

Agency and Domination in Communicative Performance

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ABSTRACT

Communicative approaches to musical composition and performance promote symbolic dialogue between performers and audiences, and seek to expand agency for all participants. Such approaches include the altering of performance rituals, the destabilizing of the performance space, and the use of interactive compositional structures. This paper explores the relationship of communicative performance practices to the social context in which they are conceived and experienced. How can communicative practices address the issue of domination while remaining truly dialogical? Pierre Bourdieu's conceptions of the habitus and the field of cultural production emphasize the strategic action of agents: agents act in order to maximize real or symbolic capital. Jürgen Habermas readily acknowledges the prevalence of strategic action in social relations and in private speech acts, yet he argues in favor of communicative action as essential to the rehabilitation of the lifeworld in a democratic society. However, since Habermas pays little attention to the social status of speakers, his theory is vulnerable to the charge of being universalist and transcendental. The author argues that communicative performance practices create a dynamic space for the experience of communicative action, conducted through verbal and non-verbal means. Drawing on recent work of New Music New College, the author explains how issues of domination can be made thematic in experimental composition and performance, thus leading to reflexive awareness. In the context of the field of cultural production, such practices take on a strategic function, taking a position in the institutional debates about artistic and social value.

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AGENCY AND DOMINATION IN COMMUNICATIVE PERFORMANCE

I shall begin by quoting Pierre Bourdieu: “To change the world, one has to change the ways of making the world, that is, the vision of the world and the practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced (1990a, p.137).” This aptly expresses the broader objectives of my performance group, New Music New College (NMNC). Though NMNC is focused on the performance of contemporary music, we are equally concerned with the way this music is presented. We wish to alter our audience’s perception of the music, of the performance event, and of the relationship of both to culture and society. Yes, we are ambitious and we have an agenda: we seek to foster reflexive awareness of the social significance of musical composition and performance, expand the agency of audience members during performance, and forge a sense of community. Ironically, the very practices that we employ to empower our audience—altering performance rituals, destabilizing the performance space, employing interactive compositional structures—can take the form of domination. In the interest of audience liberation and reflexivity, we run the risk of imposing new forms of control. This essay is an attempt to work through this contradiction, exploring the relationship of our practices to the contexts in which they are conceived and experienced.

Before working through the problems of agency and domination, I will provide background information on NMNC—our performances, our development as an institution, and the theoretical foundations that inform our work. I will then discuss our communicative performance practices, focusing on *Social Studies*, an original collection of interactive vocal compositions, first performed in 2003.

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NMNC’s repertoire could be described as “post-traditional.”¹ Tradition constitutes the deep background for our music, though the relationship of this music to tradition is by no means transparent. In the work of Cage, Cardew, Berio, Xenakis, and Zorn, to name but a few, the musical past is treated reflexively, with a full awareness that technique is historically conditioned and that aesthetic values are socially contingent. Post-traditional music, like post-traditional culture as a whole, is the product of a rationalization process that has taken place over the course of centuries. In the case of music, this rationalization process has been profoundly asymmetrical. On the one hand, music’s abstraction—its unparalleled relationship to number and its distance from empirical reality—has allowed its sonic organization to reach astounding heights of complexity. It is hardly surprising that lay audiences find much contemporary music bewildering and confusing. On the other hand, the performance contexts of music have remained deeply traditional. The structures of the recital and the orchestral concert have not changed significantly since the nineteenth century (Small, 1998; Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998). Designed for the presentation of music based on specific formal conventions and reception structures (intended primarily to negate the ephemerality of performance and to strengthen music’s status as one of the fine arts), these antiquated formats only

¹ As a term, “post-traditional” denotes conditions of radicalized modernity, in which traditions continue, though without inherent authority. As Anthony Giddens writes in “Living in a Post-Traditional Society: “Traditions are called upon to ‘explain’ and justify themselves... traditions only persist in so far as they are made available to discursive justification and are prepared to enter into open dialogue not only with other traditions but with alternative modes of doing things (Giddens, 1994, p.105).”

heighten the alienation of audiences from contemporary music and lead them to project their discomfort onto the music and the musicians. This is why we have chosen to pay as much attention to the contexts of performance as to the music being performed.

As these contextual remarks suggest, NMNC's work is very much "after Adorno" in spirit (DeNora, 2003). Our understanding of music's potential to function as social critique on a purely formal level has been shaped by Adorno's thinking, as has our belief that music can offer utopian input to society (Miles, 1997). At the same time, we have broken with Adorno in several ways. Our repertoire includes music that might be described as popular, or at least popularly inflected, and we have embraced forms of experimental music that, while radically unfamiliar, are wholly accessible to lay audiences.

