Participation Over Belonging: Analysing Microsound Using Digital Methods

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Abstract

This paper presents new research in genre theory and analysis using digital ethnography methods. First, I address some of the problems and contradictions of genre in music, focusing on questions of agency, mediation, and the disavowal of genre by practitioners, art theorists, and critics. Second, I assess recent attempts to revive genre theory and make it into a workable concept for music, arguing that, alongside a focus on promiscuity, social mediation, and temporality, an attentiveness to 'where' it is that genre communities come together – including both offline and online spaces – is essential. In the third section, I examine the art music genre of microsound, providing a brief genealogy of the genre from its coinage by Iannis Xenakis, to its take-up on the .microsound mailing list, to its present-day form as a concept embodying sound art, DSP research, avant-garde composition, and post-techno styles. Following the rhetoric of the genre itself, I propose that microsound can be conceived of as a 'cloud' or 'network' of human and non-human actors: none of them indigenous to the genre, all having different levels of influence, and all – crucially – contributing something essential to what the genre 'is'. The fourth section uses Richard Rogers' Issuecrawler (an online ethnography software) to analyse microsound's social mediations as they are performed online. Using the .microsound mailing list as a knowledge source, I analyse patterns of online interlinkage amongst artists, record labels, festivals, magazines, concert halls, and other institutions associated with the genre, furthering the insights of the earlier genealogy of microsound using these empirical methods. Further work would multiply the types of association amongst actors to include formal connections amongst artists and texts, amongst others.

Introduction: In Denial

One of the defining signs that a new musical genre has come into circulation is when the artists that it clumsily draws under one umbrella renounce it. Concerning the term 'IDM' (short for 'Intelligent Dance Music') the Tigerbeat6 founder Kid 606 has said: "[I]t's a label invented by PR companies who need catchphrases. I like sounds, but hate what people attach to sounds" (Cowan, 2003: n.p.). Richard D. James of Aphex Twin voices similar sentiments when he says of the same term: "I just think it's really funny to have terms like that. It's basically saying 'this is intelligent and everything else is stupid.' […] I don't use names. I just say that I like something or I don't." (Gross, 1997) It is perhaps easy to see why the classification of music causes anxiety for practitioners. The names that accrue to musical texts

are not typically something that individual artists can exert much control over. In the film theorist Steven Neale's words, genres are "systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject" (Neale, 1980: 19). Whilst some agents have more power in categorisation, it is only in-circulation, once a work or artist has been released into the world, that a given grouping acquires meaning and agency. In theory, a name dreamt up by an individual fan can enter into mass circulation if it is taken up and understood by an audience in relation to other genres in circulation at that time. Just the same, a category imposed from 'above' by a radio station, label, or record store can fail to take hold if it doesn't successfully communicate something about musical similarity and difference to an audience (Brackett, 2015: 204). For practitioners who write their own music, and whose production is not bound to any explicit corporate end, this post-hoc, circulatory process can seem to deprive them of agency. The more arbitrary, misleading, or just plain annoying the semantic meaning of the category (like Intelligent Dance Music), the more brutal is the retroactive betrayal of the text or artist's particularity perceived to be.

Yet genre categories do not simply operate outside of musical practice, like the names of plants and animals (Barber, 2007: 32). The way the musical world is parsed and hierarchised into genres is performative, informing and constituting the musical practices that develop within them (ibid). It would be quite easy to show how a concept of genre does in fact influence the musical practices of Kid 606 and Aphex Twin, despite their pronouncements. The mutations, hybridisations, and transgressions of the late 90s 'IDM' period, or the 'return to acid house' phase of the mid to late 2000s, are only legible as such when they are considered in the context of the meta-genres that inform and regulate them: namely house and techno music.

