social group to adopt a new technology idea or object [2]. I perceive this loss of ritual in certain industry-oriented, financially valued, technology-heavy programs within the U.K. academic network with which I am familiar. The imposition of an internal market model based on modern capitalism [3] has encouraged institutions to expand financially lucrative degree programs (often in science and technology) while bearing down on those of perceived low economic value to society (often in the arts and humanities) [4]. This policy continues in the U.K., even though evidence from the Centre for Economics and Business Research shows that funding the arts delivers a major economic contribution to society [5]. Trends such as the "quantified self" describe a growing tendency to numerically measure multiple aspects of one's life with technology [6]. One could speculate that the quantified self is a digital replacement for some analog rituals, but being numeric and virtual is ultimately unsatisfactory because the practices I am highlighting cannot currently be satisfactorily described or measured using numbers in any environment. These trends indicate a high level of "techno-positivism," a term Heather-Jane Robertson used to describe an uncritical faith in new technology [7]; in 1996, Theodore Roszak described a similar "compulsory enthusiasm in which every report on the Net and the Web comes wrapped" [8]. Florian Cramer outlines responses to these phenomena in his article "What Is 'Post-Digital'?" [9], where he describes how recent fashions are railing against new technology and harking back to a past when agency was more apparent and the self was less quantifiable.

Here it would be prudent to present a definition of *agency*. In "The Third Sense of Environment" [10], Edward Baggs and Anthony Chemero use the German word *umwelt* to describe an environment as perceived and experienced by a particular living animal, or in this instance, an actor. Agency develops when an actor conceives affordance in an object that they

Fig. 1. *The Boot*, an absurd wearable electronic instrument made from assemblage of a boot, a black stapler painted red attached to the sole, a power coil and a lampshade, 2017. It generates sound by detecting electromagnetic fields that disrupt the operation of a simple built-in oscillator. (© Neal Spowage)

have created; or when an actor perceives affordance in an object that they have encountered. Until the object is used, this affordance is perceived by the actor alone and only exists in their *umwelt*. When the actor uses the object to complete a task or deliver a concept, they are mapping their perceived affordance onto the object. This action consolidates the object, the affordance and the task, and this consolidation is perceived as agency to the actor and to any observers of the actor's *umwelt*. When no actors or actions are present, there is no agency, because agency is implied and perceived, not inherent. The status of the object as an agent is dependent on the object creator, the actor and *umwelt*. Anything and anyone can be an agent dependent on perceiver mode, context and goal of the actor.

Returning to Cramer's description of a modern response to techno-positivism, he uses, as an example, a derogatory meme showing a hipster who has taken their typewriter to the park to write, in an apparent act of Luddite rebellion against agency-free modern technology. However, an image of the same person taken from a different angle reveals a poster attached to the lid of the typewriter that advertises the writer's unique *story writing while-you-wait* service and a Twitter address for promotion and donations. This final reveal by Cramer shows the act of the hipster to be a creative postdigital blend of old and new technology. The hipster trend is not unique and is arguably late in responding to the lack of agency offered by new technologies; Donald Norman expressed similar frustrations in his 1988 book *The Design of Everyday Things* [11]. He outlined difficulty in using the multifunction technology of the time, including video recorders, digital watches, car stereos and corporate telephone systems, due to their rows of identical buttons and small displays that gave minimal feedback to the user with little instructional value.

Current postdigital methods could be perceived as a disorderly blended-technology *umwelt*, whose scope reaches beyond the discipline of computer music that is the environment encompassing Kim Cascone's arguments [12]. I incorporate a disorderly blended-technology *umwelt* in my practice to better understand the effect of agency in performance. I design, build and compose with junk-based sculptural electronic musical instruments (Fig. 1) and realize sound-based works for them in collaborations, using the disciplines of dance, video art and performance art (Fig. 2). I have noticed that in my own recent practice I have rarely used the latest discreet technology for live performance and have instead worked mainly with physical objects and older technology with strong agency. I have, in the past, arbitrarily considered that my avoidance of the latest technology is due to its high cost, susceptibility to fashion trends and unreliability. Upon reflection, it also appears that I have tried to find a balance between the convenience of unreliable newer technology and artist-led creative need for reliability and agency using older technology. In my desire to achieve this balance, I refuse to recognize the concept of obsolescence, because I consider all technology to be useful at any time in its life cycle. I argue that the loss of agency to discreet systems constitutes a major loss of control for the artist and therefore loss of communication and interaction with the audience. This has been a critical event in the creative timeline, and the agencies of invasive objects must be retained or recovered as a conduit with which to present and receive ideas, be it maker-object, performer-object or audience-object.

Fig. 2. Video still from a performance of *Cold Papaya* (2013) that incorporated the *Speaker Bra and Shovel* instrument. Choreographer/dancer Danai Pappa and I devised the piece collaboratively; it is based upon our intimate creative relationship and shaped by the perceived affordance and applied agency of the two-part instrument. (© Neal Spowage)

THE RITUAL OF SUPER-ENCOUNTERING FOR TOTEMS

I recognize that the ritual and totemic values of objects are attributes that are complementary to their agency and are crucial to the creative process in terms that relate to my practice of combining objects and artifacts into assemblages in a DIY electronics culture and performing with these sculptures using devised composition.

