

At the *Listening Post*, or, do machines perform?

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Abstract

Listening Post, a collaboration between statistician Mark Hansen and media artist Ben Rubin, samples conversations from public Internet chat sites. The sampled texts are displayed on small LCD screens while an artificial voice reads them aloud. The installation also generates music algorithmically from the data it samples. There are many ways one could describe or categorize *Listening Post*: as a highly specialized computer, as an electronic sculpture, or as an installation, for example. In some of my recent work I consider the implications of calling such pieces performances. To create a context for a discussion of *Listening Post*, I briefly summarize some of my thinking on performances by machines with particular attention to the questions raised by identifying machines as performers and the issue of liveness in performance.

Keywords

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You walk into a dark, quiet room. Suspended from the ceiling are pairs of wires from which hang over 200 tiny screens. The screens are stacked above one another between the wires, like ladders; collectively they form a grid. Against a background of New Age-sounding music, sentences flash onto the screens one by one. A synthetic male voice with a vaguely British accent reads each sentence out loud as it appears on a screen, occasionally mispronouncing an idiomatic word. When the grid is full, the process starts afresh. The environment is restful and meditative; the ever-changing spoken and written messages are alternately touching, amusing, and disturbing.

This is *Listening Post*, a collaboration between statistician Mark Hansen and media artist Ben Rubin, which I saw at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City (17 December 2002-9 March 2003). It samples conversations from public Internet chat sites then sorts and displays the results according to variable criteria: 'sometimes passages are chosen for their common length, other times for a shared subject, word, or turn of phrase' (Griffin 2002). When you enter the room, you may see and hear sentences that all begin with 'I love' ('I love you', 'I love meat', 'I love chatting'); at another moment, you may be offered numerous meditations on an entirely different subject or no single subject at all. The installation also generates music algorithmically from the data it samples.

There are many ways one could describe or categorize *Listening Post*: as a highly specialized computer, as an electronic sculpture, or as an installation, for example. In some of my recent work (Auslander 2002a, 2002b,

2006), I consider the implications of calling such pieces performances. I am particularly interested in how existing conceptions of performance derived from the performing arts may be used to analyse machine performances. To create a context for a discussion of *Listening Post*, I will briefly summarize some of my thinking on performances by machines with particular attention to the questions raised by identifying machines as performers and the issue of liveness in performance. (I hasten to add that the versions of these ideas presented here are far less developed in the interest of brevity than those in the writings I cite.)

A good starting point for this discussion is the question: if *Listening Post* is a performance, who or what is the performer? My response is that *Listening Post* itself is a performer. It follows from Brenda Laurel's (1993: 44) assertion that an application program is analogous to a dramatic script that the computer that executes the program is analogous to an actor. This analogy is perfectly consonant with traditional definitions of performance that describe the performer as one who presents a text of some kind, whether a dramatic script, choreography, or a musical composition. Beyond that level, however, my identification of *Listening Post* as a performer may seem problematic in traditional terms because such definitions generally emphasize the agency of the performer as one who does not merely execute the instructions contained in a text but who interprets the text and expresses something of his or her own through the act of interpretation. I will not claim here that a machine capable of acts of interpretation comparable to those of human performers exists at present or is likely ever to exist. But I will claim that interpretation is not essential to performance.

In his discussion of musical performance, philosopher Stan Godlovitch makes a useful distinction between two categories of skills a performer may possess: technical skills and interpretive skills. Whereas 'technical skills [in the case of music] involve causing objectively determinable and (often) quantitatively measurable acoustic effects ... Interpretive skills involve aesthetic effects for which no obvious quantitative measure exists, and typically emphasize "expression" ...' (Godlovitch 1998: 54). Transporting Godlovitch's analysis from the musical context into the present one, I shall argue that since the *Listening Post* computer causes the quantitatively measurable effects that constitute the content of the piece by mining and displaying data from Internet sites, it possesses technical performance skills. In these terms, the fundamental difference between human performers and machine performers is that whereas the former have the potential to exercise both technical and interpretive skills the latter have only technical skills at their disposal.

Even if machine performers are assumed to be incapable of interpretation and, therefore, limited to performances that require only technical skills, that limitation in itself does not distinguish machine performers decisively from human performers. The history of each of the performing arts yields instances in which human performers have been called upon to exercise their technical skills but not their interpretive skills (I shall refer to this kind of activity as 'technical performance'). In principle, technical perfor-

mance can be undertaken either by human beings who are not using their potential interpretive skills or by machines that simply lack such skills but possess the requisite technical abilities.

It is not at all difficult to find examples of traditional performances in which human performers are employed primarily for their technical skills and asked to cede their interpretive agency to someone else, though I shall mention only one example here. The orchestral musician, as described by musicologist Christopher Small, is such a case:

The musical skills that are required of a professional orchestra musician are without question of a high order: in a good orchestra substantial mistakes in the notes are rare and breakdowns almost unknown. At the same time those skills are very specialized and fall within a limited range, consisting of technical dexterity, the ability to sight-read and to respond rapidly to the notations and to the conductor's gestures, as well as those of attuning one's playing to the ensemble ... Even longer-term musical thinking is left to the conductor. I remember my astonishment at being told by a respected orchestral double-bass player that when he played a concert he read his part measure by measure and often could not remember the measure he had just played.

