



PINBALL ETUDE

Lecture Performance by Michel Roth and Aleksander Gabryś (2023)

A lecture performance for speaker, pinball machine and doublebass player, on expanded musical play by transferring gameplay skills into musical practice and, vice versa, to radically challenge gaming communities with musical play-along.

Part of the Festival *SPIEL! Games as Critical Practice* (Hochschule für Musik Basel FHNW) performed at Theater Basel on Friday January 27, 2023.

Michel Roth, Lecture and Concept
Aleksander Gabryś, Pinball and Doublebass
featuring the pinball machine MEDUSA

Video documentation: <https://youtu.be/oJrLpZqjC8w>

Script

Challenge Medusa!

Playing pinball is like playing a musical instrument: It needs practice and timing.

Aleks Gabryś, for instance, offered me to accompany my speech playing instrumentally on the Medusa machine.

He knows how to juggle the ball between the flippers.

The flippers are extensions of the human body: like keys on a piano or valves on a tube, they connect you with the vibrating stuff.

Each pinball game is a score: It organizes rules and choices.

Of course, Aleks rehearsed for this performance.

The cabinet where the ball rolls is a narrative translation of this score: here the rules turn into operational tasks. **Time your shot!**

The pull on the plunger sets a gear in motion that goes far beyond mechanical interplay: Together with the ball, you are shot into a space of possibilities that constantly reshapes and articulates itself in the moment of performance.

Components become actors – accomplices or opponents. **Light Gorgons!**

Everything that happens is immediately sensualised and takes on meaning, entire epics are stenographed onto the playing field by the ballpen and sweep you away: Aleks! **Medusa!** You! **Neptune!**... and me.

When we gather for multiplayer game, the machine even controls our human interaction.

Now we are both: player and plaything.

However, it is crucial that the playground is not purely accessible but limits the freedom of movement. The early flipper fingers were shorter than the index fingers that operated them. **Medusa's Revenge!**

This challenged human counterstrategies, such as shaking the machine to direct the ball with brute force. Against this, the TILT mechanism was developed, which penalised the use of external means.

Today, the flippers have finger-length and allow fully controlled shots. Now I really seem to juggle the ball with my bare fingers.

My mind can slip into the cabinet... **Enter Neptune's Cove!** ...and become a spring or a magnetic coil – what a self-efficacy experience! My skills and my strategies define the pitch where the real showdown takes place: me against myself. **Prepare for Battle!**

Of course, this is only an illusion. Because after everything I succeed or fail at, the score is settled in the backbox, the counters turn, the cash register rings and demands more money to **Collect Neptune's Treasure!**

Oh, yes! Sound is the strongest weapon of this game. The ball rolls and rattles and makes you quickly forget the separating glass screen. At the same time, all moves magically activate a library of sounds in the backbox. This music always seems to know where you stand. **Match Seven for Extraball!** It provides the soundtrack to the plot of your performance, its tone is alarmed, triumphant, even merciless when it switches to the restart jingle as soon as you have lost.

Therefore, you interact with the machine much deeper than just by pressing buttons. This game is not limited to its regulated frame but activates its environment. Around the late 1970ties – almost at the same time as I did – the pinball machines learned to speak **Hahahahaha!** and now comment whimsically everything that is happening.

A sophisticated "Attraction Mode" lets them continue chatting, even when the game is lost, and they try to tempt you to a new game.

In a pinball club the machines are also competing against each other.

Conquer Olympus!

[From here, the speaker can optionally "tilt" the performer by shouting **Tilt!**]

Is it just a coincidence that among my closest musical friends here in Basel there are several passionate pinball players?

I am talking of Uli Fussenegger, Michael Kunkel and Aleksander Gabryś.

Is it a coincidence or of dimensional significance that all three are double bass players? Only one seems to contradict this rule – Christoph Moor, he plays the tuba...

Did I end up as a composer because I'm only an average pinball player?

In September 2021, I made a musical intervention into a running pinball club nearby Basel (you can see a video documentation over there in the SPIELHÖLLE).

My idea was to project the typical inner mechanics of a pinball machine onto the entire pinball club transforming the collective activity into an acoustic multiplayer-multiball-game.

I did this strictly within the common practice and rules of the club.

The intense play of the audience was part of this affirmative exaltation, but interestingly, after the initial euphoria, some of them stopped gaming and became observers, walked around and listened, while others looked through my concept and started to play and interact with the super-game that I had conceived...

The musicians played both, on pinball machines in a precomposed and rehearsed way and on their instruments in a highly risky and contingent way.

For this, I prepared their instruments with typical components like balls, springs, magnets, and thus transformed them each into pinball machines.

The process of interpretation now is entangled in a triple game – performing a score, but also playfully adapting to the current situation and commenting on both verbally.

Right now, Aleks is playing another piece of this series, my *Pinball Etude No. 3*, whose material is completely derived from this Medusa machine. Aleks idea to wear a mask and to assimilate to the image of the backbox is appropriate, because not only what he plays but also what he speaks follows exactly the logic of Medusa's backbox quotes. I transcribed the whole repertoire of possible sentences and integrated them into my Etude with the permission to exchange single words so that the player can comment on his own playing now.

Isn't it interesting that in the application of game theory in the musical avant-garde around 1960, special attention was paid to this possibility of commenting and reflecting on the musical playing in real time? Think of John Cage's and David Tudor's lecture-performances in Darmstadt, Henri Pousseur's commented radio version of *Répons*, Mauricio Kagel's *Sonant* or Iannis Xenakis' idea of a musical discourse in his orchestral pieces *Duel* and *Stratégie*.

The gamification of music seems to be associated with expanded means of communication.

Cornelius Cardew, Vinko Globokar or Hans Wüthrich went even further and understood musicking as a collaborative agency for political transformation. Vice versa, social awareness was supposed to enable a redefinition of musical playing.

Today, I personally believe that we need such an extended understanding of musical playing, on the one hand as a transfer of artistic knowledge into public engagement, on the other hand as an expansion and transformation of our music-making through new social and communicative realities.

By this, aesthetic play would become playfully dissolving and empowering at the same time: as a space for action and possibility in which critical playing with and against each other can be tested and practised together.

Analogous to Ludwig Wittgenstein's late philosophy, we can understand the omnipresence and ambiguity of play as an epistemic resource. Seen in this light, my intervention in the pinball club was a research on how different playing practices, game competences and play communities can learn from each other and collude in new ways.
Conquer Olympus!

Further information about the SPIEL!-Festival: <https://www.fhnw.ch/de/forschung-und-dienstleistungen/musik/hochschule-fuer-musik-klassik/veranstaltungen/2021-22/games-as-critical-practice>