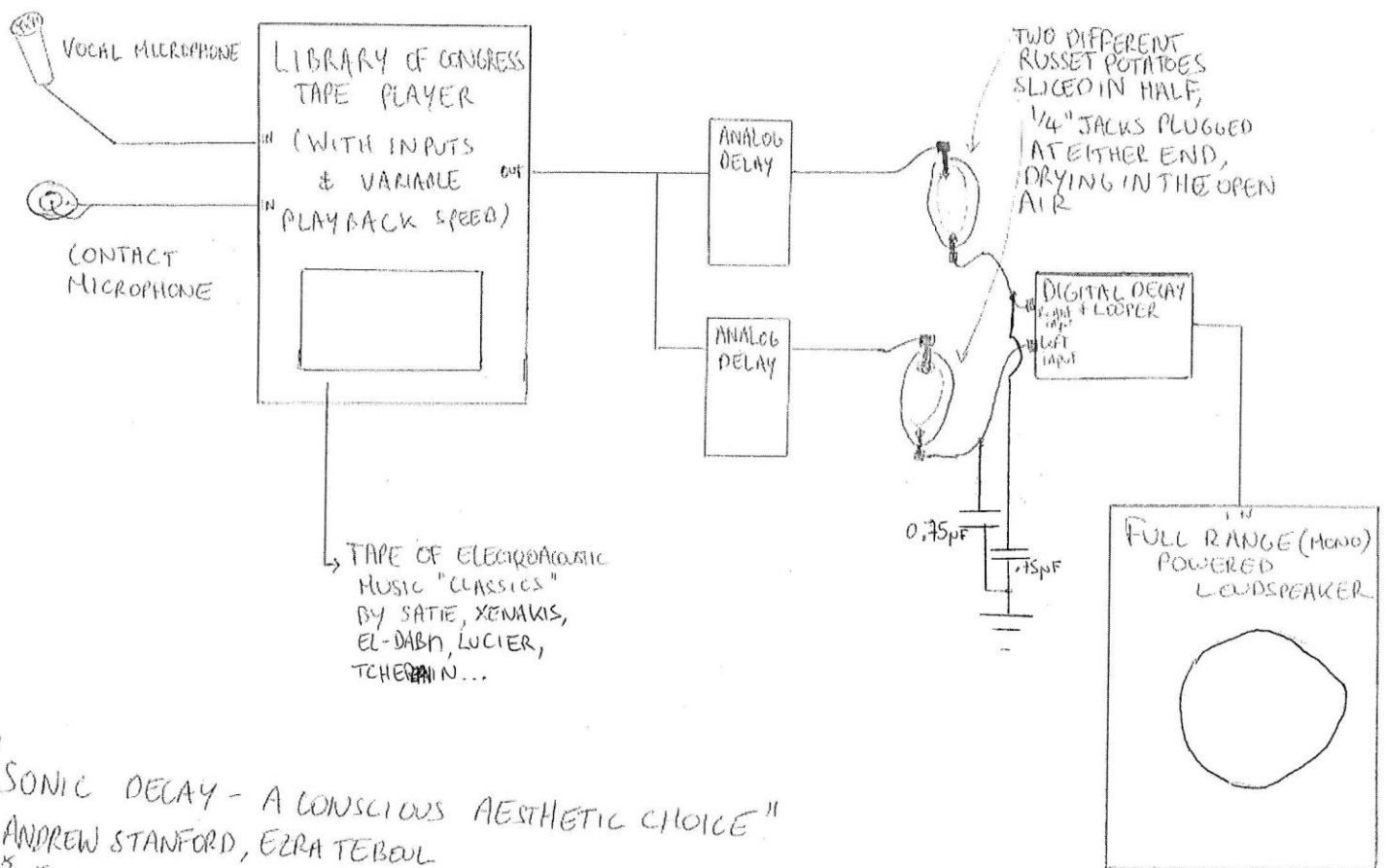# Sonic Decay

Ezra Teboul + Sparkles Stanford

Artists' statement:

"Sonic Decay: a conscious aesthetic choice" (installed and performed at the 2014 International Žižek Studies Conference) was an experiment meant to illustrate the authors' interests in material and ideological decay as basis for composition. Experimenting with our musical practice in the context of Žižek's parallax view, we developed an experimental composition to place the gradual destruction of our performance, sounds and equipment in the forefront (Žižek, 2006). Our approach was multimodal: installation / performance, interactivity / independence, analog / digital, organic / electronic, old / new, broken / functional, meaningful / meaningless. We explicitly embraced what we view as an inconsistency in contemporary electronic music or sound art practice; the unchallenged prevalence of planned obsolescence. Concepts of intent and awareness are primordial in this case. Today, the manufacturers of most consumer electronics are building decay and component failure into their products although the looming specter of malfunction isn't always acknowledged by creative users of the technology (Slade, 2009).

