LIVE NOTATION: ACOUSTIC RESONANCE?

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ABSTRACT

The present paper acts as a viewpoint shared by two authors: a live coder who uses their programming language in live music, and a live artist who uses their body in live fine art. We provide background to these practices, before entering a dialogue exploring their confluence. The subject of the dialogue is a hypothetical collaborative performance, from which a shared platform of live notation could be explored. The relation between code and body is confronted from both perspectives, looking for a role for live notation as an intrinsic part of live work, both for body and code. In this we consider notation as not being something that precedes, defines or is created by a performance, but as activity that resonates within a performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present paper is a confluence of two performance arts, finding a viewpoint for a live artist and live coder to reflect upon their practice, and look for means of collaboration.

There is some existing context for this work, for example Nick Collins has applied the principles of live coding to dance, working with choreographer Tessa Priya, and separately with Matthew Yee-King as Wrong-Headed [1]. Similarly, some fine artists have worked with public performance and programming in the construction of multimedia and performed work, such as Simon Biggs in Body Text (2010), working with dancer Sue Hawksley and sound artist. However, we present this discussion marks a new point of departure.

The practice of live art is neither choreography nor dance, but rather fine art in the temporal embodiment of live action. Accordingly, the present exchange between live coder and live artist takes the form of a philosophical rather than technological engagement. We take this as a step towards a performance collaboration, where the present paper focuses on the step rather than the destination.

Before beginning our dialogue, we provide context for it, by introducing live coding and live art in comparative terms.

1.1. Live Coding

It may seem that live coding is now well enough known to the computer music community to need little introduction. However, in truth the nature and purpose of live coding is still not well established even by its practitioners. It involves computation, but surprisingly not even that is well defined: we have great understanding of halting Turing machines, but the computer systems we use and interact with are rather different [2]. For our present purposes we take the stereotype of live coding as being performance as implicit; a programmer on stage, writing code to make music, with their computer taking on changes to the code on-the-fly. Importantly, the code is projected for an audience, exposing the activity of programming, the code acting as the programmer’s metaphorical voice. The live in live coding is often taken in this sense, of a life performance before an audience. However, it is important to note an alternative broader usage has always been present, which is concerned with any live interaction, even in a solitary composition process [12]. At its heart, live coding is concrete action through abstract code, perceived in the present moment.

The emergence of live coding has taken the computer music community by surprise [3]. Perhaps this is because on the surface, live coding is somewhat at odds with what is expected of the computer as a tool, its discrete and continuous texture in balance, most presently into amorphous music. Of course there are many contemporaneous and historical musics which overly include both discrete and continuous texture in balance, most presently the growing dubstep family of genres, for which the affordances of code give us only limited reach. Indeed, we are sympathetic to the view that human perception necessarily involves both continuous imagery and discrete syllogomy [9].

Live coding is still in the ascendency, with new languages and approaches continually developed, shared and performed with. In support, the present conference has established expert live coding review panels for both music and papers, and the Computer Music Journal (CMJ) recently published a DVD of videos featuring twenty two ‘second generation’ live coding practitioners, with a special issue to follow. So why live coding, and why now? One explanation could simply be that there is a generational wave of computer music researchers who enjoy beat-driven techno and electronica, and find live coding to be a promising line of research for this domain. Furthermore, more they may see such musics as a natural target for computer music research; while Patcher software [10] is based on analogue synthesizers, and Digital Audio Workstation software is based on the early sequencer and tracker interfaces which gave birth to acid house music are at base digital interfaces for discrete time structures. Using programming languages to process discrete patterns allows a computational, full-stack musical lattice, from functional or procedural composition to discrete events.

Live coding could also be seen as a counter-movement against once radical but now traditional approaches in the broader computer art field. For example, the notion of generative art, as popularised by Brian Eno, is often defined in terms of autonomy [4]. But to focus on autonomy is to ignore the relationship between the programmer and their work, and therefore ignore the programmer altogether. Live coding counters this by exposing a running program as a component of the activity of programming, and therefore as human activity rather than disembodied autonomy. By projecting their screens, live coders could be making the point that “this is not what software is doing, this is what we programmers are doing”.