The most radical claims of genre's redundancy tend to occur in those scenes that err towards art music, however. Here, alongside the pronouncements of non-belonging, we find the very concept of genre and its utility as a critical tool, being thrown into question. Paul Hegarty (2007: 133) on Noise Music:

> With the vast growth of Japanese noise, finally, noise becomes a genre – a genre that is not one […] In other words, it is not a genre, but it also a genre that is multiple, and characterized by this multiplicity […] Japanese noise can come in all different styles, referring to all other genres […] but crucially asks the question of genre-what does it mean to be categorized, categorizable, definable. This is what ties it together as a genre.

Derek Bailey (1993: 83) on Free improvisation:

> The lack of precision over [freely improvised music's] naming is, if anything, increased when we come to the thing itself. Diversity is its most consistent characteristic. It has no stylistic or idiomatic commitment. It has no prescribed idiomatic sound. The characteristics of freely improvised music are established only by the sonic-musical identity of the person or persons playing it.

And Kim Cascone (2009: n.p.) on .microsound:

> Yet here we are ten years later and it seems no-one can offer a stable definition of what .microsound is exactly. Journalists consistently get it wrong, outsiders get it wrong, and sometimes even some of our list members get it wrong by conflating it with 'glitch' or some other mutant strain of electronica. As of today there are no useful descriptions of tendencies in the contemporary practice of .microsound, which, in my opinion, gives testament to its success.

Since Hegarty, Bailey, and Cascone are talking about the redundancy of genre in theoretical terms, they raise a different question: does genre represent a useful analytical frame for art

music? These anxieties are not new, and are in fact symptomatic of much modernist art theory. Benedetto Croce, Theodor Adorno, and Carl Dalhaus all argued that modernism coincided with the decline in relevance of genre, and a rise in aesthetic nominalism (more colloquially, the notion that each work must be judged on its own merits) (Adorno, 2004: 199). Nominalism called for a more close-up focus on the works and corpuses of individual artists than the crude approximations of genre afforded. Whilst the debate has mostly subsided, its legacy lingers on. Both music theory and historical musicology are regulated by an epistemological commitment to the irreducible particularities of individual works and authors: whether in the close up focus of score, spectrogram, and aural analysis, or the emphasis on the lives and times of composers. Attempts to theorise categories of art and their circulation in the wider culture have generally been reserved for popular forms.

Genre theory 2.0

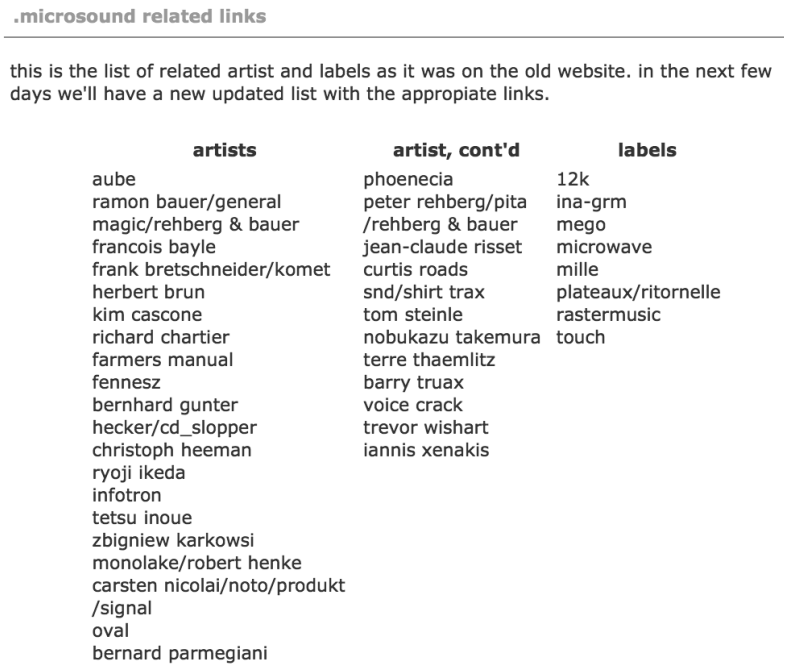
The last decade has witnessed a change in fortunes for the concept of genre in art music, however. Georgina Born, Joanna Demers, Eric Drott, and Charles Kronengold are just some of the writers that have made genre theory into a central organizing concept in their work on contemporary music. For Born and Drott, the question concerns how to make genre into a workable concept for music. Born has argued that genre theory must be "medium specific" and "attentive to music's social, material and temporal mediations as together they form a musical assemblage" (Born, 2014: 2). Drott (2013) on the other hand presents a more spatially-conceived analysis of genres that draws upon Bruno Latour's actor-network theory to theorise the ways genre groupings hold together. Both approaches provide useful tools for theorising genres, not as rigidly atemporal categories of attributes, but as fluid and sometimes-fragile assemblages of texts, people, and things that are continually being formed and reformed. Within these looser frameworks, fidelity to the emergences, endurances, deaths, bifurcations, hybridisations, mutations, and essential promiscuities of musical genre can be maintained.