In developing artistic strategies, NMNC has frequently drawn on theoretical models from the social sciences and philosophy. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production (1993), with its emphasis on the institutional production of value, has provided a conceptual framework for NMNC's work from its beginnings in 1998. Ostensibly, NMNC was created for the purpose of presenting contemporary music for the aesthetic pleasure of the New College community and Sarasota audiences. On a deeper level, NMNC is an instrument for social intervention. Our objective has always been to legitimate experimental artistic practices through a reflexive approach to the production of discourse, performance, and composition (Miles, 2006a). The ability to confer legitimacy on artistic practices flows directly from social power and prestige. As Bourdieu writes: "The work of art is an object which exists as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art (1993, p.35)." We therefore make all decisions—from the selection of repertoire, to choices of venue and staging, to marketing—with a view toward the strategic expansion of NMNC's cultural authority and power.

Even as we have pursued this strategic agenda as an institution, we have developed performance practices that emphasize openness and dialogue. In this regard, no theory has been more important to our work than Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. Described in the simplest terms, communicative action is a form of social interaction, pursued verbally or nonverbally, oriented towards achieving understanding and consensus. Habermas's theory has proven especially useful to NMNC for several reasons. First, Habermas formulated it specifically to address the problems of social organization in post-traditional society.² Second, communicative action is designed to address the chasm that exists between the formulation of knowledge by experts ("system") and the "lifeworld" experience of lay people in the cognitive, social, and aesthetic domains. Third, Habermas places dialogue and rational debate at the center of his theory. In the context of post-traditional society and culture, there are no ultimate grounds for reason, there is only the strength of the stronger argument. If reason is to be truly emancipatory, it must be understood as fundamentally intersubjective, not as the manipulation of objects in the minds of individual subjects.

In keeping with Habermas's theory, communicative approaches to musical composition and performance promote symbolic dialogue between performers and

² Though "post-traditional" is a widely used term, the term employed in Habermasian discourse is "post-conventional." This denotes a specific form of communicative action, one in which actors understand all of their commitments and values as open to interrogation. This is in contrast to "conventional" communicative action, in which some claims of tradition are held beyond interrogation (Cooke, p.54).

audiences and seek to expand agency for all participants. Our 1998 performance of John Cage's *Song Books* at the Ringling Museum consisted of five simultaneous solo recitals, in which the performers followed independent trajectories through the museum's exhibition of Joseph Beuys's multiples. In this indeterminate presentational space, the audience was invited to explore the music from multiple vantage points (Miles, 2008a). For our "Minimally Experimental" program of 2005, we juxtaposed the aesthetic closure and formal control of Steve Reich's *Piano Phase* with the openness and willful abandon of Frederic Rzewski's *Les Moutons de Panurge*, presenting the former in the closed space of a recital hall, and then moving outside for a rock band performance of the Rzewski. Most significantly, we built on the compositional achievement of Pauline Oliveros, particularly her *Sonic Meditations*, creating interactive compositions that often take the form of games that can be performed by everyone present.³

NMNC is about to embark upon on a new phase of research and performance, so this is a timely moment to critically interrogate our communicative performance practices. Specifically, how can communicative practices address the issue of **domination** while remaining truly dialogical? Do communicative practices function ideologically, persuading participants of the possibility of free and unhindered communication when such conditions are flagrantly contradicted by social experience? Or rather do they function as utopian input, offering participants the experience of a social model that is implicitly critical of existing conditions? I will first address the issues of agency and domination within the context of performance and will then move on to the broader social perspective.

THE CONTEXT OF PERFORMANCE

Given the objectives of NMNC, communicative performance practices offer numerous advantages over conventional methods. On the most basic level, these practices disrupt habitual patterns of reception. Concert audiences are so inured to the standard presentational format that they may not give it a moment's thought. Audiences experience the music and the presentational space, though they may only be aware of the former. Additionally, most people listen to recordings far more than live performances, and they bring these habits of reception to the concert experience. This can mean listening in a distracted manner, taking in music as discrete, structurally disconnected moments, or treating music as a disembodied art form: music as sonic abstraction. (As someone who grew up listening to recordings, learning to recognize the structures of classical music, I would often close my eyes at live performances. I found the musicians to be distracting.) NMNC's performance practices announce to the audience that conventional rules don't apply: we take nothing for granted.⁴

There are other advantages to these methods that I should mention. NMNC invites reflection on and engagement with the performance space. We want our audiences to become reflexive about the "structuring structures," to use Bourdieu's terminology, that condition meaning in performance. Also, audience agency is enhanced. By presenting music in unusual spatial formations (*e.g.*, performers dispersed over several rooms), audience members are offered numerous choices. As they move about the performance space, they exert conscious control over their own perception

³ For a complete account of NMNC's performance the *Sonic Meditations*, see Miles, "Objectivity and Intersubjectivity in Pauline Oliveros's *Sonic Meditations*" (2008b).

