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Title

Composition as Hyperobject

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Composition – hyperobject – sound

Abstract

This article considers compositional practice in relation to Timothy Morton's ideas surrounding the *hyperobject*. The aim is not to analyse compositional practice through the prism of the hyperobject or indeed apply the concept to composition, rather, I allude to Morton's ideas as a way to think through some aspects of compositional practice. In particular a move away from compositional conventions, such as 'the work' or the 'singular creator', which will be discussed in relation to two of my recent projects *Auricularis Superior* and *Decay*. Importantly, this approach understands composition as a practice that deals with the situated peculiarity of the human condition, and in a time when our world is changing dramatically, it too, must consider these changes and respond. In their writings, both Donna Haraway and Timothy Ingold propose a greater emphasis on our entanglement with the world as the basis of our sense of self, rather than the petrocapiatist idea of the individual self that is improved by consuming. This shift would allow us to respect and treat others and our environment with more respect and care, but also develop a new understanding of what it is to be a human entity. I propose that compositional practice can be part of this endeavour.

Main Text

Composition as Hyperobject

In what follows, I aim to show that all compositional outputs that have ever occurred and will ever occur can be understood as 'feeding into' the hyperobject that is music; that we could regard each composer's compositional practice as a hyperobject, each piece or project a small manifestation of that practice; and that we could also consider

a compositional project to be a hyperobject, insofar as a project is constructed from a variety of ideas, experiences and thoughts at different times and in different spaces.

The strangeness of the tempo-reality in compositional practice has always been a source of fascination to me in the sense that for the most part, the compositional process (writing/creating a piece) bears no temporal relationship to the experience of hearing the outcome of that process, i.e. the finished piece, for example (whether in a concert or gallery setting).¹ This is not the only curious *gap* worth contemplating that exists in the compositional process – when using conventional notation, for example, the moment of communication between the composer and the performer is a visual one. Furthermore, although sound is material (sound waves), our experience of it is sensorial and phenomenal, and its materiality is rarely of concern to us when listening². These *gaps* are invitations to be explored through compositional practice, and this is what I have set out to do in some of my work, to foreground and also delight in this strangeness of the experience of these *gaps*. The strange situation of creating work in a different time-space than the one in which the listener listens to it was directly addressed in *Auricularis Superior*³, a 30 minute headphone piece. It was originally written in 2017 for a celebratory event of Pauline Oliveros' work and legacy, *Listening After Pauline Oliveros*, in Leeds (UK). It was subsequently installed at the *ISCM New Music Days 2019* in Tallin (Estonia) and at *Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival* (UK) in 2019. *Auricularis Superior* was inspired by Oliveros' Deep Listening practice, which she describes as 'a life long practice. [...] Deep Listening involves going below the surface of what is heard, expanding to the whole field of sound while finding focus. This is the way to connect with the acoustic environment, all that inhabits it, and all that there is.'⁴ The piece's themes revolve around the multi-sensory experience of listening and the way it can transport a listener through time and space via their imagination and memory. The point at which this is addressed is during a section that includes a field recording inside the Trümmelbach

¹ An exception to this is live-coding, for example, where the sonic event is concurrent with the coding process.

² Exceptions to this can be found in some sound art works, where the materiality of sound becomes the focus of the work.

³ *Auricularis Superior* is one of the three muscles around the ear that in humans no longer use, as our ears are fixed to the side of our skull (not like cats' ears for example). Our brain, however, still sends signals to these muscles to move in reaction to sounds we hear.

⁴ Pauline Oliveros, The Centre for Deep Listening, <https://www.deeplisting.rpi.edu/deep-listening/>

Fälle, a glacial river that runs through a mountain in Switzerland, the only glacial river system that is accessible by walking inside the mountain.

Auricularis Superior extract.mp3

The whole work is available to listened to at

<http://www.claudiamolitor.org/#/auricular-superior/>

This *gap* between composing and listening, which can be explored in compositional practice to create unexpected temporal and spatial propositions, prompts me to consider Timothy Morton's *hyperobject* in relation to music and sound. In his introduction to his book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* he defines hyperobjects as follows:

They are *viscous*, which means that they 'stick' to beings that are involved with them. They are *nonlocal*; in other words, any 'local manifestation' of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject. They involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to.⁵

This describes music, or as Christopher Small would say, *musicking*, perfectly. In his book *Musicking*, Small explains that talking about music is somewhat erroneous, since music is not so much a thing as an activity that involves a great many people: from the musician to the listener, the instrument/technology developer to the architect of the performance space, and of course the cleaners, bar staff, curators, security guards, and so on, who look after the venue. Hence, he suggests using a verb, *musicking*, rather than the noun, music.⁶ Thinking then of composition in terms of the *hyperobject* allows for some interesting contemplations about the compositional process and practice. My aim here is not to analyse compositional practice through the prism of the hyperobject or indeed apply the concept *to* composition; rather, I allude to Morton's ideas as a way to think through some aspects of compositional practice.

