The (un)necessary self

improvisation, freedom and the subliminal

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Introduction

The focus of this essay revolves around the understanding of the self in improvisation and interaction in the context of an artistic musical practice. The ambition is to further understand the meaning and impact of the self in this practice. The key agents are freedom, identity and originality.

The background, and in a sense also the foreground, of these thoughts is to be found in my artistic practice, exemplified by three recollections of experiences from my work. My background in jazz and free improvised music and my otherwise fairly diverse artistic practice, including composition, electronic and interactive music and sound art, has obviously shaped my understanding of the work I do. My principle artistic and aesthetic interests are questions pertaining to open contribution and the fields discussed in this paper, such as freedom, interaction and self. This work is furthermore a continuation of some of the central topics developed in my thesis (Frisk, 2008), such as:

- *Work-in-movement*. This is a concept established by Umberto Eco (1968) that I introduced as a work type encompassing radically open works. It requires different modes of representation, as the traditional musical score is too restrictive and is not able to communicate its most central aspects: the collaboration, negotiation and interaction in the conception, realization and documentation of the work. Work-in-movement does not necessarily distinguish between composition and improvisation, although for the latter, some kind of frame is needed for the concept to be meaningful. As a specification it is geared towards modes of interaction and openness involved in all phases of the work.
- *Interaction-as-difference*. I proposed that in human-computer interaction (HCI) the methodology of control (interaction-as-control) in certain cases should be abandoned in favour of a more dynamic and reciprocal mode of interaction, interaction-as-difference. This kind of interaction is an activity concerned with inducing differences *that make a difference* (Bateson, 1972) and suggests parallelism rather than the typical click-and-response mode of HCI. In essence, the movement from *control* to *difference* is a result of rediscovering the power of improvisation as a method for organizing and constructing musical content. Interaction-as-difference is to be understood as an alteration of the more common paradigm of direct manipulation in HCI.
- *Giving up of the self*. I suggested the notion of *giving up of the self* as the common denominator between the two previous concepts and as one of the important conditions for an improvisatory and self-organizing attitude towards musical practice that allows for interaction-as-difference. Only if one is able and willing to accept the loss of priority of interpretation, if one is willing to give up or disregard faithfulness to ideology or idiomatics, is the idea of interaction-as-difference

> conceivable. Hence, the giving up of the self is not to succumb to someone else but is rather contingent on the degree to which one is willing to engage in a dialogue on the creative process and to allow others to influence it. I.e., by giving up compositional control and replacing it with an interactive negotiation in the form of collaboration, the process realizes all of these three topics.

These ideas were eye-openers for me during my work on my thesis, but also, as is commonly the case, they posed new questions and demanded further study. In the romantic tradition of creativity, neither the freedom of the artist nor the autonomy of the work, is negotiatiable. The giving up of the self was an idea that departed from that concept and from the understanding of the artistic self as a strong and defined subjectivity with a clear and organized apprehension of what the artistic output should consist of, what its form and shape should be, and how its general means of operation should be conceived. To give up the self is not to abandon these qualities but to always be willing and prepared to negotiate them.

Although very difficult to define, freedom in general is a recurring concept in the discussion of improvisation. On the surface improvisation may seem like a means to create music that is free from the chains of the formal structures that notation or idiomatics imposes on the expressive possibilities of the musician, one that opens it up to the immediate and unmediated influence of the individual, music that may be created on the spot and whose substance is defined not so much by external factors as by the will of the improviser(s). Ornette Coleman's important 1959 recording "Free Jazz" has contributed significantly to the idea that improvisation and freedom are coupled. It gave name to the free jazz movement that evolved in the US, closely followed by Europe, where the demand for social freedom in the civil rights movement found a parallel in the music.