(Small 1998: 69-70)

I have quoted this passage at length to emphasize that Small clearly describes symphonic musicians' performance skills as technical (dexterity, sight-reading, rapid response, coordination) rather than interpretive in nature. As Small indicates, the meaning and expressiveness of the piece are left to the composer and the conductor - the musicians' task consists solely of producing the required sounds. Despite the technical character of orchestral musicians' work, their relative lack of agency in the performance, and the non-interpretive nature of their activity, few people would hesitate to call them performers. In functional terms, the differences between the *Listening Post* computer and Small's symphonic musicians are not great; the computer is a performer in the same sense that they are, even down to its efficiency and the infrequency with which it commits errors or breaks down. This comparison suggests that machines and human beings are equally capable of technical performance.

In addition to arguing that the *Listening Post* computer is a performer comparable to certain kinds of human performers, I shall describe the computer as a live performer. There is for me a crucial difference between machine performers that function as playback devices for fixed programs that unfold the same way every time and machines programmed to make 'decisions' that determine the particular shape or content of any given performance (see Auslander 2001, 2002a). I consider the former to be playback devices functionally indistinguishable from CD players or VCRs in that they reproduce earlier performances. I consider the latter, however, to be performers in their own right because they do not merely reproduce an existing performance. The distinction is that between a technology of reproduction and a technology of production. Because it selects, organizes, and

presents the materials it culls from the Internet into particular performances (and composes music to accompany them), I consider *Listening Post* to fall into the latter category.

Certainly, my assimilation of machines to the category of live performers has been met with resistance by those invested in traditional definitions of performance (for an interesting response, see Blau 2002). As I have argued in detail elsewhere (Auslander 1999, 2002a), I do not consider 'the live' to be an ontological category. It is, rather, a historically and ideologically determined concept that appeared only in the modern era and whose exact meaning and cultural importance are subject to change, especially in relation to technological development. The primary direction of change has been toward a progressive decorporealization of the live event. Although we often claim to consider live events to be those in which performers and audience are both physically and temporally co-present, we do not find the concept of a live broadcast - in which performers and audience are engaged in the same event at the same time but are not physically co-present - to be an oxymoron. Our current conception of liveness emphasizes a temporal relationship of simultaneity more than a physical relationship of co-presence. Machine performers represent a further step in that development, since even when machines are physically co-present with their audiences, they lack organic physical presence.

By arguing that *Listening Post* is a live performer, I hope to legitimize a critical practice of thinking about free-standing digital or robotic artworks as performances. Although I shall not embark here upon a thematic reading of *Listening Post* (see Griffin 2002 for such a reading), I will take up the question of what kind of performer it may be said to be. Inasmuch as *Listening Post* does not generate its own content but constructs its performances by sampling conversations on the Internet, it is more akin to a master of ceremonies than a headline act.

Performance theorist Michael Kirby, in an essay originally published in 1972, describes what he calls 'received acting' as a situation in which someone is perceived as an actor simply because of the context in which he or she appears. 'Extras, who do nothing but walk and stand in costume, are seen as "actors"' because of the way the theatrical context, sets, costumes, and so on frame them even though they are not 'doing anything we could distinguish as acting' (Kirby 2003: 311). One of *Listening Post*'s functions as a performer is to frame the performances of others so that its audience will perceive them differently. As the sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) was one of the first to suggest, the way we present ourselves in everyday life can be understood as performance. This model has been extended to the ways we present ourselves online in game environments, chat rooms, and through home pages (see, for example, Miller 1995; Turkle 1995). The materials sampled by *Listening Post* are performances in that sense: *Listening Post* appropriates these social performances and reframes them as objects of aesthetic attention - it transforms social performances into 'received' aesthetic performances that can be perceived as something other than simple conversation because of the context into which *Listening Post* inserts them.

In this respect, *Listening Post* somewhat parallels performance practices associated with such New York-based experimental theatres of the 1960s and 1970s as the Performance Group and Squat Theatre, each of which sometimes sought to use their productions to frame spontaneous behaviour. The Performance Group, for example, performed in a converted garage on Wooster Street in New York's Soho. During some productions, they would throw open a huge garage door; at that point, whatever happened to be taking place on the street outside was framed for the audience as part of the production. Squat Theatre, which worked in a storefront, made much the same use of the store window that dominated their space: passers-by became received actors for those inside the theatre by virtue of being framed by the window (see Schechner 1985: 302-08).

Listening Post, too, is a window or door that opens onto the world of the Internet and frames spontaneous activity found there as aesthetic performance. But whereas the Performance Group's garage door and Squat Theatre's window were static, passive framing devices, *Listening Post* is an active one - an agential frame. Rather than standing by until something wanders into its field, it actively seeks things out, sorts them, presents them in specific ways, and even composes music to accompany them. It is for this reason that I think of *Listening Post* not as a static framing element comparable to a theatrical set but as a performer whose function is to frame the performances of others.

At a generic level, the kind of performance in which *Listening Post* engages, which I call technical performance, is something that both human beings and machines can do. But it is very clear that the particular technical skills possessed by *Listening Post* could not be found in a human performer, for no human being could scour the Internet, gather data, sort it, and display it in real time with the speed and accuracy of the machine. Although I have argued here for seeing the kind of performance in which *Listening Post* engages as generically analogous to the activity of orchestral musicians, I am not suggesting that machines could substitute for those musicians, for they possess technical skills (those mentioned by Small) that no machine can master. Although technical performance is an activity in which both human beings and machines can engage, they do not necessarily engage in it in the same ways. As technical performers, human beings and machines have different, perhaps complementary capabilities. The claim I am making here is that since a digital installation such as *Listening Post* can be understood as a performer in traditional terms, artistic performance is not an exclusively human activity. The on-going process of defining the concepts of performance and performer therefore needs to take machine performance into account.

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