This paper is informed by these recent re-theorisations of genre. What I want to add to them is an emphasis on where it is exactly that these genre dynamics are enacted and performed. In popular music studies the question of the geographical locatedness of cultural production has required a second concept, the more socially situated and colloquial notion of the 'scene'. The musicologist Barry Shank (1994: 122) portrays scene as "an overproductive signifying community" in which "far more semiotic information is produced than can be rationally parsed". Today, as cultural activity migrates online, the geographical resonances of scene would have to be extended to include the virtual spaces – discussion lists, free publishing and distribution sites, online forums, and other digital zones – in which artists, audiences, critics, and other intermediaries communicate about music. It is the diverse ways in which key actors in these music genres inhabit these online spaces, and the new social practices that emerge within them, that demand extended approaches to genre theory and analysis.

Microsound

My inquiry into genre and online scenes is focused on the amorphous and amoeba-like genre known as 'microsound'. What is it as a genre, or how did it become one? Despite Kim Cascone's portrayal of microsound, the explicit meaning of the term is fairly exact. Microsound delineates a precisely delimited realm of audio - specifically, sounds lasting less

than a tenth of a second (Roads, 2001: 86). It was coined by Iannis Xenakis in *Formalised Music* and later taken up by Curtis Roads to describe an approach to digital composition that, to a great extent, was concerned with extending Xenakis' early work in micromontage, granular synthesis, and granular processing. At this point microsound represents a critical concept and technique, one that is very much bound to the role of the computer in music. But Roads' book did other things, too. For one, it presented a history of microsound composition, which had the effect of retroactively reshuffling the canon of electroacoustic art music to bring composers like Stockhausen, Horacio Vaggione, Xenakis, and Agostino Di Scipio together under the same concept. Perhaps here we could call microsound a 'style' if we want to use that term – an approach to composition, but not a signifying category as such. Things change in about 1999, when Kim Cascone discovers the term in a talk given by Roads and borrows it as the title for the nascent mailing list he co-founded. *.microsound* was conceived as a forum for "discussion and exploration of a more general 'digital aesthetic' manifesting across a wide variety of styles and disciplines – from academic computer music to post-industrial noise to experimental ambient and post-techno" (Cascone, 1999). This crossover moment was important, since the discussions that took place on the list – amongst the first 'digitally-native' genre communities – served to concretise a set of unvoiced connections across 'art' and 'popular' styles - between glitch and micromontage, ambient and minimalism, drone and electroacoustic art music. These connections can be seen in figures 1 and 3.



.microsound related links

this is the list of related artist and labels as it was on the old website. in the next few days we'll have a new updated list with the appropiate links.

artists	artist, cont'd	labels
aube	phoenecia	12k
ramon bauer/general	peter rehberg/pita	ina-grm
magic/rehberg & bauer	/rehberg & bauer	mego
francois bayle	jean-claude risset	microwave
frank bretschneider/komet	curtis roads	mille
herbert brun	snd/shirt trax	plateaux/ritornelle
kim cascone	tom steinle	rastermusic
richard chartier	nobukazu takemura	touch
farmers manual	terre thaemlitz	
fennesz	barry truax	
bernhard gunter	voice crack	
hecker/cd_slopper	trevor wishart	
christoph heeman	iannis xenakis	
ryoji ikeda		
infotron		
tetsu inoue		
zbigniew karkowsi		
monolake/robert henke		
carsten nicolai/noto/produkt		
/signal		
oval		
bernard parmegiani		