⁵ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p.1.

⁶ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meaning of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

One of the questions raised by thinking about hyperobjects in relation to composition is what it might mean for compositional practice to consider itself part of a bigger whole rather than a discrete activity by a singular entity producing seemingly self-contained events. We could consider composition from a collaborative and collective perspective, and as practitioners rethink what the act of composing then comes to mean. In Western traditions, particularly in notated music, composition still follows patriarchal structures in the way it is created, disseminated and even perceived.⁷ In the case of composition, the narrative unfolds in the composer who is the singular ‘genius’ creator of the music. Even today, it is still predominantly a privileged, upper class, white ‘he’, and his creation seemingly springs from his mind, untouched by his surroundings or his situation, rarely is there any acknowledgement or even mention of the musicians that played the music, let alone the cleaner or cook that provided the composer with the time to concentrate on writing his work.

The person who decided what music was performed and was financially supported and funded was often an aristocrat and later on a publisher, invariably also a powerful, privileged man. A cultural critic or an academic writer then tells the audience and the wider world how they should listen to that music, what is important in the music and what it should mean to the listener.

There are efforts to change this situation, to allow more diverse groups of people to work within these structures. But that still means, of course, that the old ways of doing things, the patriarchal structures, are maintained. However, if we begin to rethink what constitutes compositional practice, then there is an opportunity for new stories to be told about the world and the way we live with it. Alternative ways of thinking and creating could then be given a voice, making it more relevant to many artists and audiences alike, and ultimately these structures, that for the most part only benefit a privileged minority, could themselves be dismantled.

What is particularly beguiling to me about the un-knowability, the ‘un-experiencability’ of the hyperobject, in the sense that hyperobjects exist beyond individual human experience, both in terms of space and time, is that it not only describes the relationship any artist has to their own output, past and future, but also because it quite beautifully describes how each individual’s practice sits in relation to every musical and non-musical event that ever has happened or will happen—those

⁷ The definition of patriarchy I am using here is a society within which social structures benefit certain human attributes, these are mostly maleness, whiteness, able-bodied-ness, neuro-normative-ness, upper and middle class-ness and so on.

events we have knowledge of, as well as those we have not—whether that is for temporal or spatial reasons. And of course mainly because each listener, each audience will have completely differing reference points, and will inevitably add, inflect, shape what it is that the composer/artist shares with them.

In my project *Decay* I explored this idea and created a piece that was both unknowable and un-experiencable in its entirety. *Decay* is a 50 minute piece that toured around Europe for a year from 2018 to 2019. It included films, pre-recorded materials as well as scored material and improvised material. While I conceived *Decay* myself and created the films and pre-recordings that went along with the live performances, each performance of the work involved different guest artists⁸ who brought their own creative practice to each new iteration, altering its course and leaving a mark on it, which then fed into the next iteration of the piece.

As such *Decay* starts to dismantle the patriarchal structures mentioned earlier. Its (de-)generative process questions two widely held conventions of compositional practice, that of ‘composer-authorship’ and that of ‘the work’. By inviting different voices into the compositional process the project challenges any sense of authoritative iteration. And by continually shifting the musical manifestation of the piece at each of its performances it also challenges the idea of the stable, infinitely repeatable ‘work’. It is unusual that a piece of music changes continuously; after all, art and music are often concerned with *capturing* a moment, freezing it in time, preventing it from changing.

The theme that runs through *Decay* is that of the inevitability and even necessity of decay in ecological terms. After all, without the temporal process of decay, forest floors or meadows would not receive nutrition for fresh growth. Without the process of fermentation, our guts would not benefit from good bacteria and we could not appreciate a glass of wine. Yet the passing of time and the decay that inescapably accompanies it is a frightening experience for us mortal humans, as we realise that our sense of self is only but a tiny moment in time. As I write this at the end of April 2020, in lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the reality of humanity’s collective recklessness in fuelling environmental collapse – enabled by petrocapiatalist structures that make us believe there is no other sensible way of

⁸ *Decay* performances included Tullis Rennie (trombone), myself (piano) and Kelly Jane Jones at hcmf// 2018, John Butcher and Alison Blunt at IKLECTIK (London), percussion trio *line upon line* in Austin (US), Gerrit Valckenaers at Transit (Belgium), Sanne Rambags at November Music (The Netherlands), Peter Stollery at Sound (Scotland), Alison Blunt and John Butcher at hcmf// 2019, and George Kentros at Sound of Stockholm (Sweden).

structuring a society – brings our human dependency on the health of our environment to the forefront of our consciousness. And of course the poor and disenfranchised suffer first!