⁴ This heightens audience awareness of the contingency of performance conventions. When we do use the standard recital format, it is recognized as one choice among many.

of the music. Finally, by becoming physically mobile or by contributing vocal sound to participatory works, the sensory involvement of audience members is intensified. Instead of simply looking and listening, the audience members use their whole body.

However, do audiences ever “simply look” or “simply listen?” Before waxing excessively about efforts to liberate audiences, practitioners of communicative performance must remember that audiences enjoy considerable agency in conventional performance contexts.

The use of space in a conventional concert establishes a rigid distinction between performers and audience, a distinction that is both spatial and functional. The performers are *there*, playing the music; we are *here*, listening in silence. But to say that audiences listen to music says nothing about how they listen. Each member of the audience exercises considerable control over their cognition of the music, focusing his or her attention on details or on the whole at will.

And this only takes the subjective experience of the aural into consideration. Even in the moribund atmosphere of contemporary concerts, there is always some measure of intersubjective communication between performers and audiences, part of what Bernard Beckerman calls “the oscillation of stimulus (McAuley, 2000, p.276).” This communication usually occurs in the form of “looks.” Audience members offer focused gazes and adopt postures of attention toward the performers, and they often use facial expressions to communicate their interest, pleasure, or displeasure. Though instrumental performers often direct their gaze toward each other, most performers will tell you that they clearly perceive the energy of the audience, an energy that is gauged by audience behavior. (When NMNC performs in our school’s small recital hall, the response of audiences is very easy to gauge. The wall at the rear of the stage is white, so when house lights are down and stage lights are up, the light is reflected back onto the audience, illuminating everyone in the house, all the way to the back row.)

A second audience “look” is with other audience members. Spectators notice what others are doing, how they are responding to the performance, and they occasionally make eye contact. They even monitor audience members who are watching other audience members. Though the spatial organization of the modern concert hall suggests that all eyes are trained on the stage, this is fortunately not the case.

The spatial and functional organization of conventional performance thus offers audiences protection—from the performance. This protection allows an *inner* play to occur in freedom. In this way, the supposed domination of the audience by the performance and the performance space is balanced by a significant degree of subjective agency (McAuley, 2000, p.271).

This leads to the next question: What are the risks of communicative performance with respect to the questions of agency and domination? Based on NMNC’s work over the past few years, I would cite three specific hazards.

First, interactive performance structures can offer false communication. Such performances ostensibly empower the audience with greater agency, but they sometimes are much more controlling than conventional performances. Consider “Affiliation,” one of the compositions from my *Social Studies* collection. All of the *Social Studies* pieces are intended to foster reflexive awareness of the social dynamics

of performance. The music takes the form of verbal instructions for sonic games.⁵ In the case of “Affiliation,” a piece that addresses the issue of how individuals come together and reach agreement, all participants spread out over the entire performance space (in the case of our performance, this meant three large adjoining rooms in an old mansion). On a cue, everyone who wishes to participate sings whatever pitch they wish. As they pause to take a breath, they listen for others who are singing the same pitch. If they find such a participant, they “affiliate” with that person.



Illustration 1: NMNC performs “Affiliation”

If not, they may affiliate with someone singing a different pitch: the two participants must gradually alter their pitches until they have found the midpoint between them. They then are singing a unison interval. This process continues—between individuals and then between groups—until everyone is singing the same pitch. As the sound mass becomes more unified, it becomes more spatially focused as well. The final unison is sung by the whole group standing in one place. ([View video of performance](#)) Note that the structure of “Affiliation” is unidirectional: no resistance by participants is allowed. Also, for the spectators, even though they are free to move about at will, they eventually find themselves standing on the outside looking in: they are completely excluded from the performers’ final triumphant unison. As one audience member commented after the work’s first performance, “Is the point of the last piece to resist as long as possible? To come to a unison as quickly as possible? What’s to prevent someone...from never agreeing?”⁶

A second hazard of communicative performance practices is that they can promote self-consciousness rather than reflexive awareness. When audiences are implicated in the performance as active, mobile participants, they themselves become performers in a sense. The oscillation of stimulus is disrupted: doing supplants looking and listening. “Affiliation” again provides a case in point. The actions required of

⁵ In conception and format, the *Social Studies* pieces are heavily indebted to the work of Pauline Oliveros, particularly her *Sonic Meditations*. For details, see Miles, “Composing Reflexivity: The Social Studies Project” (2006b).