Figure 1: links page from .microsound.org (used with permission)

The list's popularity, and the founding of labels like Raster Noton, 12k, LINE, and others (fig. 1) contribute to the tentative coalescence of .microsound as a genre category. It aggregated a discursive community, a set of organological and stylistic regularities, a body of critical literature (such as Cascone's 2000 article "The Aesthetics of Failure"), and a descriptive label. However, the evolution didn't end there. With the work of Richard Chartier, Taylor Deupree, Janek Schaefer, and the LINE label, microsound began to invade *other* territory: visual art, field recording, sound in the gallery, and so on. Coupled with the burgeoning writing on sound art and sound studies that posited listening as a creative act, and

used the barely-perceptible sounds of microsound to dramatise this, these directions began to create to push microsound away from the concert-hall and sound-recording centred genre communities of art and popular music, and into the environment and the gallery. It's this nexus of avant-garde composition, DSP research, post-techno, and sound art that microsound occupies today.

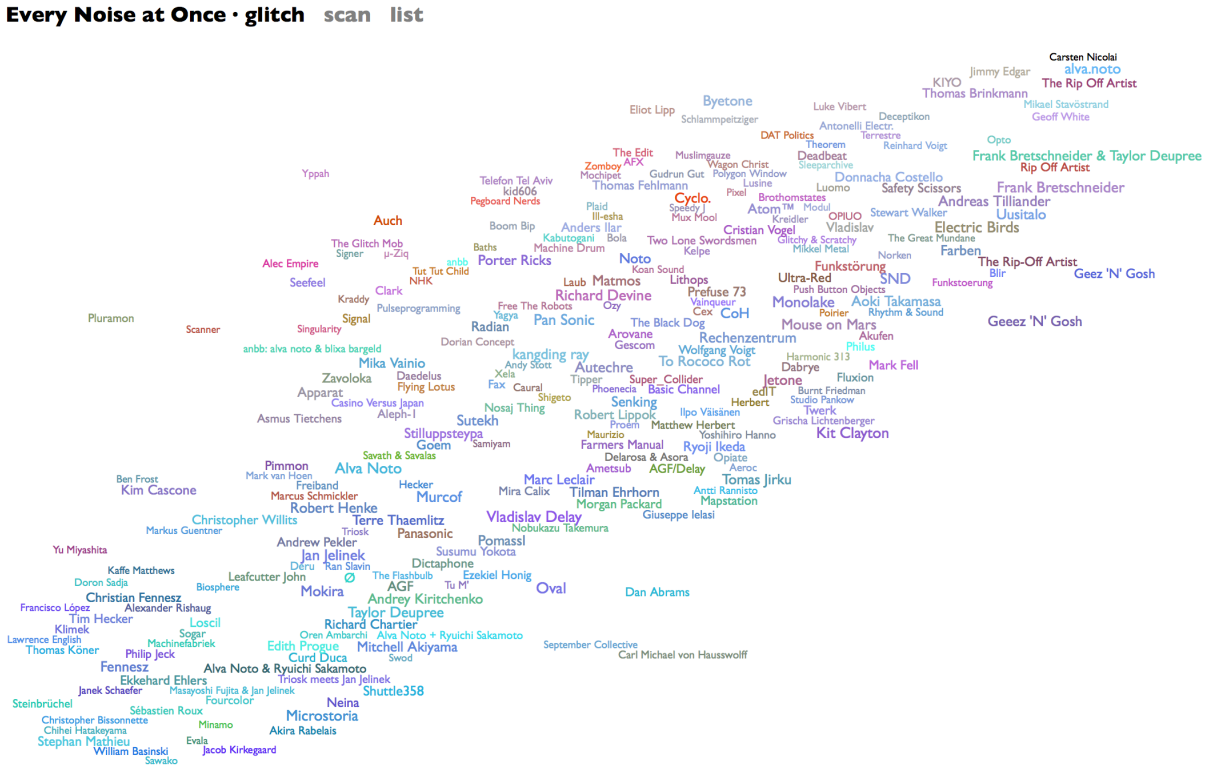


Figure 2: Screenshot of 'glitch' from McDonald's *Every Noise at Once* website (used with permission)

