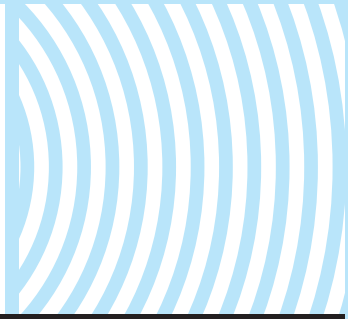# Process, Composition and Difference

Spencer Roberts

Biography

Spencer is primarily interested in temporality and abstraction. More specifically, he is interested in their relationship to generality and to the production of difference. Taken together, these concepts represent the key themes of the philosophical perspective known as Process Philosophy. Accordingly, he is interested in a diverse range of thinkers from both the Anglo American and European process traditions (Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, Nicholas Rescher and Alfred North Whitehead). Whilst Spencer's concerns are mainly philosophical, his practice is diverse. His work embraces a number of activities, including writing, artwork, programming and electronics, and he explores their parameters through a series of process-philosophical themes.

The central tension in process thought concerns the relationship between novelty/ innovation and connectivity/ integration. That is to say, for process philosophers the world is in a constant state of transformation or flux, but the immanent flows, fields and forces that underpin such transformation are positioned as inter-relational, inter-connected and in some sense mutually constitutive. Thus the process perspective considers everything to be engaged in a perpetual mode of transformation, but suggests that despite the necessity of differentiation, connections and relations nevertheless proliferate. In accordance with this emphasis upon concepts of temporality and connectivity, much of Spencer's work engages in one way or another with technology. As a consequence, it is often programmatic or electronic in nature, combining custom written computer software with analogue and digital electronics, to explore conceptual issues through the practice of physical computing.

The production of software and electronic circuitry allows him to exploit the rhythmic and temporal potentials of computer technologies in a broadly material fashion. His work investigates the ways in which deterministic procedures – the looping, iterative and structural processes instituted by computer technologies – can be most productive of difference. That is to say, monolithic infrastructural technologies and protocols often facilitate new avenues for resistance, and inculcate fresh and innovative modes of expression through transversal forms of connection.

Though generally based upon physical electronics, the form of his work is diverse. It has ranged from a small electronic box that endlessly performs Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (*Beckett Machine*, 2008) through to a network of dripping devices that render a visual and kinetic representation of the turbulent nature of news media onto the surface of a series of submerged maps (*Newsdrip*, Anneke Pettican and Spencer Roberts, 2005). *Beckett Machine* was included in the Bury International Text Festival, 2009, whilst his work with Anneke Pettican has been shown Internationally (UK, Japan and Bulgaria).

Current Research

Recently Spencer has been working with Louise K Wilson. In 2010, at the Dortmund Kuenstlerhaus, they exhibited a modified vintage record player that synchronised a four channel 'choral' audio track to a recorded monologue by the nuclear-chemist Otto Hahn in which he discusses the apparatus and processes employed in his early experiments with fission. The speech was cut to vinyl disc and played on repeat in the gallery space. The synchronisation of the four-channel sound with the record player's speaker was achieved through the utilisation of an Arduino microcontroller and two modified mp3 players. Spencer and Louise will exhibit new work in July 2011 at Gooden Gallery in Vyner Street, London. The new work will incorporate an LCD screen, archive footage, and an electronic device that will periodically tap at the pane of a dirty window.

In another context, Spencer's work in relation to physical electronics has also allowed him to explore possibilities
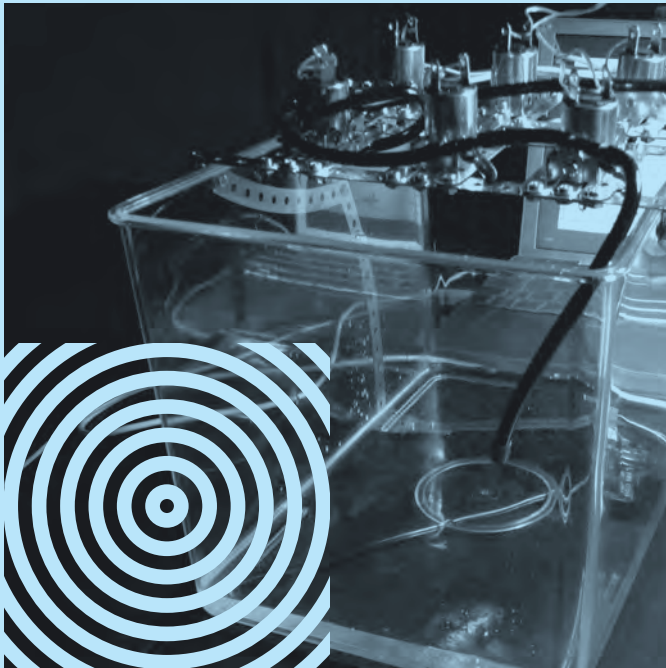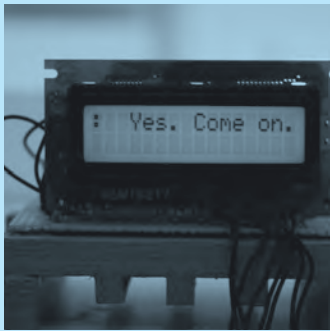
for contemporary modes of performance. He has been working with Impossible Theatre for a number of years producing a mobile, multi-screen, networked, interactive projection system. This is currently being toured on the international festival circuit. They have also produced a series of animatronic figures that are responsive to audience movement. The latter, in coll-aboration with multi-media theatre company Forkbeard Fantasy, will be exhibited at the National Theatre towards the end of 2011.

Alongside his art practice Spencer has developed a number of online archiving system for curators and artists. In this capacity he has worked for organisations such as BANFF, No-w-here, Brass Art, Grafik Magazine and CRUMB. He is currently developing an archival indexing system for the Otolith Group (a collective who were shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 2010).

Spencer works in a thoroughly praxis-oriented fashion - with artworks providing the starting point for papers and vice versa. Thus both the Beckett Machine and Newsdrip projects have informed conference papers focused upon the process philosophical thought of Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze.

Spencer is currently in the final year of an AHRC funded PhD at the University of Hertfordshire. His research attempts to apply process-philosophical insights to the debate concerning the legitimacy of practice-based research. It highlights the aesthetic and developmental aspects of textual research by positioning textual production as a long-durational, inter-textual, relational mode of composition. Exploring the nature of this compositional process, Spencer foregrounds the tensions between innovation and inte-gration that are characteristic of many forms of research enquiry. He suggests that research processes bring with

them what appear at times to be conflicting demands – there is a demand for the researcher to innovate (make an original contribution to knowledge) whilst nevertheless locating their work with respect to a research history or tradition. As such research processes are expressive of a certain tension between cultural innovation and cultural reproduction. Spencer's thesis argues that it is here that we can find commonality between what may appear to be radically diverse modes of research practice.

According to Spencer's thesis, this concern with cultural differentiation and cultural repetition maps on to the aforementioned tension at the heart of process philosophy between transformation and integration, and in light of this the concept of process becomes a valuable and importantly neutral means of comparing traditional and non-traditional forms of research. That is to say, a disciplinarily neutral, processual

focus, allows us to assess diverse research activities, including those emanating from the arts, taking into account domain specific modes of cultural and material innovation, as opposed to adopting or imposing criteria derived from more traditional (textual) modes of research. Thus research in the sciences and the arts are each concerned with cultural-material innovation and reproduction, but the methodological requirements for this innovation and reproduction differ across contexts, are subject to different kinds of emphasis and involve variable modes of expression.