As a force affecting all the elements involved in music, decay holds a conflicting role. In the discussion of *sound objects* (spectromorphology), decay is only mentioned as a topic because it is necessary to cover when discussing sound "terminations" (Schaeffer, 1966; Smalley, 1997). In *sound-making* objects (instruments), decay is only an incidental step, even when its consequences are compositionally interesting (Cascone, 2000 or Ghazala, 2004). Malfunction receives a more thorough analysis in the literature, which echos previous discussions mentioning decay but the nuance between the two terms is not discussed (Kelly, 2009; Samartzis, 2005). This isn't because there is no musical work that could trigger this conversation. David Tudor's work as a composer often focuses on electronics expressing themselves and Louis & Bébé Barron's *Forbidden Planet* soundtrack used circuits recorded as they were breaking themselves (Tudor & Schonfield, 1972). Both were influenced by Cage and both capitalize on the intuitive and creative potential of relating indeterminacy to the sound of an

electronic instrument ceasing to function. However, there exists little discussion focusing explicitly on the compositional possibilities of decay as a gradual process in composition.

In "Sonic Decay" - all 6 hours of it - we wished to explore those possibilities, explicitly. We used a cassette tape as our main means of sampling. Contact and telephone microphones were used for recording. Decaying digital / analog delays and rotting potatoes were used as signal processing elements as described in the following diagram:

VOCAL MICROPHONE

CONTACT MICROPHONE

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS TAPE PLAYER
(WITH INPUTS & VARIABLE PLAYBACK SPEED)
IN   OUT
IN

↳ TAPE OF ELECTROACOUSTIC MUSIC "CLASSICS" BY SATIE, XENAKIS, EL-DABH, LUCIER, TCHEREPNIN...

ANALOG DELAY

ANALOG DELAY

TWO DIFFERENT RUSSET POTATOES SLICED IN HALF, 1/4" JACKS PLUGGED AT EITHER END, DRYING IN THE OPEN AIR

DIGITAL DECAY + LOOPER
RIGHT INPUT
LEFT INPUT

$0.75pF$ $.75pF$

FULL RANGE (MONO) POWERED LOUDSPEAKER

"SONIC DECAY - A CONSCIOUS AESTHETIC CHOICE"
ANDREW STANFORD, EZRA TEBOUL
ŽIŽEK STUDIES CONFERENCE (2014)

Before the start of the piece, the potatoes each had a significant portion of the skin on one side removed. This allowed for two things: The end of 1/4" jacks to be pushed inside the flesh of the potato (which interestingly enough offers a sturdy connection) and for the flesh itself to dry and oxidize in the open air. As that process progressed, electrical resistance between the two leads implanted in the potato went up and the cutoff frequency of the filter went down.

Description of the performance and installation

We intentionally reflected the cyclical nature of the sounds being produced electrically, most of which were based upon the material compiled on an hour long tape by Andrew Stanford (one of the two authors), by setting up three chairs around the audio equipment and discussing the relevant concepts of the performance piece. Those concepts were explained as often as a new person who was attending the conference stopped to express curiosity in our work. This resulted in cyclical, yet erratic, verbal discussion patterns. As the discussion progressed, we paralleled the decaying electronic sound with the decaying coherence of the verbal conversation. Both were interspersed with external events through the third chair which was open for anyone to claim so that they might engage through participation. The contact and telephone microphones linked the recorded material and the live performance through the same electronic decay process.

As the installation reached an end, the two potatoes acting as variable resistors in a simple first-order lowpass filter for the left and right channels, had dried out enough for the cutoff frequency to be in the 500-1500Hz range. This resulted in a bass-heavy rendering of the classics of electroacoustic and experimental music assembled on the tape. The conversation around the setup and its protagonists had also fallen to a lower point of intellectual clarity, although the questions and insight provided by willing audience members did add an unexpected amount of life to the mix.

Compositional response

We used a stereo recorder to provide audio documentation of the process that took place during out conference performance. For the special issue of the journal, we (the authors) composed audio-based responses to explore the sound that was generated during our performance. One of the recording sections serves as a textural basis. It was selected due to the quality of its sound-objects. The other selected recording serves as the textual basis, where the spoken content shapes that of the response. In both responses the textual and textural substances were removed, thus leaving the two compositions without their skeletons. This was further inspired by two specific sections of the *Parallax View*: a discussion of Fitzgerald's *Tender Is The Night,* in which the only satisfying work is the combination of the two incomplete visions of the book and Schumann's "missing voice" composition *Humoresque* (Žižek, 2006: 17-20 & 365-366). In the latter, one of the voices is omitted from the final version, resulting in noticeable empty space. If the installation was an attempt at materializing technological and ideological decay, these compositional responses attempt to embrace it structurally.

The combination of the two separate responses constitutes the primary content of our contribution to this special issue of the journal. The audio offers a sound-based reflection on the discussions that took place at the conference. By superimposing the two responses with varying levels of offset (using the two independent streams), we hint at the compositional implications of the technology being used and how it relates to the initial aesthetic prompt of embracing decay as a method of organizing sound.

Please click the following links to access the audio files

- **PART A**   https://youtu.be/uZp71FvPNq0

- **PART B**   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DH4d0su7lNc

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