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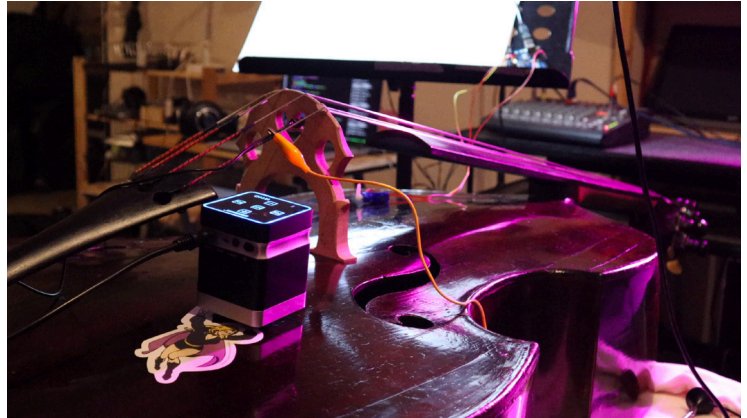
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As if They Were Flowers: A Virtual Multimodal Exhibition

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Autonome Systeme (AS) is a sound and media art project hosted and carried out 2020-2021 by the Graz-based platform for net art mur.at. The project questions the positioning of systems with 'autonomous qualities' in music and art making. It engages with the liminalities between autonomy and automation, whole and parts, observer and observed, systems and environments, and looks for the artistic affordances of the space in between them. AS culminates with an exhibition in July 2021 that gathers artworks developed by a group of five young artists confronting these themes. Under the title *As if They Were Flowers*, the exhibition will feature various types of artefacts in both the sound and visual domains that are presented physically in an art space in Graz as well as online in a dedicated virtual reality environment.

Context, Central Questions and Topics

The development of learning, self-adaptive systems, which are capable of sensing and acting on their environment, and their embedding in our everyday life, brought the buzzword 'autonomy' to everyone's lips. Be it autonomous cars, drones, or the next 'artificial intelligence' that is supposed to help us in the household, autonomous systems have permeated many different fields, including science and industry, society, and even art. Despite the fact that such systems seem ubiquitous, the question 'what makes a system autonomous?' has not a univocal answer. However, when analysing autonomous systems in different fields, the concept of 'autonomy' is often examined in conjunction with the idea of 'agency', as such systems can sense, act in, and affect their environment. What this 'act' means largely depends on the context, and this ambiguity generates infinite understandings of the idea of 'autonomy' itself.

Our project aims to engage and play with this ambiguity from an artistic perspective: How can existing notions of 'autonomy' and 'systems' from fields like robotics, system theory, game development and sound art contribute to collective artistic practice? What kind of creative relationships can we establish with 'systems' having 'autonomous qualities' both from the position of making art as well as from an audience's viewpoint? We seek to explore this in an open feedback process: we develop imaginative and playful ways of integrating those ideas into art, while observing how this affects our artistic practice itself and subsequently our insights into the topics we work on.

Methods and Previous Stages of Work

Autonome Systeme is a practice-focused artistic research project carried out by means of a self-organised collective working group that began in September 2020. Members of our group consist of five young artists from different fields (sound art, media art, media design / coding, music, robotic art, radio art). We establish a process that we describe as iterative co-composition. Across regular meetings and brainstorming sessions, and also incorporating input from external peers and professionals from the fields of sound and media art and aesthetics, we create, transform, and exchange ideas, sketches, and works across several cycles of iterations. The result of each stage flows into one or several collective works that are presented to the public. We also maintain a blog to document our individual working processes – a creative diary reflecting about code, text, parsing, and automated perceptions.

Each iteration consists of three phases: generation, parsing and evaluation / output, and focuses on one topic that represents a central aspect of autonomy. These iterations allow our own creative processes to become a kind of automaton, feeding individual inputs into a collective mechanism of creation / composition. We formulate boundaries for each phase (e.g. the impulse we begin with, how to transform it), and rules and parameters used to engage with the system itself, thus implementing what we call a "multimodal artistic parser". The result of this parsing process consists of sounds, visuals, or even physical objects. In the final stage of collective evaluation, these are eventually connected to form another unified system. Our procedure is inspired by analogue and digital techniques of "autonomous" parsing or generation: programming language parsers, André Bretons "automatic writing" (Graw 2002), and game design paradigms such as the ECS (Entity Component Systems) introduced by Adam Martin (Martin 2007).

The result of the first iteration, which focused on the "autonomous self", was a sound work, presented on Radio Helsinki on January 17, 2021 for the international radio art festival Art's Birthday. The procedure we chose was a reductive transformation: while the initial inputs should be diverse in format, the output (result) of the iteration had to be in one given medium, sound. Each artist generated one sketch / artefact in a different medium, developing an aspect of the meaning of 'self' and how it relates to 'autonomy'. We produced and exchanged computer patches, visuals, text-based art, and a series of analogue photographs that were then creatively converted into sounds, applying procedures of text-to-speech, text-as-score or image-as-score. In the third step a remix of these artefacts was collectively created, which resulted in the piece *#unSELFed*, a 20 minute sound work.

The second iteration takes the results of the first stage further, questioning autonomy and interdependence of sensory experiences under the theme "artificial intuition". As a medial constraint, all artefacts we create are designed to be part of a virtual space which will also later become a part of the final exhibition. One seminal idea is to realize a performative sound installation featuring an acoustic feedback system involving an acoustic instrument (double bass) and interactive electronics, which will be captured and presented as a 3D video recording with ambisonic sound. Another room will be designed to host a virtual re-elaboration of *#unSELFed* as a spatial audio experience.

The third iteration is resulting in the final exhibition, which will take place in physical format as well as in a dedicated virtual world on Mozilla Hubs designed

by the project team. Our central topic will be “autonomous ecosystemics”. This topic, as well as the title of the exhibition *As if They Were Flowers* is inspired by Richard Brautigan’s poem “All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace” that presents a utopian-dystopian dream of a world where physical and digital beings coexist and form a so-called “cybernetic ecology” (Brautigan 1967). Much like we re-mixed, re-imagined, and re-distributed our initial inputs to create *#unSELFed*, we will take the same approach to create new digital representation of the work-in-progress materials and the final artworks of all our three iterations. Additional materials will be presented to visualize our working process, including generated texts, visualisations of keywords, and sonic fragments from our initial research. All of these materials will be inter-related, creating their own microsystems and feeding into the broader ecosystem of the virtual exhibition.

Autonomous Systems project website:

<https://autonomous-systems.mur.at/index.html>

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