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Ang Song Ming

Controlling the Glitch

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Glitch: microcosm of the catastrophe; or a subgenre of computer music comprised mainly of static, noise, and the real or simulated recordings of mechanical or electronic malfunctions. As a subgenre, glitch can be interpreted as a development born out of its social-technological context, given the advent of personal computers in the nineteen-eighties, and how they made their way into many homes over the next two decades. At the same time, the affordability of samplers, synthesisers and drum machines heralded the beginning of the home studio.

Glitch was concretised as a subgenre unto itself about a decade later, formed around labels such as [Mille Plateaux](#) (Germany) and [Mego](#) (Austria). The music comprises infamously of static and noise, with dissonance and atonality being its formal traits. Glorifying or at least legitimising the mishaps of technology, glitch has evolved from analogue to digital sources, now produced very much through computers as its fundamental instrument, with various software that produce intentional glitches on demand. Mille Plateaux and Mego have dedicated themselves mostly to compositions ranging from relatively melodious, ambient records to full-on noise surges. On the other hand, [Warp](#) (England) releases beat-based albums with anarchic syncopation, assailing the listener in another way. The use of rhythm as a structure provides the backdrop for Warp musicians such as Autechre to break the outline that time has enforced on music.

Derived from machines and functioning as the emblem of imperfection, glitch connotes the inversion of conventional standards and puts forward entropy as a paradigm. As a system of disorder, glitch can arguably be seen as self-contained, even though its unstable nature prevents meaning from being firmly located. Deregulating the time-action axis depended on by science and art, from military technology to musical serialism, the random nature of the glitch demands the relinquishment of control:

The apparition of the glitch displays the desire for an art that wrinkles time. [A glitch] accumulates power by insertion, by its irruption in a flow of events. It is the random factor, the spark that ignites the primordial soup, the flash that illuminates the status of music as phantasmagoric time, not as utilitarian timekeeper. (Young 54)

Glitch posits malfunction, failure, and disturbance as part of the universe—one can no longer ascertain the wholeness of the world. The glitches in the music offer an alternative perspective of viewing time as they free time from both its practical function and its traditions. For example, Autechre's exploration of rhythm presents glitch as an art form that forces the listener to re-evaluate the processes of time.

Generated intentionally through music software, glitch now comes in fully controllable parameters via plug-ins that have been developed. Glitches produced at will flood the entire composition; the music employs style as content. Still, the pervasive malfunctions in glitch are frequently offset by the presence of control. In Autechre's "All Tomorrow's Linoleum", method precedes madness. The song starts with different layers of micro-rhythms, assembling to form a web of hyperventilating beats. As the track progresses, the listener realises that these glitch polyrhythms slow down concurrently to reveal a conspicuous techno beat. Not only does Autechre show its skill in manipulating glitches by channelling them into a structure, they also reveal the technology behind the control of glitches. It is as though Autechre is unveiling to the listener the methods behind the construction of the song—the global tempo of the song is programmed to decelerate throughout the song's duration, just as different rhythms are faded in and out of the song to contribute to the dynamics of the

piece. Simply put, every parameter is under control, and it is no surprise that Autechre's music has been often labelled as scientific and surgical.

The mechanical aspect of Autechre's music is exemplified through their "[Gantz Graf](#)" video, where director Alex Rutterford uses monochrome colours to illustrate perpetual transformations of an engine-like object. The beats once again are typically convulsive, but there is no doubt to the high levels of control imposed on both the music and video. Flashes of electricity pass through the engine from 2'34" to 3'04", and at 1'02", the image even looks like a nuclear reactor with two halos circling the top and bottom of the engine. Rutterford shows nothing but process in the video. The mutating engine, itself a process, is placed in a black 3-D space with grey lines and circles that appear like a 3-D animation modelling design space, yet another meta-reference to process.

Control, even though excellently manifested in Autechre's music video, cannot be absolute. As Virilio mentions:

every time a technology is invented, take shipping for instance, an accident is invented together with it, in this case, the shipwreck, which is exactly contemporaneous with the invention of the ship. (32)

The accident is necessarily conceived along with its technology, and this essentially means that human mastery of technology can never be total, despite every desire and effort to do so. By extension, there will always be the glitch. Through the display of supposed technological control, Autechre paradoxically foregrounds the accident through the intentional spasms of its music, as well as the possibility of meta-glitches disrupting the control Autechre has over its craft. Even glitch as a genre is not spared from its own malfunctions.

Works Cited

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