Genres as networks

A Venn diagram could depict microsound as the centre point where these various genres, communities, and styles of practice overlap. One circle electroacoustic and computer music, one circle glitch, a third sound art, and so on. But a more sophisticated visualisation than this would be as a network, or 'cloud', to use the parlance of microsound. One of the most interesting and successful examples of this approach is Glenn McDonald's Every Noise at Once website (fig. 2). The site offers an algorithmically-generated, 2D scatter-plot of the genre-space for an enormous 1374 genres, with the co-ordinates of each artist being based upon nebulous aesthetic criteria gleaned from audio feature extraction. The novelty of this way of viewing a genre is in its fluidity. Any categorisation - whether a very tightly defined one ('Plunderphonics') or a more loose, amorphous assemblage ('Ambient') – is comprised of a meshwork of artists, all having differing levels of influence, but all contributing something essential to what the genre is. But because the network privileges relations rather than identities, or lines rather than nodes, the same actor can appear in multiple networks without compromising the 'integrity' of either assemblage. 'Ryoji Ikeda' can appear in 'glitch,' 'audiovisual art,' 'sound art,' 'noise,' to infinity. The network view means that the

notoriously untidy, overlapping quality of genres – so often the source of hand-wringing in discussions of musical aesthetics (cf. Demers, 2010) – is not scrubbed away but ontologised, and transformed into an inescapable condition. It can be considered a formalisation of Derrida's very well known 'law' of genre:

> [A] text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging (my italics) (Derrida and Ronell, 1980: 65).