All this brings us to a troubled sentence: live coding provides a linguistic interface which affords a musical lattice. The trouble is that language does not only exist via a discrete alphabet, but also as it is articulated by being spoken, written or signed. Natural language has dual existence as both a sequence of discrete words, and a continuous spoken prosody. When listening to speech, we naturally decode it by discrete chunks, but can also experience it both at the same time, interwined, in mutual support [9]. As a result, by exposing the code work in live performance, we stumble upon an intriguing opportunity to extend the source code into a continuous and dynamic pattern, or more recently Vanessa Bercroft’s installation live art works where up to thirty identical body-shaped women, usually vaguely naked, stand motionless confronting the visitors to the space, vb45.904.3all (2001) is particularly striking.

Not that any of the above live works fit neatly into any category and there would no doubt be variation in which term any of those referenced would identify with. The areas outlined above are offered as a way for a newcomer to such practices to grasp a handle on a complex, difficult and often confrontational form of human exchange. The field, like live coding, is determined by the practitioners themselves. Key to understanding where live art...

[For this reason, the definition of what Live Art is as a practice, as distinct from recognising it when you see it, is frequently taken, even by those who think of themselves as practising, teaching or writing in the area, as usually uncertain, contentious, or an unhelpful exercise.]

Nick Kaye [5]
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1. INTRODUCTION

The present paper is a confluence of two performance arts, finding a viewpoint for a live artist and live coder to reflect upon their practice, and look for means of collaboration.

There is some existing context for this work, for example Nick Collins has applied the principles of live coding in dance, working with choreographer Tessa Priya, and separately with Matthew Yee-King as algostep artist Kiti le Step. Similarly, some fine artists have worked with public performance and programming in the construction of amorphous music. Of course there are many contemporary and historical musics which overtly include both code and body labour, such as digital art, and ‘performing’, a rejection of tradition and entertainment which can be applied to many performance-based practices.

LIVE ART

One explanation could simply be that there is a generational wave of computer music researchers who enjoy beat-driven techno and electronica, and find live coding to be a promising line of research for this domain. Further, more they may see such musics as a natural target for computer music research; while Patcher software [10] is based on analog synthesizers, and Digital Audio Workstation software is based on discrete machines, the 16 step sequencer and tracker interfaces which gave birth to acid house music are at base digital interfaces for discrete time structures. Using programming languages to process discrete patterns allows a computational, full-stack musical lattice, from functional or procedural composition to discrete events.

Live coding could also be seen as a counter-movement against once radical but now traditional approaches in the broader computer art field. For example, the notion of generative art, as popularised by Brian Eno, is often defined in terms of autonomy [4]. But to focus on autonomy is to ignore the relationship between the programmer and their work, and therefore ignore the programmer altogether. Live coding counters this by exposing a running program as a component of the activity of programming, and therefore as human activity rather than disembodied autonomy. By projecting their screens, live coders could be making the point that “this is not what software is doing”, this is what we programmers are doing”.

But all this brings us to a troubled sentence: live coding provides a linguistic interface which affords a musical lattice. The trouble is that language does not only exist in a discrete alphabet, but also as it is articulated, by being spoken, written or signed. Natural language has dual existence as both a sequence of discrete words, and a continuous spoken prosody. When listening to speech, we naturally associate it with discrete sounds, as if we experience the other step-sequence oriented musics, the affandances of code may feel completely natural. For electroacoustic musics, performing with live code may feel less natural, simply because discrete structures of code do not map as well to amorphous music. Of course there are many contemporary and historical musics which overtly include both discrete and continuous texture in balance, most presently the growing dubstep family of genres, for which the affandances of code give us only limited reach.1 Indeed, we are sympathetic to the view that human perception necessarily involves both continuous imagery and discrete syllogism [9].

