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Operations and Institutions

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Abstract

This paper looks at two artists, Brian Eno and Cory Arcangel, and how they engage in performing the systems in which their work are derived from and situated in. The systems they engage with in their art, ranging from compositional/computing algorithms to heuristic operations, connect with various other systems – capitalism, communication, and culture.

Eno's theoretical underpinnings of Ambient music is explored in its relation to the efficiencies and effects of generative art and experimental music, specifically how they expand on notions of organization, labour, and productivity. Arcangel's new media practice, which can be seen as an extension of Eno's work, represents a contemporary practice capable of initiating a non-paranoid paradigm.

Through both artists' works, the dissertation shows how they perform institutional critique by moving away from being *institutionalized* (i.e. co-opted) by their very systems, and instead *instituting* (i.e. beginning) gestures (that are not merely subversive but productive).

Contents

Ambient music and axis thinking	3
Institutions and organizations	5
Productive noise – The Scratch Orchestra	6
Continuous Partial Awareness	8
Altering consciousness and extending the ambient	9
Performing the system	10
Exploiting the system	12
Multiplicities and possibilities	14
Conclusion	15

Ambient music and axis thinking

In addition to his work as a musician (solo and collaborative), record producer (David Bowie, Talking Heads, U2, Coldplay), and visual artist (generative art), Brian Eno is a thinker. Most widely known as the ‘father of ambient music’ for a series of records he released in the Seventies and Eighties, ambient music illustrates how processes and products engineered by Eno are often underpinned by concepts.

In 1996 Eno released a diary he kept in 1995, *A Year with Swollen Appendices*, consisting of reflections on his professional and personal lives. In the diary, he writes about axis thinking, a form of contemplation involving spatial dimensions. “Axis thinking is a name for a continuum of possibilities between two extreme positions: so the axis between black and white is a scale of greys.”¹ It is “an attempt to locate and conceptualize the newly acknowledged grey-scale positions.”²

Ambient music epitomizes the notion of axis thinking, and Eno’s definition of ambient music is playfully ambivalent. “I like it as an ambiguous term. It gives me a certain latitude. [Ambient music] has two main meanings. One is the idea of music that allows you any listening position in relation to it. ... music that can be background or foreground or anywhere. ... The other meaning is more pronounced on *On Land*: creating an ambience, a sense of place that complements and alters your environment. Both meanings are contained in the word ‘ambient’.”³

The concept of ambient music is best summarized in the liner notes of Eno’s album *Music for Airports*, where he writes, “Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in

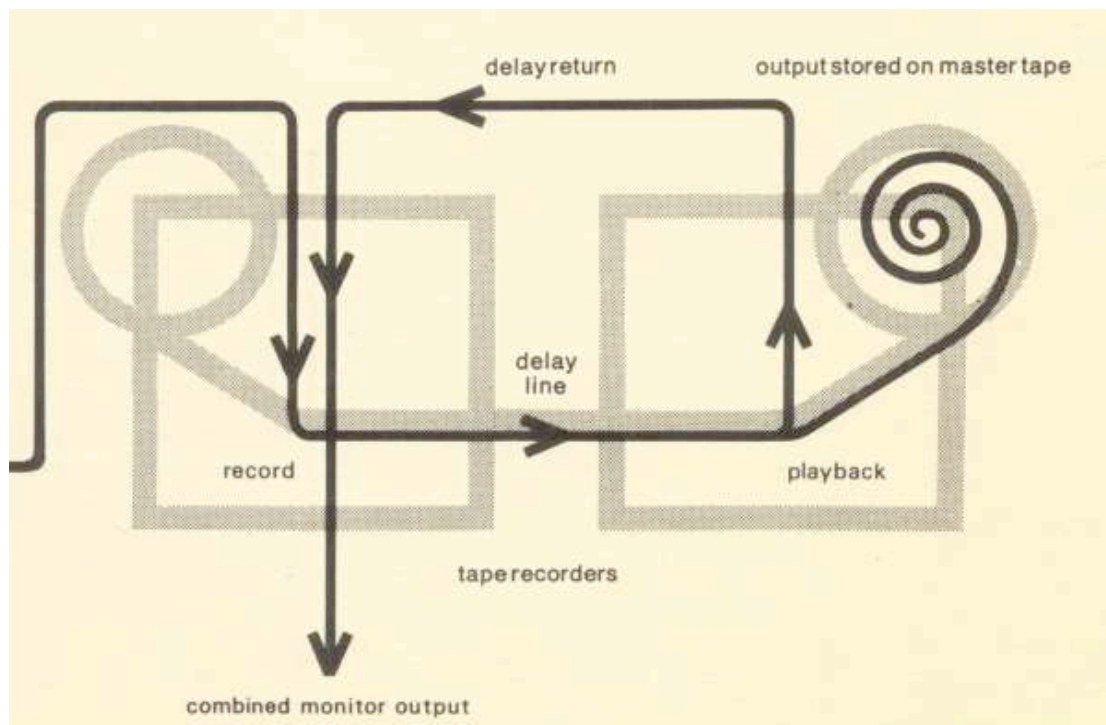
¹ Brian Eno, *A Year with Swollen Appendices* (London, Faber and Faber, 1996) p. 298.

