

# Noise &/as Nervousness: Gertrude Stein in the Interface

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## Abstract

This small paper focuses on '*noise as communicating presence*' [1] in performance and digital communication by mapping Gertrude Stein's 1934 lecture 'Plays' onto the interface through contemporary digital theorists Ulises A. Mejias and Alexander Galloway. How do the critical resonances between performance and digital media allow us to develop a theory for a practice that values the accumulation of these disturbances? I argue that Stein's spectatorial 'nervousness' provides a tactic for an expanded understanding of noise that positions presence – our own, the interface and those communicated with – firmly within digital communication technologies. I aim to use the intersection of media theory and performance to develop a theory that enables us to layer the agencies at play in a process, to attend to how 'interface as an intersection of these agencies'. [2] Ultimately, I argue that understanding this affective presence is vital to how and why we might act as 'accumulators or curators of disturbance'.

## Introduction: Performance & Process

The following will use a critique of performance from the 1930s as a means to think about 'noise' in artistic and critical interventions into modern communication technologies. Gertrude Stein's essay 'Plays' is about the theatre. It focuses on the relationship between the spectator and the action performed on stage, on how that relationship produces an affective syncopation that makes one 'nervous'. Here, I will explore the connection between that 'nervousness' and the sense of performerly presence created in internet-situated performances. In doing so, I aim to gain insight into the different operations of 'disturbance' in contemporary digital communication and art practices. Performance, as an artistic practice, is a generative process as well as an exchange based one. It necessarily requires an audience and a performer: the performance is a kind communication between these two parties, and for this reason performance has often been defined as a time-based form that occurs for both groups in at once. [3] However, contemporary performance theorists and practitioners have complicated this view of performance and this is the context of my work. [4] In this paper, I will address how Stein's 'nervousness', originally written to refer to live theatrical performances, can be extended into the terrain of contemporary digital performance practices. I argue that 'nervousness', as an understanding of the relation constituted by an artwork, has contemporary value for addressing how and why we might act as 'accumulators or curators and of disturbance'.

## Repetition and relation

This paper is a reminder that our concerns repeat, historically and artistically. Or, rather, that they echo and the parallels or differences in the ideas that return are worth attending to. (The process of returning as marked by both difference and similarity is also the nature of performance. Richard Schechner refers to performance as characterized by 'restored behaviours': performances repeat [5]. More recently, Rebecca Schneider, in *Performing Remains*, has addressed the political stakes of how performance remains and returns [6].) Performance is attuned to this repetition but, for the purposes of this paper, I am more interested in the relationship that a performance generates. It is through exchange – one person witnessing another in something that has been named a 'performance' – that it constitutes it affects. As Maria Chatzichristodoulou writes, performance and digital arts both 'are inherently in process'.<sup>[7]</sup> These processes form a relation that operates in a tension between the intention of the person who 'produces' the performance and those whom engage with the processes it creates. It is the qualities of the relationship between a spectator and a performance that Stein addresses and that, I argue, can be mapped onto relationships mediated by contemporary digital interfaces. I am specifically interested in how artistic practices start to make use of digital interfaces – email, direct messages, videochat and so on – and the technical and emotional disjunctions they produce.

And so, what disturbances does Gertrude Stein bring to the practice of making and understanding within digital communication? Ulises A. Mejias, in *Off the Network*, argues that reframing our approach to 'noise' is a tactic for finding space outside the networks: the effort is in the shift 'from trying to solve the problem of *communicating in the presence of noise* to one that sees *noise as communicating presence*'. [8] This small paper will focus on the notion of 'noise as communicating presence' as it echoes in performance and will put forward a practice of accumulating disturbance by mapping Gertrude Stein onto the interface.

## Stein & Nervousness

In 'Plays' – one of a series of lectures that made up a tour of America in 1934 – Stein turns her attention to the theatre and its 'problem':

This thing the fact that your emotional time as an audience is not the same as the emotional time of the play is what makes one endlessly troubled about a play, because not only is there a thing to know as to why this is so but also there is a thing to know why perhaps it does not need to be so. [9]

The dissonance between your emotional time and a play's emotional time, between you and me as we communicate across an interface, is what makes one 'endlessly troubled'. To be troubled, however, isn't necessarily a bad thing. It is the occasion for thought. Stein's nervousness easily becomes, comes from, the noise and mutation of a disrupted signal. Her emphasis on 'emotional time' points to the felt, the affective experience of being together as imperfect, disrupted. Stein finds syncopation in the theatre, a site where the audience and the performer are sharing time and space generally. There I will focus on how this affective nervousness, of being together whilst being out of sync, resonates with the asynchronic relations of contemporary internet communication practices. I argue that, in these instances, a similar nervousness is produced through an inverse process. It is the dissonance that comes from two (or more) parallel experiences, the unavoidable disturbance is/as the communication of presence. In our considerations of communication and the interfaces that mediate us, nervousness appears in the connection between the affectivity of relation and the functionality of a system that is the source of provocation. 'Nervousness' can be read as the affective experience of presence – our own, the interface and those communicated with – rooted firmly within the disturbances of digital communication technologies. This affective presence is, I think, significant in how and why we might act as 'accumulators or curators of disturbance'.

