

Systems for Play

Granoff Building – Studio 3 | Mondays 1 – 4 & Tuesdays 7 - 9

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Overview

This is a course on creating systems for organizing sound. It is also a course for using sound to think about and listen to systems. Through weekly projects, we develop scores, rules, programs and patterns for exploring the world with our ears. Readings and examples draw from sound art, fluxus, game design, cybernetics, rituals, dance music, and chance processes. Laboratory sessions introduce techniques for recording and processing audio and provide time and space to rehearse and tune our sound systems. Class time is spent actively experimenting with the (im)material properties of sound while listening critically and constructively to the systems with and within which we live.

Another View

Sound, like system, is everywhere, moving through us and around us. We make sounds, but we also play with what is already sounding, pushing it around, folding it, pointing to it, amplifying, multiplying, cutting and randomizing it, leaving it be. How does sound communicate? What does it tell us about space and time? About the relationship between people and objects? *Systems* influence who we are and how we play, pushing us, amplifying, dividing, and patterning us. Systems can be linguistic, cultural, technological, ecological, illogical, generative, fictional... How can we play (with) them? (Mis)use them? What are our strategies? Are we scientists with microphones, pilots navigating audio-worlds, or musicians adopting the methods of engineers, insects, logicians and mystics? This course is about attending to the noise, figuring it in and figuring within it. All systems *of* play and *at* play are *in* play, including this one.

Structure

Monday sessions include a discussion of the week's materials, readings and examples that serve as starting spaces for thinking about concepts like repetition, noise, resonance, silence, sampling, and feedback. In addition to historical, technical, and experimental perspectives, there is dedicated time for exploring these concepts through experiments and exercises.

Thursday laboratory sessions are used both to introduce techniques and rehearse and tune our systems. When necessary, the class becomes an ensemble, playing game pieces, event scores, conceptual instructions, and improvised experiments.

You are expected to be on time, having read, listened and rehearsed—ready to work | play.

Course Objectives

- Develop proficiency with concepts and technologies for working with sound and digital audio.
- Explore recent creative practices that blur the boundaries between sound, music, noise, silence, & art.
- Create your own sound systems and document them effectively.
- Develop deep listening skills and a critical yet generative lens for thinking about systems

Grading

20% | Attendance & Participation

Attendance and participation are mandatory. Unexcused absences beyond three will result in the deduction of a letter grade. Participation includes both in-class discussion and online or asynchronous discussion and documentation. You are expected to engage with all assigned materials prior to class and prepare questions or thoughts for discussion. (More about online discussion / documentation below)

10% | Presentation / Discussion

Working in pairs, you will prepare a short presentation and discussion session for one of the weeks.

40% | Projects

Short projects will be due most weeks. Be ready to present projects in class on the date they are listed in the syllabus. (more on the project documentation below)

30% | Final Project

4.09 - Presentation of Concept – 10%

4.30 - Critique in class – 10%

5.08 - Final Performance/Show - 10%

The form of the final project is open, but it should relate in some way to the themes of the course. Final projects must be significant in scope, but do not necessarily need to be singular works. They can be a series of iterations, a sustained practice, a system, etc.

Final projects will be presented for the public at the end of the semester.

Documentation

Video, audio, words, and/or pictures for each project should be posted online within a week of the project's deadline. The documentation does not need to be slick or wonderfully produced, but it should provide an idea of how the piece works, looks, and/or sounds for someone who was not there.

Materials

Most of the materials are available on the course website—systemsforplay.com. You are responsible for checking the website and viewing all materials that have been posted by Wednesday at 5pm for the following Monday's class. If something resonates with you, follow the rabbit hole—learn about the artist's inspirations, the production process, etc. Treat the materials as you might treat a text, view them from different angles, think about them while you are walking around.

There is one required book:

- *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* by Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner

There are hundreds of recommended books. Here are a few:

- *Handmade Electronic Music: The Art of Hardware Hacking* by Nicolas Collins
- *Listening Through the Noise* by Joanna Demers
- *Noise, Water, Meat* by Douglas Kahn
- *Sound Ideas* by Aden Evans

Policies

Assignments: Late assignments will not be accepted without prior approval. Prior here means at least a day before class. Of course, exceptions will be made for emergencies and illness provided there is adequate documentation.

Disability: Please speak with me during office hours if you have a disability or other condition that might require modification of the course procedures or exercises. For information visit <http://www.brown.edu/campus-life/support/accessibility-services>.

Academic Integrity: I expect you to follow the Brown Academic Code. Production courses sometimes call into question traditional notions of fair use, copyright, and plagiarism. If you have questions about a specific project, meet with me during office hours.

Communication: I will usually reply to emails within 24 hours. If I don't reply within 24 hours, email me again.

This syllabus and schedule will change as we move through the course

Schedule

	0		7
1.26	Introduction	3.16	Computers & Programming
1.29	Lab: Sound, Acoustics, and Digital Audio	3.19	Midterm Concert
	1		
2.02	Listening to Sound Systems	3.23	no classes
2.05	Lab: Introduction to Max/MSP	3.25	no classes
	2		8
2.09	Play & the Magic Circle	3.30	Time & Repetition
2.12	Lab: Object Orchestra	4.02	Lab: Teensy & HCI
	3		9
2.16	no class	4.06	Noise, Glitch, & Failure
2.19	Lab: more Max/MSP	4.09	Project proposal presentations
	4		10
2.23	Fluxus, Intermedia, & Chance	4.13	Context & Sampling
2.26	Lab: Principles of Instrument Design	4.16	Individual meetings and work time
	5		11
3.02	Games & Rules	4.20	Sound Art
3.05	Lab: Cobra by John Zorn	4.23	Rehearsal / work time
	6		12
3.09	Feedback & Cybernetics	4.27	In-class critique
3.12	Rehearsal	4.30	In-class critique
			13
		5.08	Final Show