² *Ibid.*, p. 300.

³ Brian Eno, “Against Interpretation” interview with Steven Grant in *Trouser Press*, Aug 1982 <http://music.hyperreal.org/artists/brian_eno/interviews/trouper82a.html> (28 Aug 2009).

particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting.”⁴ The significance of ambient music lies therefore in how it introduces possible shifts in focuses: texture as opposed to melody; stillness in addition to movement; music heard in its own right and as part of the environment; music of the foreground and music of the background. Ambient music thus serves as a platform for transvaluative potentials⁵ to emerge, where the possibilities of reversing foreground/background and voluntary/involuntary attention are played out.

In his first ambient album *Discreet Music* (1975), Brian Eno relied on sets of instructions to produce generative music. In the liner notes he writes about his gravitation towards “situations and systems that, once set into operation, could create music with little or no intervention on my part. That is to say, I tend towards the roles of the planner and programmer, and then become an audience to the results.”⁶



Tape delay system of “Discreet Music”

⁴ Eno, *A Year with Swollen Appendices* p. 296.

⁵ Transvaluative qualities are qualities that can be perceived as both sides of the same coin, e.g. what appears as confidence to some may appear as arrogance to others.

⁶ Brian Eno, *Discreet Music* inlay (London, EG Records Ltd., 1975).

On the title track, a generative composition is realized via technology. The piece, in which Eno deliberately limited his participation, starts from a synthesizer fed through a tape delay system.⁷ The delayed signal is then recorded onto the master output. On the second half of the album, Johann Pachelbel's "Canon in D Major" is performed through three variations via a set of instructions given to the orchestra.⁸

Institutions and Organizations

In his essay "Private Lives, Public Gestures 2", Jan Verwoert builds on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's idea of non-paranoid reading and proffers two meanings of 'institute' with regards to art and politics. The first version is that of 'instituted', where works and gestures are incorporated as part of the system; the second is to do with 'instituting', in which processes are initiated and point towards new directions. If the past tense of 'instituted' suggests a state where things cannot be changed, then the present continuous tense in 'instituting' confers a sense of action and hope.

The system set up by Eno in *Discreet Music* is a practical manifestation of his thoughts on organization, which focuses on the notion of productivity – how one can make music with only a set of instructions. *Discreet Music* thus relates to Verwoert's essay in how it plays out the notion of production and institution, of initiating work through a mere gesture.

Besides *Discreet Music*, Eno's essay "Generating and Organizing Variety in the Arts" elaborates on the notion of organization and productivity. "A musical score is a statement about organization; it is a set of devices for organizing behaviour toward producing sounds."⁹ Eno then elaborates on how classical music constitutes a system of organization. "A traditional orchestra is a ranked pyramidal hierarchy of the same kind as armies that existed contemporary to it. The hierarchy of rank is in this pattern: conductor, leader of the orchestra;

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Eno, *A Year with Swollen Appendices* p. 333.

section principals; section subprincipals; and finally, rank-and-file members.”¹⁰ Orchestral ranking, which parallels military ranking, serves three purposes: it assigns “varying degrees of responsibility [and] behaviour ... , creates ‘focus’ and ‘point of view’ [and] predicates the use of trained musicians.”¹¹

Against classical orchestras, Eno introduces experimental music as a contrasting system. On one hand the classical orchestra is akin to a military organization – its devotion to the score (strategy), deference to the conductor (commander), and prescribed instrumentation (weapons) – where there is little room for deviation. On the other hand, the open form of experimental music – Eno uses Cornelius Cardew’s Scratch Orchestra as an example – represents a liberal constitution. The drawback of the classical orchestra is that it suppresses variety, and in terms of biology, has a lower adaptive fitness due to its inflexibility. Experimental music is however not rigidly defined vis-à-vis a Fordist division of labour; it is more flexible, generates variety, responds to emergent situations, and hence more adaptable as a system.