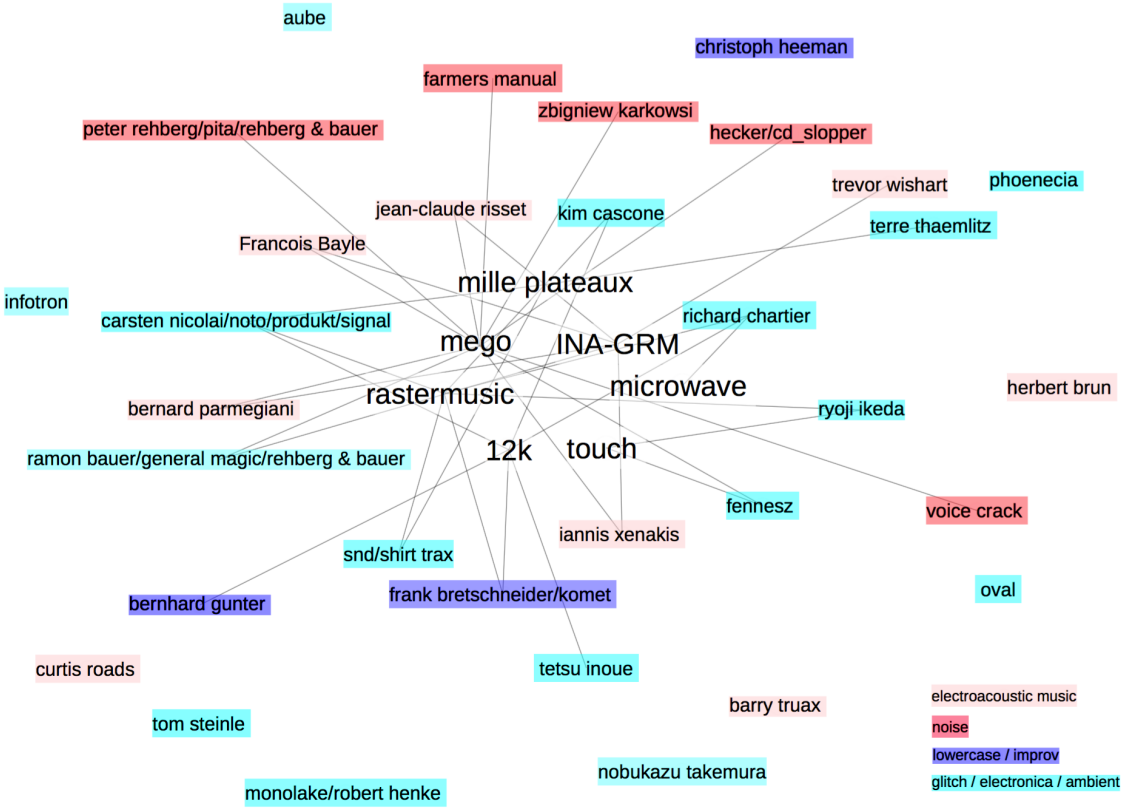


Figure 3: Visualisation of .microsound links page (fig. 2) showing label membership

There is, however, a conceptual aporia in McDonald's maps. By positing genres as assemblages of artists and texts alone, there is a limit to how big and amorphous the network can be: too large and it spreads out into just 'music'. In a sense this is what Paul Hegarty and Derek Bailey argue – that free improvisation and noise are simply too diverse for them to be genres. But as Simon Emmerson has noted, genres "are not simply descriptions of the sounding features, but must include a discussion of venue, social milieu, performance and dissemination practice" (Emmerson, 2007: 2). He rightly argues for the signifying content of genres to be multiplied; indeed, more 'actors' could be added to the list. Record labels, stores, magazines, and festivals all do their work in framing how and what a musical text communicates. But how do we capture these links between people and things in the performance of genre, and make them available for analysis?

Digital Methods

In the following analysis I use digital ethnography methods to analyse patterns of hyperlinking among musical actors on the Internet. Online hyperlinking practices represent

clear and available markers of social ties, musical collaborations, professional partnerships, and institutional support relative to a given grouping. They do not tell the whole picture, but they provide us with enough information to begin to build up a picture of a scene or genre as it is performed online. Crucially, they offer visible evidence of the ways in which 'human' and 'non-human' actors enter into networks through the mutual exchange of material and semiotic properties. A first example of the strength of these methods can be seen in figure 3: a visualisation of the actors listed on the .microsound links page, with membership of labels indicated by straight lines and constituent genres indicated by colour. Taking it as text for analysis, we can say that, with its mix of artists and labels, it already provides a wider picture than the purely textual and intertextual representations represented in figure 1. However, it is also limited – firstly, because it is represents just person's view of microsound, albeit it an influential person (Kim Cascone); and secondly, because it is his view in 1999 or earlier.

In order to get an expanded and more contemporary view, I have used a digital ethnography tool called Issuecrawler. The method is quite simple. One starts with a list of URL's that represent about 10-20 key actors, or 'knowledge sources', associated with the grouping one wants to represent: signature artists, record labels, stores, magazines, festivals and so on. The software, Richard Rogers' *Issuecrawler* (2002), then crawls through the associated webpages and stores in a database any hyperlinks that direct the user to another destination on the web. It then analyses these outlinks and discards any that appear less than two times in the results. The results that are left are then plotted in a 2D network displaying inlink and outlink patterns amongst the key nodes (webpages), with the relative x-y position of the nodes on the map indicating their relatedness, i.e. how frequently links are exchanged between them. In this case, the curated list of links on .microsound (fig. 1) represent the knowledge sources whose outlinks are analysed. However, since many of these actors are no longer active or have changed in orientation (Mille Plateaux, Shirt Trax, Microwave), the list had to be updated to represent a more contemporary sample (table. 1).

