

Death of a Designer

A Noise Opera for Pixel-Line Orchestra

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1 Concept

This is a proposal for an experimental drama which illustrates and interrogates the technical and social systems that operate within the microcosm of the Graphic Design Industry - a world with an inner life that is invisible to most people. We are surrounded by the polished products of an image industry that rarely provides any insight into its functioning. This work changes the focus from the finished output to the process of creation in an attempt to shift the understanding of graphic labor from object to subject. In constituting an orchestra, the designer becomes an instrumentalist and her actions and decisions artistic expressions.

The Orchestra is presented as a *Design Agency*, with workstations for digital painting, photography, type and illustration. Each station is configured with hacked versions of FLOSS software that can generate OSC messages for distinct acts of graphic labor: paint, cut, erase, move, filter, etc. A sonification engine, most likely PD-based, interprets these events in realtime and converts them to sound. The images themselves are also saved to a central git archive, displayed and converted to sound with every new set of changes.

2 Background and Motivation

I was involved in the conception and realization of the first Pixels and Lines Orchestra this last June in Bergen. It was an inspiring and beautiful experiment which has given us a foundation concept for future work. Specifically, I would like to add a narrative social layer. This element of drama provides a way to temporarily shift the discourse around design from a question of *what is created* to one of *how work is done*. As an engineer and an artist who has been deeply involved in the Design World for the past several years, I am often perplexed by the reluctance of many graphic artists to consider their tools. The parallel specters of the dominant Adobe Suite and precarious labor conditions beg for an interrogation of the epistemology of working with media.

Ideally, in order to turn the concept presented here into a successful performance, I would have a collaborator who is especially focused on sound and orchestration, some-

one to develop a sonic narrative. This person should be able to devise instruments which express or contrast the technical processes that occur in the user interface of the workstations as well as the emotional content of the story.

All artistic decisions will be made collectively. The content will change during the residency in order to integrate the ideas of my partner as well as discoveries made in the process.

3 Description of the Work

The performance takes place on a stage resembling a minimalist design bureau. The conductor, librettist and primary antagonist for the performance is *the Boss* who sits at a raised desk at the back of the stage. The protagonist is idealistic *Lead Designer* who works feverishly at his desk. The *libretto* is not sung but displayed as a projection of the email application on the Boss' screen. With each action, email and git-push the tonal qualities of the sonification change to suit the drama taking place. The plot is borrowed from classic tragedy plays and short stories and would be something like:

1. Another day in the office. Boss says we need a new customer! None to be found!
2. A prospect calls. A pitch is made. A customer is acquired!
3. Too much work. The boss is cruel and manipulative, making promises about money and status. But the heroic designer fights on to create a great corporate identity.
4. The client will not accept the design. The designer tries desperately to compensate to adapt to changing customer demands. The boss is angry and blames the designer.
5. It was just a cruel trick for tax purposes. The designer dies. His logo goes unused.

4 Method and Plan

The PLO presents a context where it is possible to lay open the human and technical conditions of media labor and it does so by exclusively using FLOSS. The residency would entail developing the following components:

1. Build Workstations
 - (a) Ubuntu with a stripped down UI
 - (b) Hack Scribus, GIMP, MyPaint, Inkscape, git and Thunderbird to generate events and send them to the event server.
2. Sonification Server - Likely combining PD and Underweb as this worked well during LGRU

- (a) Create Tone Patches for each instrument
 - (b) Create variants for each act and dramatic shift
- 3. Libretto and Score
- 4. Casting - we will need designer / actors to perform
- 5. Set Design - a design bureau with desks and minimal lighting
- 6. Rehearsals - we will need to practice at least twice