Through Stein, I want to purpose a practice of accumulating disturbances in digital communication that does three things: firstly, foregrounds relation through an attention to presence (of people exchanging, of technologies mediating that exchange) as an aspect of a system's processes. Secondly, explicates 'noise' and disruption as instances that confirm the potentialities of exchange (thus, confirming relation of people and technologies). Finally, provides a framework in which noise, as nervousness, does not indicate confinement in a totality but rather confirm both the possibility and the actuality of an otherwise. It emphasizes our differing positionalities within the functions of modern communication technologies. Gillian Rose argues that, through the interface we can attend to the intersection of people and digital technologies that shapes and is shaped by their usages. [10] Nervousness as the result of both noise and one's experience of it as it occurs in and through our communications when they gather inside the interfaces of our networks. Stein's particular experience of performance, what she calls the 'nervousness' caused by a syncopation in 'emotional time' is echoed by Mejias's description of noise as communicating presence. The question is, how does

this help us to develop a theory for a practice that values the accumulation of these disturbances and the affective dissonances they produce?

### Nervousness and Performances (1972 – 2014)

An early example of a performative artwork that actively stages this sense of disturbance as nervousness is *Boomerang*. In 1974, Richard Serra and Nancy Holt experimented with the looping of live broadcast television in *Boomerang* (1974). The work, which now exists as video documentation that can be seen on YouTube, is a single shot of Nancy Holt as she speaks about the experience of listening to her own voice (See Fig. 1). Holt narrates the experience of talking while listening to her own voice, slightly delayed, televised live. *Boomerang* is a touchstone for thinking about art's reflexive self-situating within technology. It is particularly pertinent to later internet art practices insofar as it plays with embeddedness in a communication technology that is infinitely easier within a ubiquitous networked culture. Understood in relation to contemporary (post) internet art practices, *Boomerang* anticipates the friction of a mediated relation across web communications. Its operations and effects are rooted in Holt's nervous relation with herself.



Fig. 1. *Boomerang*, 1974, Nancy Holt and Richard Serra, video. Copyright: MoMA.

However, in *Boomerang*, the artists are in a television studio using specific and specialized technology: the experience of a delay in sound is novel but is not directly reflective of friction in contemporary digital processes. However, it sets up a similar effect in contemporary artworks that are more clearly in dialogue with our actual experiences of technology today. In the Tate Room Live performance *Les Yeux d'Argos* (2014), video streams between London and Paris are edited into the live performance as it occurs via Google+ and YouTube. As the connection between the performers (who are also siblings) skips and pixelates, these technical difficulties add to the shape of the performance while also reminding the spectator of their own conversations with far away loved ones. Similarly, Leah Lovett's *Contraband*

(2014) – a sing-a-long between London and Rio de Janeiro – strives for but can never really be quite in sync due to the slight delay caused by miles of fiber optic cables travelled. All three of these examples find their affect – or an important part of it – in the meditation of a relationship, with one's self or a distant group of people as it intersects with technical disturbances. I am interested in how this dissonance, either as the threat of failure or simply as the evidence of connection mediated between two locations, operates as an artistic tactic for intentionally creating nervousness.

### Accumulating Disturbances

All of these works operate through the syncopation of communication technologies. Like Stein's experience of the theatre, this syncopation translates into a sense of being at different emotional times. The performer and the audience, or even the performer and her mediated self, are not concurrent despite also trading on the sense of being at once. The simultaneous communication, of video feeds in these examples but also of emails and messages and the other instantaneous modes of digital communication, performs a connection despite our syncopation: a same time despite being in different emotional times. The noise of the connection – instances of digital friction – exacerbates the nervousness that comes from emphasizing those different emotional time; it erases the ease that a clear connection strives for and highlights the inevitable syncopation that comes even with the most 'perfect' connection. An artist's (sometimes prior) presence is added with an audience's present presence to create a performance – less a technological noise, more an acute feeling of being mediated by technological possibilities. The moments of friction, of noise or partial failure that the technology produces in mediating our relationship, makes us nervous. To be nervous is to know that there is noise, to hear presence communicated. Stein identifies something fundamental to the way in which a process of communication invites attention to itself, something that is 'is not a contradiction but a combination and that combination causes one to think endlessly.' [11] Thinking through Stein, a shift in understanding the noise – as opposed to the signal – becomes easier: 'noise as communicating presence' is Stein's nervousness, the technological confirmation of another's unsynced presence.