Eno then goes on to apply the notion of axis thinking on classical music and experimental music. On one end there is classical music, which employs what is known as an algorithm, “a comprehensive set of instructions for reaching a known goal.”¹² On the other there is experimental music, which employs heuristics, i.e. “a set of instructions searching out for an unknown goal by exploration, which continuously or repeatedly evaluates progress according to some known criterion.”¹³

Productive noise – The Scratch Orchestra

Cornelius Cardew’s *The Great Learning* (1971), performed by the Scratch Orchestra, can be read as a significant alternative political framework. In *The Great Learning*, singers are given simple instructions on how to perform the

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 334.

¹² Ibid., p. 342.

¹³ Ibid., p. 343.

piece, e.g. “choose a note that you can hear being sung by a colleague.”¹⁴ The participants (*anyone* can participate) are given the liberty to make decisions on the spot, and the piece thus functions as an example of self-organisation. Cardew’s work is important on two counts: it performs and works as a scale model of democracy within the field of music. In addition, it unveils (or unmutes) the hidden productivities in what we see as amateurishness or chaos, putting them to use.

The simple instructions in *The Great Learning* serve as a source of intrigue for Eno for one particular reason – the instructions, despite being relatively simple, yield rather similar results repeatedly. This seems counter-intuitive because a loosely defined composition is open to interpretation and subject to many arbitrary decisions of the individual performers. Eno eventually concludes that certain hidden elements control the outcome of the piece, and he attempts to uncover these hidden resources, which he believes can be harnessed as productive elements.¹⁵

The Scratch Orchestra serves as a representation of how noise – in the form of amateurism – is introduced into a system. It also depicts the convergence of industrial and cultural labour, a phenomenon that signifies the mechanization of humans. What the Scratch Orchestra seeks to generate then is the notion of positive, intentional noise. The discomfort a listener hears from the inadequate performances is in fact the sound of an orchestra testing the limits of music – to legitimize noise as an acceptable term of musical vocabulary is to refuse professionalism and make professionalism unnecessary as a goal of music. Harnessing weakness as strength, and privileging unskilled over skilled labour, this anti-orchestra does not merely parody established modes of production. It performs instances where artistic production is intertwined with, but not enslaved by, industrial production. What Eno does in his study of the Scratch Orchestra is in fact to nominate a case study of labour that is politically progressive, with his act of nomination a gesture of inauguration/institution.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Continuous Partial Awareness

The concepts of ambient and systems may also be understood through Cory Arcangel, whose practice highlights the relations of art and music with their respective industries. Having majored in electronic music composition with minors in computer science and classical guitar at Oberlin Conservatory, Arcangel's output traverses the fields of music, new media, and conceptual art. Like Eno, Arcangel's work performs and criticises the various systems that work comes into contact with.

Continuous Partial Awareness is an ongoing project in which Arcangel writes a list of observations and actions to be realised as artworks. Much like a to-do checklist, one finds amongst the entries: "My neighbors' wind chimes are tuned to the same exact notes as 50 Cent's 'Wanksta', so sometimes I hear 'Wanksta' on windy days." Also, "The sound my TV makes when it is turning on and off is in the same exact key as Hall and Oates' 'Man Eater'."¹⁶

Arcangel's work relates very much to one of Eno's Diary entries about where one works as an artist – inside or outside the work, i.e. whether one focuses on the formalistic aspects of a work, as opposed to the context or environment that it is presented. Arcangel is not the author of the sounds of the wind chimes or television, but by simply perceiving and pointing them out – another case of institution – he provides a framework for these concepts to materialize into an artwork.

¹⁶ Cory Arcangel, "Continuous Partial Awareness" (2008-09) in *Cory Archangel's Internet Portfolio Website and Portal*.
<http://www.beigerecords.com/cory/Things_I_Made/uploads/Main/5_Stars.pdf> (28 Aug 2009).

Altering consciousness and extending the ambient

One of Cory Arcangel's (as yet unrealized) items on *Continuous Partial Awareness* can be read as an attempt to extend the productivity of Eno's ambient music. Utilizing a tenet of ambient itself – to alter consciousness in an unannounced way so that its effect on the listener is barely noticeable – Arcangel proposes to “Modify a museum audio tour by making it just a little bit slower, ... not slow enough so people notice, but just so they get mega bored.”¹⁷ The work is made functional through dysfunction, and surfaces via imperceptibility. Unlike Eno's albums, which listeners purchase with an awareness of Brand Eno, Arcangel's audio guide would be a clandestine event that makes no announcement of itself as either work or concept.