http://blog.nobukazutakemura.com http://brahms.ircam.fr/jean-claude-risset#resources http://clang.mat.ucsb.edu/news.html http://editionsmego.com http://florianhecker.blogspot.co.uk http://homepage.swissonline.ch/bots http://microsound.org http://music.hyperreal.org/artists/tetsu/index2.html http://roberthenke.com http://touch33.net/catalogue/to32_rehberg_bauer_fasst.html http://trenteoiseaux.net http://web.fm/twiki/bin/view/fmext/webhome http://www.12k.com/index.php/site/news_all http://www.3particles.com/news http://www.alien8recordings.com/artists/aube http://www.carstennicolai.de/?c=links http://www.christophheemann.de/christoph-heemann	http://www.fennesz.com/links http://www.frankbretschneider.de/news.html http://www.herbertbrun.org/brunlinks.html http://www.iannis-xenakis.org/xen/friends/links.html http://www.inagrm.com/accueil/outils/grm-tools http://www.markfell.com/wiki/index.php?n=mf.curatorialpractice http://www.markuspopp.me http://www.raster-noton.net/news http://www.ryojiikeda.com/archive/exhibitions http://www.sfu.ca/~truax/wsp.html http://www.touchmusic.org.uk http://www.trevorwishart.co.uk/index.html https://milleplateaux1.wordpress.com/social https://twitter.com/kimcascone http://www.comatonse.com/thaemlitz/news.html http://www.electrocd.com/en/bio/bayle_fr/discog

Table 1: Updated list of .microsound links

What we see in figure 4 is hardly a visual biography of microsound – more a snapshot of a subsection of the genre at a particular moment in time. However, what comes across strongly is the distinctive social and institutional mediations of the genre, with artists, labels, festivals, research centres, stores, blogs and publications, and other signifiers all making an appearance.