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2 FOR THIS REASON, THE DEFINITION OF WHAT LIVE ART IS AS A PRACTICE, AS DISTINCT FROM RECOGNIZING IT WHEN YOU SEE IT, IS FREQUENTLY TAKEN, EVEN BY THOSE WHO THINK OF THEMSELVES AS PRACTICING, TEACHING OR WRITING IN THE AREA, AS ESPECIALLY UNCERTAIN, CONTROVERSIAL OR UNHELPFUL EXERCISE.

Nick Kaye [5]

1 Although note the work of MCLD (http://mcld.co.uk/) in integrating live coding and beatboxing, particularly his performances with the algostep artist Kiti le Step.
comes from (now in reference specifically to practices such as Reeve’s) is to recognise that it is decidedly anti-
theatrical, site-specific and usually performed once only. The action risks unfolding live over time un-rehearsed, ex-
perimenting with the aesthetic as opposed to formal beauty or ‘excellence’. In fact, a live art work’s meaning emerges
through the very fact that the performer is not ‘pretending’ or even necessarily ‘skilled’ in terms of using the body;
live artists are not trained in the way dancers are, for ex-
ample, but that would not stop them dancing, if the idea-

2. Dialogue

Hester Reeve (HR): Despite apparent differences between live coding and live art, we’ve had some very energised philosophical conversations and always seem to tune in to
similar areas of value. Does this mean if we were to start
work on a collaborative project it would be straightforward-
forward?

Alex McLean (AM): Well I think the problems that
might emerge could be interesting, and in so a way it
wouldn’t be a shame if it was straight away, I think about it. That is meaning-
ful somehow from a live art perspective, so I would see
one aspect of my collaborative effort to affirm that in
your practice. I use my body as a medium in my work
because I feel it is (in our culture) extremely honest and somehow it demands people consider potentiality, the
power of depth of human agency, which freaks most people
out. For example, when Oleg Kulik runs around naked in a
gallery or city centre as a savage dog, often being people,
audiences may claim to be shocked by his coarse actions
which turn over social norms but to my view of things,
the real shock that such live art actions force people
to encounter is that the music and the nature of
THIS is true, we decided IT, we uphold IT and look, I’m
undecided IT. IT gets undecided relatively easily ergo
you have the capacity to undecide IT. And of course,
undeciding is as interesting as sticking rigidly in one
cause the alternative of showing nothing is worse. So
the place that code has in a live coding performance might be
understood better on considering why live artists show the
body.

HR: For me as a live artist, the body-being of a live
art work is obviously central, but it’s not the core essence
of that centre (it certainly can not be removed). I am not
sure straight off what I do think is more elemental to the
work than my body making it happen. Interestingly, I get
that same sense of something ‘elemental’ (for want of a better
expression) when I look at the code in a live coding
performance. I also respond to the coder’s body invested
in labour at the laptop, yes, but the code is not mere result
or documentation, because it has live agency but only as
you witness it. The fact that there’s that flicker of agency
without-a body is somehow deeply stirring.

AM: Yes I agree there is a question of what a body
is. I have been rather enthusiastic about the notion of a
couple of decades, to the point that code has been an
important window of experience for me. Is my code part
of my body? I am reminded of a discussion I had with
my father, when we realised that we were speaking
about our bodies and minds. For my father, her body was
rational and her mind irrational, so for example her mind
would want to jump on the next Eurostar train to Paris,
but her responsible body would stop her. For me my body
wants to go to Paris and my rational mind stops it. This
kind of basic mismatch in bodily experience might also be
a problem in our (as yet hypothetical) collaborative per-
formances. But talking at cross purposes does it seem to
realise it? If such an incompatibility unfolded during a
performance, that could be exciting, or it could result in
‘failure’.

HR: For starters, I am not sure that our collaboration
means that as a live artist my job is to confront you
with your body or make you consider its ‘performance’. For
me that would be somehow to miss the point. And, as I
have suggested, this might be because there is not ‘dramatic’
or ‘presented’ in any way, that concentration in the task
which is witnessed through the coder’s body carries its
own significance. I think about it. That is meaning-
ful somehow from a live art perspective, so I would see
one aspect of my collaborative effort to affirm that in
your practice. I use my body as a medium in my work
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potential depth of human agency, which freaks most people
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rational and her mind irrational, so for example her mind
would want to jump on the next Eurostar train to Paris,
comes from (now in reference specifically to practices such as Reeve’s) is to recognise that it is decidedly anti-theatrical, site-specific and usually performed once only. The action risks unfolding live over time un-rehearsed, excluding some of the parameters that are applicable in the theatre. What is everything. So, the live artist is an ordinary human being prepared to do something in front of others in order to open up the potential of liveness per se.