The tampering of a museum audio guide can be seen as a hacker activity, and its effect echoes, but differs from, Nicolas Bourriaud's analysis of Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) in its engagement with the mundane, where the force of an artwork derives from its display. Bourriaud writes, “The readymade achieves its maximum power only when displayed, that is when registered by museum and camera, the museum system functioning as recording room and thereby ratifying, in Duchamp's terms, the ‘absolute contradiction’ that is its very essence.”¹⁸ Arcangel's idea is not a readymade in the strictest sense, although the retarded audio guide is predicated on a preexisting product of labour. Yet they are similar in spirit through their penetration of the museum system, deriving their meaning from this particular correlation.

To slow down an audio tour is also to lower the pitch of the voice. The detunement of the voice brings to mind the *détournement* (a punning coincidence) adopted by the Situationists in relation to the Surrealists. In *The Radicant*, Bourriaud's translators note that “The term *détournement* is difficult to translate; used in connection with the Situationist movement, the word's closest

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, trans. James Gussen & Lili Porten (New York, Lukas & Sternberg, 2009) p. 148.

English equivalents include 'hijacking,' 'rerouting,' 'misappropriation,' 'distortion,' and 'derailment'.¹⁹

It appears that the detuned audio guide encompasses all definitions of *détournement*: hijacking and misappropriating the original audio guide by distorting the voice, and derailing the visitor from the course of the audio guide should she discard it, hence rerouting the visitor's walking experience.

The act of slowing down an audio tour is noteworthy in itself. Reducing the speed of playback and extending the experience of time – these are literal consequences that can be read metaphorically in relation to ambient music. If altering consciousness is the essence of ambient music, Arcangel shows how this strategy could backfire at the same time – that a listener can become mega bored. Thus Arcangel's idea extends the reach of ambient music by utilising malfunction in a productive manner, turning ambient into a genre capable of double productivities – both when it works and when it does not.

Performing the system

Arcangel's museum audio guide is but one of his several works that illustrate the workings of a system through participating in it – in this case a museum, which can be seen as a self-sufficient organization, and the art industry that a museum is plugged into. The slow audio guide, which could drive the listener away from the content produced by the museum, aspires to undermine the museum as an authority on its subject – the metaphorical removal of its voice literally hinders the orientation and navigation of the museum. As the connection with the audience is lost through the disrupted audio guide, one can interpret Arcangel's intervention as a form of emancipative gesture, for without it, one does not realise that the audience is in fact called into being – i.e. produced as a subject – through the system of the museum (and technology).

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 150.

One of the points that Tom Holert makes in his essay “Performing the System” is how the criterion for interpreting art has moved from sensibility to subjectivity. “While in the ‘60s there was talk of a ‘new sensibility,’ the very concept of ‘sensibility’ (as a culturally coded attitude toward the world) has now been superseded by the concept of ‘subjectivity.’ Societal processes are now – thanks to Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri – more adequately described as processes of subject formation. One important reason for this change is that subjectivity has become capitalism’s most important market. The production of identities and emotional states has superseded the production of products.”²⁰ Holert’s observation of capitalism identifies subject formation as the key to consumption. In advertisements, companies invoke the audience’s aspirational desires with promises of making us harder, better, faster, stronger – or fitter, happier, more productive.

Earlier in the essay when the notion of transvaluative potentials was elaborated, and when Muzak’s Stimulus Progression was introduced, the interpellative²¹ powers of music had already been foreshadowed. Ambient music connects sensibility and subjectivity by bringing into relief one’s awareness of her listening. Although it allows for listeners to shift between positions in relation to the music, it already *presumes*, and in so doing, *prescribes* that the listener shall inhabit these positions. In this way, ambient music illustrates the interpellative powers of music – it is not a case of us playing the music; it is the music calling us into being (i.e. the music playing us), the music assigning us a position.

Instead of being a subject of advertisements, the audience engaging with Arcangel’s museum guide would be fed with information on art – knowledge of commercial products is substituted by knowledge on art. In both cases the audience is conjured as a subject of the voice. Whether one is subject to

²⁰ Tom Holert, “Performing the System”, in *Artforum* (Oct 2004)
<http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_2_43/ai_n6258588/?tag=content;col1> (28 Aug 2009).