I agree with Donna Haraway that we must think about how we live *with* the world, not simply *in* it, because we are in fact the world; we are not creatures who float around the world and can escape it, we are absolutely and intrinsically linked to the earth, we breathe and die with it. As she reminds us, ‘we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations;’⁹ what we need, as she puts it, is a *making-with*. We could also understand ourselves, as Tim Ingold does, not as individual blobs with defined borders, but as collections of lines and threads that connect and re-connect to others and our environment:

[I]f life is not enclosed within a boundary, neither can it be surrounded. [...] For inhabitants [...] the environment does not consist of the surroundings of a bounded place but of a zone in which their several pathways are thoroughly entangled. In this zone of entanglement – this meshwork of interwoven lines – there are no insides or outsides, only openings and ways through. An ecology of life, in short, must be one of threads and traces, not of nodes and connectors. And its subject of inquiry must consist not of the relations between organisms and their external environments but of the relations along their severally enmeshed ways of life. Ecology, in short, is the study of the life of lines.¹⁰

In both these thinkers’ writings it is clear that we are ourselves assemblages of relationships. And if we were to put more emphasis on these relationships as the basis of our sense of self, rather than the petrocapiatlist idea of the individual self that is improved with consumption; when we realise that we are as much a part of our ecology as anything else within it, then maybe we will start not only to respect and treat others and our environment with more respect and care, but also develop a new understanding of what it is to be a human entity.

At this point, it is worth being reminded of the pitfall of conflating the passing of time with the notion of progress, or indeed the petrocapiatlist obsession with

⁹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 4.

¹⁰ Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 103.

growth. It is becoming ever clearer that this is an unsustainable and dangerous fantasy that ignores the reality of the world, which is that there is no such thing as linear temporal progress in which we simply leave past experiences and deeds behind. Rather, these experiences and deeds will haunt our present and future by continually returning us to our past actions. We can observe this all around us, whether through the cyclical nature of earth's seasons or even the repetitive market crashes in petrocapiatalist societies. And I would argue that the way in which we construct music is an indicator that we humans intrinsically understand this cyclical nature of being; after all, returning is one of music's basic structuring systems, whether it is the return to the chorus in a 3 minute pop song, the return to a tonic in a classical symphony, the looped samples in a DJ set or the return of a sonic event in a sound installation.

Decay not only took as its theme the notion of decay and return, but the whole structure of the project was one that attempted to rethink compositional practice, echoing Haraway's call for the need to rethink the way we live *with* our world, which requires a more collective and collaborative approach to our actions within this world. What thinking of composition as hyperobject also requires from the artist, then, is to acknowledge that being involved in compositional practice is to be involved in worlding, and this in turn implicates it in the concerns and realities that we find ourselves in at any given moment. In that sense we are beholden as artists to respond to, or at the very least acknowledge, the world around us.

The tour of *Decay* was a kind of hyperobject, in the sense that the whole piece was not known or experienced by any one person. Initially, I had conceived that Tullis Rennie (trombone) and myself (piano) would be the constants in the project, carrying the experience of performing with each guest artist to the next performance with another guest artist. However, due to the somewhat impenetrable visa requirements of the current US government, we were not able to travel to Austin, Texas, to perform with the percussion trio *line upon line*. So Tullis and I made some extra film in Hackney Marches, London, with some additional pre-recorded material, in order for the performances to go ahead with us virtually performing alongside the trio. Inadvertently, this unreasonable restriction against artistic collaboration actually amplified the hyperobjectiveness of the project, as now no single performer was present at all performances of *Decay*.

Decay film extract.m4v

As part of this project we also created a vinyl release. This recording is another kind of hyperobject in itself. Including improvisations from all collaborators, each performer individually recorded their own response to the materials (scores/films/pre-recordings) of *Decay* before they had performed it. They had no knowledge of how anyone else was responding, as they did this. Moreover, they each recorded themselves at different times, in different places, with different technologies, and only in the editing suite did the collective sound emerge.