Perhaps unexpectedly, a synchronicity/confusion between the practices of live coding and live art is now im- 33
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2. DIALOGUE

Hester Reeve (HR): Despite apparent differences between live coding and live art, we’ve had some very energised philosophical conversations and always seem to tune in to similar areas of value. Does this mean if we were to start work on a collaborative performance it would be straightforward?

Alex McLean (AM): Well I think the problems that might emerge could be interesting, and so in a way it would be a shame if it wasn’t straightforward. But I think it will also be unlikely, as I think issues of the body are some-what alien to computer programmers.

HR: And that’s obviously not the case with live artists. And yet, I always start my process for a work from abstr-act ideas – philosophical ideas as opposed to camal ones. But of course, I am very interested in what my body then has to do in order to embody or be true to those ideas. This conceptual-idea basis to live art might mark another difference between our two practices. So, exciting but not straightforward.

AM: Yes it is interesting that in live coding there are two ways a composer can get music, it is as if music is gener-ates it, and no-one really seems sure about what the pur-pose of showing the code is. Some suggest it is to en-hance the experience of the music; I think it might just draw attention to the mouths of the personnel that might otherwise go unnoticed, that might cause the alternative of showing nothing is worse. So the place that code has in a live coding performance might be understood better on considering why live artists show the body.

HR: For me as a live artist, the body-beings of a live work is obviously central, but it’s not the core essence of that centre (it certainly can not be removed). I am not sure straight off what I do think is more elemental to the body than the working body making it happen. Interestingly, I get that same sense of something ‘elemental’ (for want of a better expression) when I look at the code in a live coding performance. I also respond to the coder’s body invested in labour at the laptop, yes, but the code is not mere result or documentation, because it has live body but only as you witness it. The fact that there’s that flicker of agency of- fering-up of a body without a body is somehow deeply stirring.

AM: Yes I agree there is a question of what a body is. I have been rather enthusiastic about a couple of decades, to the point that code has been an important window of experience for me. Is my code part of my body? I am reminded of a discussion I had with my brother, when we realised that we were processing information for our bodies and minds. For my sister, her body was ra-ra...
ing the time structures I want to construct through my code, shift away from the wholly grid-based acid techno I have become preoccupied with for the past couple of years and back towards looser time, not in terms of inaccuracy but in terms of events which organise themselves into heterarchies, rather than imposing a fixed grid upon them. Repetitions, and multiples of the number four are psychologically extremely important to me, but to the point where I need to fight against them through polyrhythmic patterns and musical arcs that end in chaos. This is an opportunity to create an important shift in my musical activity, influenced by your actions but as part of my own musical development.

HR: Is it possible to relate more about the coding aspect of your performance work to me - a non-programming person. Your type of coding is a curious mixture of abstract language and concrete making born in the same moment. Is it a logical process then?

AM: Well code takes much the same form as written text such as this, discrete alphabetic marks on a page. When we read a novel the text might evoke sensory experience, and when a computer turns code into sound it is an analogous process. So when that code is interpreted live, the senses can be manipulated through the text. The history of computer programming is in both mathematics and textiles, and I think the latter still offers the best metaphors for programming, following a knitting pattern, or giving a machine instructions which are woven into results. But of course with programming, I don’t feel the wood moving between your fingers, and code involves extra steps of abstraction; not just patterns, but patterns of patterns. Live coding reconnects these levels of abstraction with tangible experience, so half of you is lost in discrete language, and the other half is lost in a musical moment. This is a lot like speech, discrete words intertwined with musical prosody. So for you, how does this kind of notion of abstraction relate to body work, or notations of body work, in live art?