²¹ Interpellation is the transformation of concrete individuals into subjects by ideology, which can be imagined through the act of hailing “hey, you there!” – Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” (1970) in *On Ideology* (London, Verso, 2007) p.44-51.

commercials by watching television or putting on earphones for the museum guide, the tacit contract between the subject and technology is that the subject shall no longer interact with the rest of her surroundings or other people once she is in the zone of engagement. To consume information is in fact to be consumed by information. By listening to the television or headphone, the subject gives up on her right to free speech.

In “Performing the System”, Holert’s central question is how pop art walks a fine line between being critical and hypocritical – e.g. the practice of culture jamming uses the vocabulary and strategies of global capitalism against itself, but is this a subversive or reinforcing gesture? In coining the term ‘ambient music’ – and I am using Eno’s concept of axis thinking here – Eno stands on the cusp between a theorist introducing a concept and a marketer selling a brand. So the question emerges: is it possible to criticise the system that one is embedded in using the operations and semiotics of the system itself? Cory Arcangel’s *Punk Rock 101* may provide some ways forward.

Exploiting the System

Cory Arcangel’s *Punk Rock 101* (2006) takes the form of “a webpage which paired Kurt Cobain’s suicide letter with Google Ads (Google ads are generated from the text of the page they appear on).”²² The work draws on celebrity culture via the interface of music and public relations, enacting a capitalistic process by making transparent its operation. Kurt Cobain,²³ a Gen X figure made famous by the media in the Nineties and right at the end of the pre-Internet age, is thus recalibrated as a virtual presence in the Internet Age. It is almost as though Arcangel has resurrected Cobain and profited from a trace of Cobain, tapping into rock mythology, a world where fact and fiction bleed into each other.

²² Cory Arcangel, “Punk Rock 101” (2006) in *Cory Arcangel’s Internet Portfolio Website and Portal* <http://www.beigerecords.com/cory/Things_I_Made/PunkRock101> (28 Aug 2009).

²³ Lead singer, guitarist, and songwriter of grunge band Nirvana, one of the biggest rock groups of the Nineties. Cobain committed suicide at age twenty-seven at the height of Nirvana’s fame.

In his suicide letter, Cobain wrote, “The worst crime I can think of would be to rip people off by faking it and pretending as if I’m having 100% fun.”²⁴ Even as Cobain’s suicide was in part prompted by the pressures of the media, and against Cobain’s fears of ‘selling out’, Arcangel returns Cobain where he rightfully belongs to (and can never escape from) – the media and capitalism. The simple pairing of Cobain’s suicide letter and the world’s most famous search engine demonstrates the feedback loop of Cobain being endlessly informed by his dual identities – a public icon and a private person. But the crude, insensitive pairing of the Cobain letter and Google Ads shows exactly how ‘intelligent’ Ad Sense is – that a computer is intelligent enough to work out what ads to post according to the keywords of the website, but not sensitive enough to avoid such inappropriate actions.

Punk Rock 101 is predicated on a shortcoming of algorithms; the computational logic of Ad Sense decrees that a webpage would be scanned for keywords, for which the relevant ads would then be broadcast. By inference, we know that a heuristic system would work better in this context, if additional scripts were employed in the program so it can evaluate the suitability of its results and revise its output.

But Arcangel’s masterstroke is showing how this pairing is profitable; the artist did in fact get paid by Google (just over US\$120) for running Ad Sense.²⁵ What Tom Holert terms as ‘performing the system’ is to “engage with a mediascape entirely controlled by economic agencies and interests in order to gain insight into its logic.”²⁶ Yet Arcangel goes further than performing or criticizing this system; he profits from it – fully exploiting the system, reinforcing its economic objective, but most importantly taking from it, albeit in a minor way.

²⁴ Arcangel, “Punk Rock 101”.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Holert, “Performing the System”.

Multiplicities and possibilities

The last example I cite as an elaboration of the productivities of systems art is the *Bruce Springsteen Born to Run Glockenspiel Addendum* (hereafter *Glockenspiel Addendum*), produced by Arcangel in 2006.²⁷ Three of eight songs on Springsteen's *Born to Run* album originally feature glockenspiel parts; Arcangel produced the addendum by composing, performing and recording glockenspiel parts over the other five songs. Three versions of *Glockenspiel Addendum* exists: a vinyl record and mp3's that only features Arcangel's glockenspiel (meant to be played together with the original record); a 'mixed' CD that combines the addendum with the original; and finally a live version where Arcangel performs the glockenspiel parts along to Springsteen's recording.