My assemblages are made from numerous individual found and made objects and artifacts, which could be described as evocative, after Sherry Turkle [13], and when put together are intended to create a Gestalt whole. Like elements of a totem, each of these component parts contains information from their maker/designer that changes when placed in the context of the assemblage. This information can relate to gender, original design or artistic purpose, corporate identity or personal character and style dependent on the origins of the object. Once assembled, these parts develop new meanings, and the completed instruments have weight, mass, physical size and ingrained artistic intent, and they make electronic sound/noise. All these aspects invade the space of the user and the audience and are intrinsic to the creation of an *umwelt* that has potential for complex and engaging interactions.

When I search for materials for my instruments, I find that my activities and processes become almost ritualistic, encountering and preparing useful junk objects in a similar manner to that described by Jeff Ferrell, who documented a year of his life living out of dumpsters [14].

There is a behavior that can help people understand these apparently high-level scavenging activities; it is called *super-encountering*; as discussed by Sanda Erdelez, super encounterers "encounter information on a regular basis and perceive it as an important element of their information acquisition." She noted, "My research identified that immediately before encountering information users may be in 'information acquisition mood,' e.g., in active search for some other information or in some other way primed to receive information" [15]. I relate Erdelez's information acquisition mood to my personal experience of searching for materials.

EVERYTHING WILL BECOME AN ARTIFACT, THEN EVENTUALLY A TOTEM

When physical objects or artifacts are used in rituals, affordance and agency are required to make reconnections. These objects—sometimes homemade craft objects or older technology such as a vinyl record or a teapot, and often containing history, ingrained cultural meaning and instruction—give a meaningful level of control and direction to participants in the ritual. Similar concepts apply to my practice when I use found objects to assemble my instruments.

According to Chris Gosden, an artifact can be anything that is not the landscape. He defines it as "mobile material culture which moves across the landscape, linking or dividing social groups" [16], and I suspect that my sculptural instruments are, according to Gosden's anthropological elucidation, "artefact assemblages" [17].

There are two types of space that I have experienced and I think are relevant to this discourse, both of which contain artifacts of their previous use; artifacts relating to Space Type A, the state a room was left in by the previous occupant, or artifacts relating to Space Type B, discarded objects in an abandoned ruin that represent a long history of use and occupation. The visual appearance of Space Type A could be characterized by misplaced furniture in a living room, a poorly reset recording studio or a dirty floor in a dance space, and the visual appearance of Space Type B could be represented by a derelict building, abandoned shopping trolleys or scattered fixtures once part of the building's original use. These are signs of ongoing human activity, and these two examples are only differentiated by timescale. Human activity in Space Type A can be measured in minutes, hours and days, whereas activity in Space Type B can be measured in years and decades.

I refer here not to managed historical sites but to places either currently in use as working spaces or abandoned by mainstream society. They are the type of places that I would usurp for a performance, and in this article I will concentrate on Space Type B, which Tim Edensor describes as "dis-ordered and messy sites" in his book *Industrial Ruins* [18]. These spaces may have had many uses throughout their history, such as squats, hideaways, party venues, clandestine storage, adventure playgrounds or loitering, and they are littered with evidence of these activities. This is the flotsam, jetsam and detritus of modern society and it gives an artist much inspiration when gleaning materials or using them as a performance space, especially if that performer/artist has tendencies toward super-encountering. These spaces are messy creative bricolage ecosystems that have a different geography and precepts to the ordered spaces of contemporary towns and cities. An artist could interact creatively with one of these spaces to use it as their instrument by collaborating with the ghosts of previous occupants that manifest in the artifacts they leave behind.

I have produced and documented a performance in one of these disordered spaces, namely a disused cooling tower with all internal structures removed, located in Willington, Derbyshire, U.K. The assemblage I used was a dragging instrument called *The Beast* (Fig. 3), a convex dome attached to a chain containing an array of small speakers. On the underside were piezo contact microphones that allowed the instrument to amplify the sound of itself being dragged. I called the piece *New Track of Unknown Terra II* [19]. A critical part of my preparation for this performance was "getting to know the space," which took the form of a reconnaissance expedition in which I explored all towers on the site for aesthetic impact, threw debris for percussive effect and shouted extended vocal noises into the reverberant spaces (Fig. 4).