HR: Except with live coding, your brain is not in command of the end result in the way that it is when the weaver weaves or someone else is doing it. Or do you know exactly what sounds will emerge as you code, in the way that a pianist can anticipate what will happen with her fingers in a certain arrangement on the key board? It’s hard to know how to answer your question. Notation is just not a term that has ever been used in association with live art, or not yet. The term has concrete relevance to the planning stage: behind the scenes plotting things out before they happen, a casual but crucial memory jogger of what happens where, that no one but the director and actors ever see. But live art is realised-completed live, only the work’s idea-basis might be ‘noted’ before hand, and at that as an exploration rather than a determination. I do make drawings leading up to a performance, more to cast a spell over the process and give me confidence that something that absolutely nobody has asked for. I’ve always considered these to be drawings. But this new term we’re playing with, ‘Live Notation,’ promises something to me and more than the initial association of a performer’s actions activating abstract symbols or mark making in front of an audience. My initial premonition of this is that it’s the performance of notation that allows the elemental to inhabit it in some way, but for only so long as the notation exists.

AM: I might not know exactly what will happen when I change the code, but I anticipate what might happen. This is the same as a painter, who makes a mark on canvas, experiences the results, and decides whether it is good before making the next mark [6, p. 33]. So my brain is locked in a feedback loop with the code, output and the body – the brain has an idea, writes some code, the code is turned into output, and experienced through the body.

HR: So, are you insinuating that the value of the body in our respective performances is to maintain the ‘world,’ ‘matter,’ ‘other humans’ somehow as constituent in the form of the work but without the need to represent them? No resonance without any of those things?

AM: Yes I think I agree with that, at least as a starting point. Shall we leave it there for now and write a conclusion?

3. CONCLUSION: LIVE NOTATION: ACOUSTIC RESONANCE AND NON-COCHLEAR SOUND

“Non-Cochlear Sound addresses sound as a conceptual, contextual construct. Non-Cochlear Sound might function in a sound-like fashion without specifically referencing or making sound, it might use sound as a vehicle for transporting ideas or materials from point A to point B, it might even make sound but only as an excuse for initiating other activities. Sound always makes meaning by interacting with other things in proximity: geographic proximity, ideological proximity, philosophical proximity. Non-Cochlear Sound is nothing more – and nothing less – than the acknowledgement of this reality.”


As our dialogue between live coding and live art demonstrates, ‘Live Notation’ is not about an exchange of techniques or skills (although we are open to the need arising) but instead, and perhaps a little surprisingly, more about excavating ontological concerns in order to understand and support deeper, concealed ‘shared space’ that lies at the heart of both practices (at least in terms of the authors’ particular exercise of them). This shared space seems linked to resonance rather than any type of content, a resonance that can only come to bear through the presence of the people. However, it is not a resonance across the palm area that is read, it is what we describe as “extended-body.” The notion of non-cochlear sound seems particularly apt for helping us ‘grasp’ this concealed shared space that is as conceptual as it is physical.

Non-cochlear sound most obviously links to the musical aspect arising from the live coding side of our potential performance collaboration; the music from the live coder’s actions is closer to the patterns of the programming aspect of the performance, than to the recognised patterns of sound made for the audience’s ears. It is as much a spatial resonance as it is music to be heard or danced to and this point is amplified by the showing of the code. But ‘non-cochlear sound’ also enables us to posit the body of the live artist to be similarly construed and received by an audience as a spatial resonance rather than a figure-personality. Following Lefebvre’s examination of spatial practice in the public arena [7], sound acts as a mediator that locates the body in relation to other bodies. Expanded and conceptual notions of sound may be more important to live art than it currently acknowledges.

In our dialogue above, both live coder and live artist think through this notion of spatial resonance and realise it as dependent upon the body-at-work or body-being element in both performances. In this context just what we mean by a body is brought into creative and philosophical questioning. Is the body of the performer here as much an amplifier of spatial resonance for other human bodies and in this context can we speak of other non-human aspects of the performances as “extended body?” Something ritualistic is suggested and embraced if not fully understood as yet.