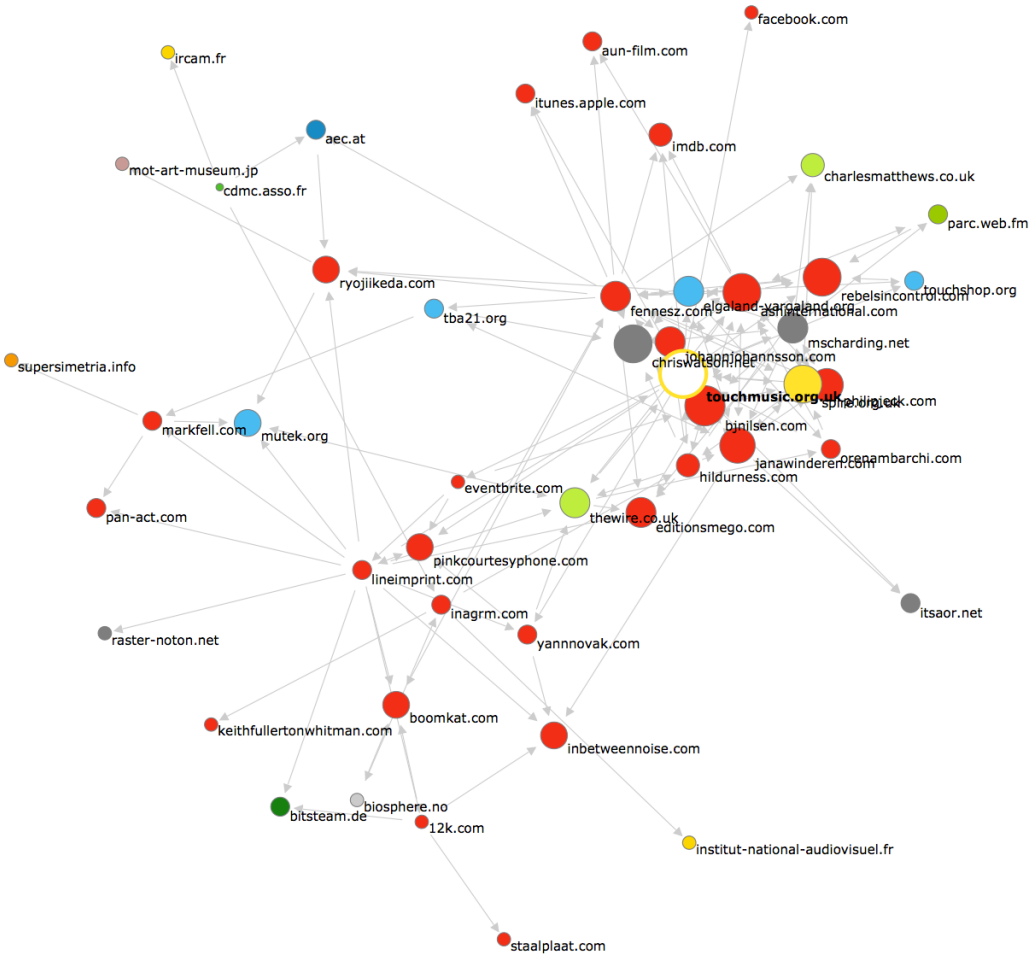


Figure 4: Results for Issuecrawler analysis of Microsound

A more detailed analysis of these results is pending in (Haworth forthcoming). In the meantime, I want to pull out one or two results relevant to the brief genealogy of microsound presented earlier. An important one is the prestigious Prix Ars Electronica Festival (aec.at). Since most of the artists and labels that appear in the network have received an honorary mention or full award from the festival since 1999, its appearance on the map is to be expected. Indeed, the recognition of these artists by the Prix Ars contributed to microsound's ascendance during the first decade of the 2000s. It is not an accident that this period also coincided with a marked ideological shift in the way Prix Ars framed the music award. As is well known, 1999 saw the category undergo a name change from 'Computer Music' to 'Digital Music,' with the panel making a deliberate move to award artists who work in a 'real unsubsidized market place' over the academically-affiliated electroacoustic and computer music composers that had previously dominated in the awards (Eshun, 1999). But the microsound map animates some of the contradictions of this distinction. For a start, we can note the range of institutions that are represented. Reputable electronic dance music festivals such as Mutek and the now-defunct Supersimetria are indexes of the 'bedroom techno' movement that the festival praised in 1999, but it is far from the whole story. The art music resource Centre de Documentation de la Musique Contemporaine is represented on the map, as well as the computer music research institute, Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique (Ircam). Institut National Audiovisuel-Groupe de Recherches Musicales

(INA-GRM), too, can be observed. Confirming microsound's slippage into sound art, we can also see contemporary art spaces represented such as Thyssen Bornemisza Art Contemporary 21 Festival and The Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo. In short, the map confirms microsound's essential promiscuity: bedroom studios sit alongside academic research centres, concert hall settings next to clubs and art galleries, dance music labels and stores next to art music databases.

Indeed, the range of the results on the map highlight questions about what, if anything, makes microsound legible as a genre. It is here that we come to some of the drawbacks of spatial maps based on social links. For despite the keen citing of the late composers Bernard Parmegiani, Herbert Brun and Iannis Xenakis in the .microsound.org links (fig. 1), these actors do not appear in the network. Two of these composers do have active web presences maintained by third parties (so their physical absence does not explain their virtual absence if you like). Anyone familiar with the genre of microsound will know that these links are very much active, being performed sonically, on recordings and in concerts; discursively, in interviews and other media; and paratextually, in the way the music is framed on CDs and websites. These genealogical links contribute to the distinctiveness of microsound as a genre. Their absence shows that, in genre analysis using digital methods, we also need to be attentive to how it is that links are made. The social and professional links displayed here allow us to multiply the amount of actors that constitute the signifying material of genres – labels, festivals, modes of dissemination, forms of subsidy. They also allow us to expand the geographical terrain of musical genres onto the virtual spaces where they are today being performed. In addition to this, further work would need to expand the types of links that are made between actors to include those sonic, visual, historical, discursive, and material links that are so important to the constitution of today's digital music genres.

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