I assembled a crew and returned four months after the reconnaissance expedition to film myself dragging *The Beast* around the site, but the preparation rituals were not over. As we were setting up, a short, heavy, unexpected hailstorm dampened everybody's mood and distracted us from the task ahead. To restore our spirits, we reconnected to the space with an improvisation session [20]. The combination of sound and movement acclimatized our aural faculty to the

Fig. 3. *The Beast*, chain, vacuum-formed acrylic, three DIY amplifiers, reclaimed speaker cones, springs, 2014. This dragged instrument amplifies the sound generated by its contact with various surfaces. (© Neal Spowage)


Fig. 4. Reconnaissance at Willington cooling towers with camera operator, August 2014. (© Neal Spowage)

acoustics of the space and reconnected the crew members with each other, restoring our enthusiasm. The improvisation was ritualistic because we were "re-connecting things, beings and spheres of existence" [21] that had become distant due to the storm.

I am also writing this on the premise that the affordances of my many instruments are fluid, as perceived through their characteristics as artifact assemblages. They are tools that have been used to devise performances; however, before the performances were devised, they were artworks in their own right. Before they were artworks, they were disordered artifacts, waiting to be gleaned by someone like me from disordered spaces. Before they were disordered artifacts, they were artifacts with a different context. It is sometimes difficult to be sure of the artifacts' origins, as the precise history of individual objects can never be truly known [22]. Their status as agents changes over time depending on their use, and they may have played a small part in the creation of other artifacts; indeed, archaeologists and museums use databases that allow for artifacts to have multiple fluid contexts [23].

For example, the plaster bust that I used as a vacuum form mold to create my *Speaker Bra* instrument [24] is now the display stand and an artifact in its own right (Fig. 5). The
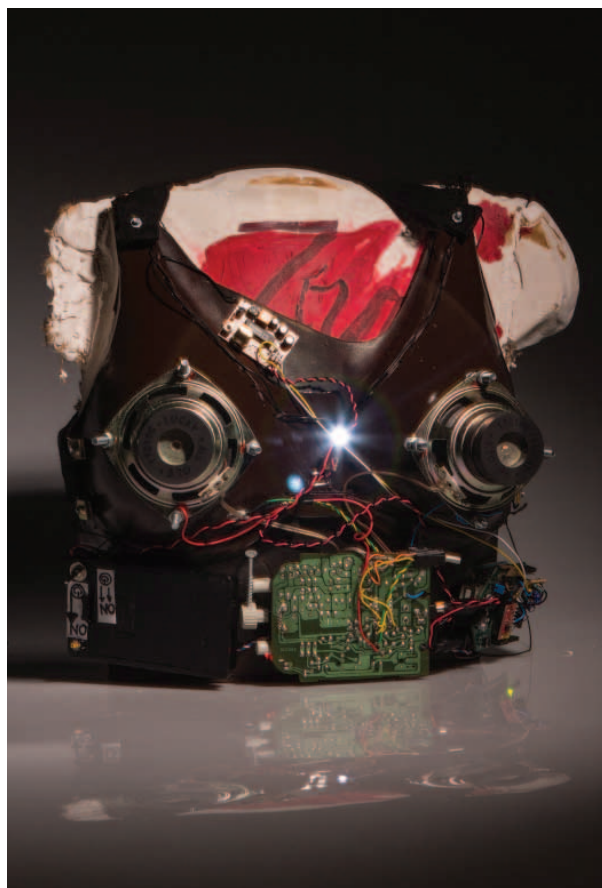
Fig. 5. The *Speaker Bra* with plaster mold being used as a display mount, vacuum-formed acrylic, leather, reclaimed amplifier and speakers, Arduino Pulse Width Modulation remote control, miscellaneous electronics, 2013. (© Neal Spowage)

Speaker Bra is made from artifacts and may not have taken its current form had I been unable to glean the appropriate materials, including the speaker cones, leather scraps and the amplifier circuit. This ties the instrument to the history of its component parts and the personality of the maker, which imposes affordance and the seeds of human agency onto the assemblage.

CONCLUSION

When they are appropriately assembled and employed, objects and artifacts can become successful instruments that are the totem and agent; it then follows that the ritual becomes the making process and final performance. Totemism, agency and the process of ritual anchor the instrument to the composition and the space. Mess forms the space and serendipity provides a method for acting within that space. It is seemingly unlikely that the techno-positivist approach, which I am convinced lacks strength in the anchors of totemism, agency and ritual, can contribute greatly to this area

of live performance, because it is overly concerned with the notion of control and accuracy, the antithesis of serendipity and mess.

The agency connecting the totem and the ritual is fluid. The totems inform ritual and the rituals are agents and actors. The instruments are totems and agents within the performance. The performance spaces can be totems, agents and instruments. At the end of the creative process, the actor will have played every role. To assist in understanding these statements, I have mapped Lincoln's definition of ritual to agents in parentheses: repetition (is habit); mental preparedness (is information acquisition mood); the ability to connect things (is super-encountering); makers, performers and audience (are beings); and creative bricolage ecosystems (are *umwelt*).

New discreet digital technology, with its weaknesses in the areas of totemism, agency, ritual, mess and serendipity, is still a long way from providing the tools and environments traditionally supplied by older, physically invasive technology for creative endeavor.

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NEAL SPOWAGE *is an artist, musician and academic based in Leicester, U.K.*