Are we simply getting carried away by ideas? It must be admitted that this paper stands as an initiation of the project – whether there is any weight to these posturings can only be answered through realising a collaborative live performance.

Figure 1. The Live Notation logo, evoking a cave painting hand-print, marked with discrete lines.

One concrete step we have taken towards collaboration is to produce a logo for a research project under the banner of ‘live notation’. Less to brand our endeavour and more to establish a talisman for its journey. We are taking a risk and are aware that there is something linked to ritualised communication that connects the practices. The live notation logo takes inspiration from some of the first marks left by mankind – the hand-prints such as those found in the Pech-Merle caves in France. Three geometrical forms, similarly shaped into the palm area, are an association between ancient and contemporary. In these ancient caves sound and mark making were used as part of ritualised communication. Often red dots of colour are daubed around the hand prints, and scholars suggest that these mark points of aural resonance within the caves that the tribes people would have exploited in their rituals. Some scholars have gone as far to name such events as the first ever rock concerts [11]. It is hard not to think that aspects of these performance-rituals were about inhabiting – if temporarily – the world as extended-body.

4. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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5. REFERENCES

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HR: Except with live coding, your brain is not in command of the end result in the way that it is when the weaver weaves or someone speaks to another. Or do you know exactly what sounds will emerge as you code, in the way that a pianist can anticipate what will happen with her fingers in a certain arrangement on the key board? It’s hard to know how to answer your question. Notation is just not a term that has ever been used in association with live art, or not yet. The term has concrete relevance to the planning stages of theatre; a behind the scenes plot of the play. The notations programme.

AM: I might not know exactly what will happen when I change the code, but I anticipate what might happen. This is the same as a painter, who makes a mark on canvas, experiences the results, and decides whether it is good before making the next mark [6, p. 33]. So my brain is locked in a feedback loop with the code, output and the code – the brain has an idea, writes code, the code is turned into output, and experienced through the body.

HR: So, are you insinuating that the value of the body in our respective performances is to maintain the ‘world,’ ‘matter,’ ‘other humans’ somehow as constituent in the form of the work but without the need to represent them? No resonance without any of those things?

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[11] I. Reznikoff, “Sound resonance in prehistoric times: study of the hand-prints such as those found in the Peche-Perière caves in France.” Three geometric forms, strings, grooves across the palm are notations of the performances as ‘extended body?’ Something ritualistic is suggested and embraced if not fully understood as of yet. Are we simply getting carried away by ideas? It must be admitted that this paper stands as an initiation of the project – whether there is any weight to these posturings can only be answered through realising a collaborative live performance.

One concrete step we have taken towards collaboration is to produce a logo for a research project under the banner of ‘live notation’. Less to brand our endeavour and more to establish a talisman for its journey. We are taking a risk and are aware that there is something linked to ritualised communication that connects the practices. The live notation logo takes inspiration from some of the first marks left by mankind – the hand-prints such as those found in the caves. These geometric forms, strings, grooves across the palm are notations of the performances as ‘extended body?’ Something ritualistic is suggested and embraced if not fully understood as of yet. Are we simply getting carried away by ideas? It must be admitted that this paper stands as an initiation of the project – whether there is any weight to these posturings can only be answered through realising a collaborative live performance.

As our dialogue between live coding and live art demonstrates, ‘Live Notation’ is not about an exchange of techniques or skills (although we are open to the need arising) but instead, and perhaps a little surprisingly, more about excavating ontological concerns in order to understand and support deeper, concealed ‘shared space’ that lies at the heart of both practices (at least in terms of the authors’ particular exercise of them). This shared space seems linked to resonance rather than any type of content, a resonance that can only come to bear through the presence of others. However, it is not a sense of an association between ancient and contemporary. In these ancient caves sound and mark making were used as part of ritualised communication. Often red dots of colour are daubed around the hand prints, and scholars suggest that these mark points of aural resonance within the caves that the tribes people would have exploited in their rituals. Some scholars have gone as far as to name such events as the first ever rock concerts [11]. It is hard not to think that aspects of these performance-rituals were about inhabiting – if temporarily – the world as extended-body.