Perhaps having three versions of the work imply a proliferation or multiplicity that constitutes possibilities. This again recalls Verwoert's essay, as mentioned earlier.²⁸ The positive meaning of 'institute' brings to mind a state where processes are initiated and point towards new and even multiple directions. It is in the 'mixed' version of *Glockenspiel Addendum* that the notion of possibility further develops. As Arcangel mentions in an interview, this version has been tagged by computers automatically and circulated under Springsteen's name.²⁹ Hence, a user downloading Springsteen's *Born to Run* via file-sharing networks could well end up with Arcangel's mixed version and have no idea that this is in fact an appropriated work. The work thus floats around on peer-to-peer (P2P) networks like Limewire without Arcangel being credited (legal issues aside) as the author. He mentions, "My thoughts on this version were based on the fact that my own artwork for years had floated around the Internet uncredited, in

²⁷ Cory Arcangel, *The Bruce Springsteen Born to Run Glockenspiel Addendum* (2006)
<http://www.beigerecords.com/cory/Things_I_Made/GlockenspielAddendum> (28 Aug 2009).

²⁸ Jan Verwoert. "Private Lives, Public Gestures 2" in *Frieze*, no. 113 (Mar 2008)
<http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/private_lives_public_gestures_2/> (28 Aug 2009).

²⁹ Jo-Anne Green, "Live Stage: Cory Arcangel" in *Networked Music Review* (8 Jul 2008)
<http://turbulence.org/networked_music_review/2008/07/08/live-stage-cory-arcangel-brooklyn/> (28 Aug 2009).

fact I kinda encourage it, so why not just start it off this way? Cut out the middle man so to speak, even if the middle man is myself.”³⁰

Arcangel acknowledges the removal of the middleman as a gesture that brings the system of art to the point of an endgame, where the artist and/or middleman cannot profit from art as transactions are hindered. He therefore imagines a situation where art becomes anonymous, where source and identity are destabilised in a system. By engaging the Internet and file-sharing networks – sites of public, democratic (and illicit) activity that represent anti-hierarchy, utopian visions – as the platform of his work, Arcangel rejects capitalism for an instant and reinstates in art a sense of possibility.

Conclusion

In “Performing the System”, Holert writes about the concerns that Siegfried Kracauer had about the computer age and the function of pop art: “in the imminent ‘computer age’ the ‘human being would become a statistician's vision, that is, he would disappear into a point.’ For Kracauer, this concern over humanity's reduction to statistical data is directly linked to Pop art; it is caused by the ‘pressure, first of all, to place objects in front of you and to point to them: There you have your ad, there you have your drive to culture, your automatization!’ He thus sees Pop art as late-capitalist society's attempt to educate itself about its own dynamics of abstraction, and he harbors a certain hope for its potential as an instrument to demonstrate the realities of the economic system.”³¹

Kracauer’s comments, made in 1966, are essentially part fear, part hope. The fear of the computer reducing the human to a statistic is not unfounded. Take for example two of the world’s predominant websites, Google and Facebook. The reliability of Google as a search engine stems from a system it employs,

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Holert, “Performing the System”.

PageRank, which ranks websites according to several criteria.³² The criteria includes the number of links made by other users to a website, and the time spent by each user on each website. The effectiveness of Google is therefore in part established by Internet users, who in this case perform free labour for the company. Similarly, social networking sites like Facebook harness their users' uploaded data as information for marketing – by indicating 'Brian Eno' as my favourite music on third-party applications such as iLike, I receive notifications for Eno's performances/talks near where I live.

Yet there remain possibilities for the individual to exist without being reduced to a statistic in our current computerized, networked world. Through Cory Arcangel's *Punk Rock 101* and *Glockenspiel Addendum*, which are really works of pop art because they appropriate mass-produced cultural objects (Cobain's suicide letter and Springsteen's album), a non-paranoid understanding of the economic system is enabled. Likewise, Eno's reading of the Scratch Orchestra as an inclusive scale model of democracy posits how organisations are not necessarily oppressive. Operating via the notion of ambient, what links both Eno and Arcangel is their sensitivity towards the environment in which their work operates in – the interfaces between music and politics, between art and capitalism. It is through the realm of the ambient – this awareness of ecology – that simple gestures and perspective shifts can realise the subversive and productive potentials inherent in creative endeavours.

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This paper is an excerpt from a web essay on the potentials and productivities of systems art, available at www.circadiansongs.com/systemsart

³² Google, "Corporate Information – Technological Overview" in *About Google* (2009) <<http://www.google.com/corporate/tech.html>> (28 Aug 2009).