⁶ From questionnaire, distributed at the Social Studies performance, March 16, 2003.

participants in this piece are quite complex. Listening to others, then focusing on your own pitch, then modifying that pitch - these actions absorb the participant's attention. The "look" that is involved is not one of detached observation of the whole but focused attention on another individual participant or small group of participants. Moreover, each participant's performance virtually precludes focus on the performance as a whole.

Finally, communicative performances can fall into the trap of regarding the audience as an undifferentiated group. Ironically, this is a carry-over from conventional performance, where treating the audience as a mass has an equalizing effect, placing expert and novice on the same level. By contrast, when audiences are invited to become participants, their varying status and agendas with respect to performance become apparent. In the case of the "Affiliation" performance, not everyone was positioned equally to participate. Some participants were members of the performing ensemble, some had significant experience as performers, some were familiar with NMNC's events, while still others were completely uninitiated. No one was forced to participate, of course, but the assumption that everyone who wanted to join in was equally positioned to do so was a fiction. By speaking of relative positions within a field of action, I have of course moved into the discursive realm of Pierre Bourdieu. We shall turn now to the social context of communicative performance, focusing on Bourdieu's challenge to Habermas's theory of communicative action.

CHALLENGES TO COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

As I stated earlier, Habermas's theory has proven very useful to NMNC in its emphasis on the mediation of expert culture and lay experience, its cogent analysis of post-traditional culture, and its intersubjective conception of reason. However, it is worth remembering that Habermas developed this theory in part as a way to overcome the limitations of earlier critiques of instrumental rationality, particularly that of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Through the theory of communicative rationality (the framework for reason that underlies communicative action) Habermas took "the linguistic turn" and moved decisively away from the philosophy of consciousness. While this dialogical conception of reason is a welcome departure from the subject-object model, it points up one of the main problems with Habermas's theory: it emerges from the field of philosophy and is extremely abstract and universal in its sweep.

When Habermas discusses the exchange of speech acts by communicative actors, he makes several assumptions. First, he assumes that understanding is the ultimate goal of communication: self-interest is subordinated to this end. Habermas writes:

"I shall speak of *communicative* action whenever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding. In communicative action participants are not oriented to their own successes; they pursue their individual goals under the condition that they can harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions." (1984, pp.285-86).

Speech acts and validity claims are exchanged freely until consensus has been achieved. Yet, Habermas never explains why actors would be willing to set aside their own interests. Second, Habermas assumes that communicative actors enjoy a self-conscious mastery of the means of communication and the situations in which it takes place. Participants in communicative action are obviously post-traditional individuals, those who have adopted an ironic position toward their own

commitments. In short, Habermas treats a very narrow and specific social context as universal. The social position of actors is not addressed. The issue of domination is discussed in pejorative terms and is relegated to the practice of strategic action.

This is where Bourdieu's theory, emphasizing strategic decision-making, serves as a necessary corrective. Bourdieu situates agents within the competitive field of the *habitus*, the world of socially constructed relationships that is experienced as reality:

“...systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (1990b, p.53).”

As competing conceptions of social life, the advantage of the *habitus* over Habermas's *lifeworld* is that the former is understood as a field of action. Agents occupy different positions within the *habitus* and seek to acquire real or symbolic capital through their actions. Communication, both verbal and nonverbal, is employed strategically, and not necessarily with self-conscious mastery. Consensus is by no means normative, though it can be pursued for strategic purposes. From Bourdieu's perspective, domination is always an issue and communication is always distorted.

What are the implications of Bourdieu's analysis for communicative performance, specifically for NMNC? In several respects, Bourdieu's insights into agency and domination help to strengthen and clarify communicative performance practices. The theoretical choice is not simply one of “Bourdieu or Habermas,” but rather how the insights of these two thinkers can be fruitfully combined.

First, let us consider the problem of models of communication that are abstract and universal. I have already discussed what can happen when a group of individuals is regarded as a mass. However, we should remember that audiences for live performance—whether musical or theatrical—are already unified to a considerable degree. Audiences tend to be self-selecting, based on the desire for a specific kind of performance. Thus these audiences are socially situated, occupying a narrowly defined portion of the social space. Our publicity is designed to reach this segment of the arts audience. Therefore, the audience for NMNC events arrives expecting communicative performance. It would be inaccurate to say that we impose such performance on our audience.