### Thinking Endlessly

We – anyone who uses contemporary communication technologies with criticality, so perhaps everyone – are invested in the importance of thinking endlessly about what the effects of materials and relations situated in digital communication processes are. We think endlessly because our experience is syncopated as we speak across a video feed, we are having different emotional times. In *Les Yeux d'Argos*, to siblings are trying, failing and succeeding in their attempts to dance together between London and Paris

with striking results that emulate the tensions of any conversation with family performed over the internet (See Fig 2). The sing-a-long staged in *Contra-Band* (2014) is conducted in full awareness of the impossibility of harmony: disturbing the sense of community it strives to create is exactly the point. The dissonance, the annoyance and humour of its struggle belie the broader unease about censorship and the communication of political dissent. In both works, the nervousness of knowing that you are not at the same time as someone else despite the fact you are is integral to the performance. Technological disturbances and their affects function to highlight relationship while confirming the tensions implicate in that act of relating.



Fig. 2. *Les Yeux d'Argos*, 2014, Selma and Sofiane Ouissi, video, Copyright: Selma and Sofiane Ouissi.

This is the combination that is not a contradiction of being apart while being together, the noise of unsynced presence in which we are accumulating disturbances. This combination (that is not contradiction) is the 'along-sidedness' of a system, taken up by Alexander Galloway in his discussion of Serres in *The Interface Effect*:

"Systems work because they don't work. Non-functionality remains essential for functionality. This can be formalized: pretend there are two stations exchanging messages through a channel. If the exchange succeeds – if it is perfect, optimal, immediate – then the relation erases itself. But if the relation remains there, if it exists, it's because the exchange has failed. It is nothing but mediation. The relation is a non-relation." [12]

For a practice of accumulating disturbances, syncopation is the relation that fails to erase itself. This is the fact of existing imperfectly that throws the system into relief, emphasizing the processes it performs as they are made and seen to happen. I know we are talking, you know I am talking from somewhere else: 'noise as communicating presence'. The intention, in performance always, is to be practicing relation. This is an important way in which it runs counter to technological processes. That something happens, is made to happen and is experienced as happening. Accumulating disturbances demands attention to those parallel experiences. It is a

practice that holds on to the relation that fails to erase itself. This is also way a practice of accumulating disturbances for technology is useful: the combination *is not* a contradiction. It is relation that refuses to erase itself. And that causes one to think endlessly about that relation, a relation that is marked with the nervousness of its dissonance. Nervousness, in a practice of dissonance, is the visibility of relation.

### Endlessly Troubled

Nervousness is the visibility of relations that are defined through the fact of their not progressing together. It is ‘the certain proof that the emotion of the one seeing and the emotion of the thing seen do not progress together’. [13] The emphasis on emotion, not just the affective experience but also its implication within a broader cultural framework tethers the technical – a bad connection – with the experience of feeling and understanding that disruption. A feeling that becomes a means of understanding is exactly the communicating of presence that noise can and does produce. Mejias’s larger project in *The Off Network* is to think beyond the network – as metaphor and as system – into something more complex and less confining. It thinks through and around the spaces that the network produces, attending to the ‘noisy and unpredictable’, the thing that makes one ‘endlessly nervous’ while also being the combination (not contradiction) that makes one think endlessly. The doubling of the interface as ‘concerned as much with unworkability and obfuscation as with connectivity and transparency’ is useful enabling the conditions suggested by Mejias, in which we shift from noise as disruption of presence to noise as confirmation of presence beyond the strictures or possibilities of the system. The ‘endlessly troubling’ nature of ‘nervousness’ ultimately rests in the desire to understand why it is functioning in this way and how it might be possible for it to function elsewhere.

### Conclusion: Communicating Presence

Within all of this, Stein’s experience of performance – which here becomes a theory of accumulating disturbances in art for digital interfaces – is about how the processes, or internal logic, of an artwork and an experience is ultimately troubled and troubling empathetic relation. It is a theory that layers the agencies at play in a process, that attends to how ‘interface as an intersection of these agencies’. [14] However, by thinking about Stein and her nervousness as a means for approaching noise, it has been my aim to begin the work of thinking about the differences between different kinds of performances. Here, social performances and artistic ones, digital and ‘live’ ones. Performance is a tricky term, and I believe that its expansiveness allows us to make tricky connections. Here, the experience of these intersecting agencies is one of nervousness, a nervousness that extends beyond the one to one relationships of communication or artistic practice into the interplay of agencies that

create and control these systems. The feedback and affects of being in relation make one endlessly troubled. Endlessly troubled in that we have to address ourselves to difference as a condition. The endlessness moves towards the possibilities of difference. The use, of noise/of failure/of syncopation, is that it opens up a space for thought that *acknowledges plurality*: an acknowledgement of presence that reinstates difference. Stein addresses nervousness with a blatant disregard for the conventions and functions of the form: not necessarily removing the nervousness of the form so much as making that nervousness the impetus of the drama. Ultimately what is at stake here is a thinking possibility in diversity while also thinking about its affects. One is nervous about different emotional times, something that I hope disrupts the utopian promise of noise as difference while still holding it as a valuable mode.

**‘It is in short the inevitable problem of anybody living in the composition of the present time, that is living as we are living as we have it and now do live in it.’[15]**

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