Decay vinyl extract.mp3

The album can be bought from <https://www.nmcrec.co.uk/multimodal/decay>

To summarise so far, all compositional outputs that have ever occurred and will ever occur can be understood as ‘feeding into’ the hyperobject that is music. We could also regard each composer’s compositional practice as a hyperobject, each piece or project a small manifestation of that practice. But we could also consider a compositional project to be a hyperobject, insofar as a project is constructed from a variety of ideas, experiences and thoughts at different times and in different spaces.

Timothy Morton reminds us that the only perspective we can take is a situated one, and that ‘there is no outside, no metalanguage.’¹¹ And maybe, the act of working with sound, compositional practice, is a good example of grappling with this impossibility of a metalanguage. Sound is messy, it is ungraspable, slippery and certainly does not behave itself. Although there are some that would argue that sound can exist in and of itself, I find such a standpoint difficult to follow when confronted by the experience of sound. Even if we put our doubts aside and for a moment accept the idea that sound exists in and of itself, as soon as we think or listen to it, we ‘contaminate’¹² it with our thinking and listening. We cannot speak of sound without speaking of listening and we cannot speak of listening without speaking of sound. I am not arguing here that sound does not exist outside human experience, of course it does, but how could we possibly talk about that from anything but a situated position?

Composition is an exercise in entangling oneself in the messy waters of sound, of becoming entangled with the phenomenon *and* the thing, without the need to

¹¹ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, p. 5.

¹² Contamination in Anna Tsing’s sense of ‘transformation through encounter’, Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 28.

understand, or maybe better put, *with* acknowledging the impossibility of understanding either aspect fully. As Morton says about hyperobjects, ‘Thinking them is intrinsically tricky.’¹³ Compositions, sonic experiences over time, are similarly tricky to think of. It is no surprise that composers have created or used systems such as functional harmony, serialism, scientific models or chance processes to create their work. By doing so, a useful illusion of understanding the whole of a piece of music is created. This is because we can then retrospectively analyse it, break it down into neatly packaged elements and make sense of it.

This analysing does, of course, tell a story, but only part of the story, and from a particular perspective, because the experience of listening is far more complex, and we know this from personal experience, since hearing the same thing, even at the same time, in the same space, despite all the socio-cultural conventions of engaging with music that are so deeply embodied within us, will never be the same for any two people. Trying to grasp what a sound or a composition means is impossible if we want to extract generalities, but we can think of it in a situated way; we can think of what it means at a particular time, in a particular space, to a particular listener.

In essence, compositional practice deals with the situated peculiarity of the human condition, creates moments of framed time through sound. Its core material, that of sound, is an unfathomable hyperobject, made up of human, non-human, animate and inanimate utterances that have existed and will continue to exist beyond human existence. In working with sound, one is both engaged with the very physicality and reality of sound, whilst one is at the same time acutely aware of the very many conceptual layers humans have encased it in. Sound is not relative, it is made relative by our listening and the stories we tell ourselves about it. Composition walks the tightrope between material/object reality and human conceptualism/experience and it tells its stories in that *gap*.

And the reason I believe this storytelling is important in terms of human and earth ecology is that the sonic is often the first indication that something is wrong or amiss. Think of the scream or cry of another human, or the opposite, the cessation of breathing sounds—the silence before the devastation—the lack of birdsong or insect buzzing that comes long before most of us notice there is an environmental problem. So if we listen intently, we might hear the quieter stories that need telling. And these stories matter, particularly in a time where many of the old stories, for instance,

¹³ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, p. 4.

stories that perpetuate patriarchal and petrocapiatalist structures, have been and *are* getting us into terrible trouble. Donna Haraway poignantly explains the urgent need to tell new stories about the world:

So much of earth history has been told in the thrall of the fantasy of the first beautiful words and weapons, of the first beautiful weapons *as* words and vice versa. Tool, weapon, word: that is the word made flesh in the image of the sky god; that is the Anthropos. In a tragic story with only one real actor, one real world-maker, the hero, this is the Man-making tale of the hunter on a quest to kill and bring back the terrible bounty. This is the cutting, sharp, combative tale of action that defers the suffering of glutinous, earth-rotten passivity beyond bearing. All others in the prick tale are props, ground, plot space, or prey. They don't matter; their job is to be in the way, to be overcome, to be the road, the conduit, but not the traveller, not the begetter.¹⁴

This sentiment of Haraway's, as well as Morton's argument about hyperobjects, in which he contends that hyperobjects make hierarchies of reality, i.e. something that is more real than something else impossible,¹⁵ both resonate with what I hope to achieve in my compositional practice. That is, I intend to tell stories that undermine perceived hierarchies in order to tell new stories. And as Haraway reminds us in her writing, it matters what stories we tell.

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¹⁴ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 39.

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Biography

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