Second, communicative performance entails constraints upon action, but unlike the *habitus*, these constraints can be made explicit and thematic. One of NMNC's strategies has been to devise performance and compositional structures that call attention to these very constraints. In this way we attempt to make power visible (Bourdieu, 1994, p.164). For example, in “Persuasion” (another piece from the *Social Studies* collection), individual singers initiate patterns that compete for the group's allegiance.



Illustration 2: NMNC performs "Persuasion"

The audience is able to observe the collective competition, even as they listen to the interplay of sonic material. ([View video of performance](#)) A work such as this constitutes symbolic struggle on both the objective and subjective levels: NMNC creates a physical space in which symbolic power becomes discernible to the audience, while at the same time attempting to alter this perception by fostering reflexivity (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.134). Using Habermas's terminology, NMNC problematizes previously unthematic aspects of the lifeworld, bringing them from the background to the foreground (Habermas, 1998, pp.242-246).

This point is crucial, as it constitutes one of the ways in which NMNC is attempting concretely to alter our audience's understanding of music and social life. In the case of *Social Studies*, the reflexive character of the event went beyond the performance to include printed materials as well. While the program offered some information about the *Social Studies* compositions, including a short introduction and instructions for all the pieces, we also distributed a questionnaire to audience members before the performance. There were two points to this. First, we wanted the interactive character of the event to be clear from the start. The students of NMNC therefore greeted audience members as they arrived, handed them a questionnaire and a pencil, and talked with them briefly about the performance. Second, the questionnaire oriented audience members to the themes of *Social Studies* by asking them to reflect on their own musical experience. Since the questionnaire included pre-performance and post-performance questions, it helped reveal the immediate impact of the *Social Studies* event, something that was useful to the audience and, of course, to NMNC. ([View questionnaire](#)) As one audience member wrote, "This event in social studies really opened my ears to the effects of social influence." From another questionnaire: "Wonderful experience for both 'statics' and actives. Communion."

Finally, NMNC consciously exerts institutional power—academic, cultural, performative—in the struggle over meaning and value. Ostensibly, our purpose is to perform contemporary experimental music. Our secondary goal is to use our power

to make manifest a particular audience—an audience that is open to post-traditional culture, an audience that shares a perception of the world and a posture towards political action. We wish to make this audience visible first to themselves and then to the surrounding community. This does not happen simply by bringing people together in a physical space. As Gay McAuley notes, audiences become a collective through the process of responding (McAuley, 2000, p.250). By entering into the interactive space of communicative performance, our audience starts to take on the character of a community.

If NMNC's performances have raised social awareness on the part of our audiences, our efforts to legitimate experimental music have had a demonstrable impact on the practices of local arts institutions. Ten years ago, the Sarasota Orchestra (then known as the Florida West Coast Symphony) played no contemporary music at all. They were convinced that their audience, dominated by aging retirees, would never tolerate anything other than standard orchestral repertoire. Over the past several years, two things happened. One, like all orchestras, the Sarasota Orchestra (SO) administrators began to worry about their future audience. Second, these same administrators noticed that NMNC was consistently attracting large crowds for performances of "hardcore" contemporary music, even experimental music, music that was supposedly alienating in its effect. In 2007, the SO decided to offer a contemporary music program, entitled "New Music New Year." The similarity of the program's title to our name was not coincidental. The SO consulted with me on every aspect of the program, from the selection of works (which included Ligeti, Revueltas, Danielpour, Pärt, and Schoenberg) to the marketing strategy. They asked me to give a pre-concert lecture and I gave them permission to use the NMNC mailing list. By every measure that was important to the SO, the concert was a success. This year NMNC and the SO have embarked on The Crossroads Project, a two-evening festival that will feature, on the first night, New College student rock bands (even punk bands) working with SO musicians, followed the next night by the SO's performance of a commissioned orchestral work by New College alum, Silas Durocher. *SRQ*, the leading cultural magazine of Sarasota, recently ran a cover story about this project. The cover reads "Progressive Culture," with a caption reading "New College and the Sarasota Orchestra: Avant-Garde Music." It is a tangible sign of change when the conservative local orchestra actively associates itself with the local new music group and adjusts its programming accordingly.

Returning to the quotation from Bourdieu, offered at the outset of this essay, I hope that it is now clearer how NMNC is attempting to "change the ways of making the world." Domination is an integral part of all performance: it would be pointless to avoid the issue. The real question is how to make domination—and agency—integral parts of the thematics of performance, how to explore *with audiences* these dimensions of meaning in performance. Communicative practices enhance the dialogical potential of performance, creating contexts for the experience of communicative action. Within the larger field of cultural production, such performances function strategically, arguing for the necessity of open and unrestrained communication.

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