Whether or not improvisation can be said to be free as such, or can be considered an expression of freedom, is not my main interest here. Rather, my focus is on the significance of the concept of freedom in the practice and discourse on improvisation. How can this notion of freedom, whether negative as in 'free-from' or positive as in 'free-to' (Peters, 2009), operate alongside other important agents in the improvisatory practice, such as interaction, tradition, context and technique? Neither is it my objective to enter into a discussion of the value of a particular means for organisation of artistic work, or specific aesthetic attitudes in artistic practice. I am, however, interested in how subconscious and embodied knowledge, or intuitive action, is given significance in the creative act, how this significance influences the self and, conversely, how the self is influenced by these aspects. The trajectories of the self may be drawn further and will influence, and be influenced by, much larger systems in the sociopolitical domain.

The iconified Western auteur mentioned above has been under attack at least since the sixties. The mythical creator behind nonnegotiable works of art enjoys a natural freedom of expression and does not have to answer to criticism. My argument (Frisk, 2008) is that the view of this Kantian genius is still very influential to how we teach and present art. For myself, merely realizing this was not enough. I needed to more profoundly understand what problems I had with this role in relation to my own artistic practice, and in what ways I could neutralize the expectation of being in control. The decisive moment occurred when I was working on the interactive sound installation *etherSound*, where I was forced to accept that a large part of the compositional decisions had to be made by the users of the system rather than myself. In order to fulfil the idea behind the piece I had to come to terms with the fact that I was not able to restrain the input of the flow of users. I had to give up that which Boulez (1964) refers to as "the 'finished' aspect of the Occidental work, its closed cycle" (p. 51) and approach the "open work" that Eco (1968) discusses, to further attempt "to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me"

(Barthes, 1977). Obviously, as an improviser the notion of the open work was familiar to me, but the dynamically open work that I was now approaching was not something I had experience with. Furthermore, the view of the authoritative creator is also something improvisers are often confronted with, and the view of musicians and composers as being absolutely clear about all details of their work is as prominent in improvised music as it is anywhere else.

My project was a pursuit to move further away from the kinds of composers, works and authors that Boulez (1964) discusses in his 1964 article *Alea*, and to instead move towards the convergence point of creation and interaction. This radicalization of the role of the creator asked for a new work concept and an altered view on interaction[1], but as a consequence it also called for a review of the self, even after the notion of giving up of the self was staged. The questions that were raised as a result of these ideas in my thesis and that I approach in this text relate to the position of self and other: How can the self enable or discourage interaction? What aspects of the self and of expression should be open for influence from the other? What are the factors that set boundaries on my individual expression, and how may this individuality be manifested without inhibiting the other? What is the meaning of freedom and how can it affect the other? These are inquiries that engage social and political discussion as well as aesthetic positioning.

1 This was however not a linear process. The different ideas grew simultaneously and influenced each other. The control methodology of human-technology interaction gave rise to thoughts on an ethics of technology and questioning my own ambitions in my use of technology inspired a reevaluation and appreciation of the complexity of human and artistic interaction.

I or Eye

In Stockholm about ten years ago, a venue with a long tradition of presenting improvised music was promoting a concert with a group that I was part of. At the time the group was doing a small tour in Scandinavia and it featured a few improvisers and one classically trained musician. This was a group where we communicated well and always found ways to deal with the obstacles and issues that came up in the performances Despite the fairly low number of visitors in the first set this particular concert was no exception. After intermission there was a bigger crowd and halfway through the second set I thought I recognized a person coming into the room, walking past the stage. As a consequence my playing changed. It was a fairly radical change and even when listening back to the recording I can hear the difference. I also managed to pull my fellow musicians along in this new direction. At the moment I was surprised by the effect the episode had on my playing and listening back to the concert I find it odd that the change occurred so abruptly. I was embarrassed. I had been taught that my expression and my artistic choices should come from the inside. To be a strong musician meant not letting external factors have an influence, but instead being in control of oneself. Hence, according to my view at the time, I should be the master of my own playing and I myself should make the choices, regardless what happens around me. Only those with whom I play may influence me.[2]

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To listen to the other is a central concept in ethics. To meet the other with respect and understanding regardless of how the other is approaching oneself is intrinsic to the Christian message. In the teaching of jazz and improvised music, the concept of listening to the other is absolutely essential, although there are many important accounts of the opposite attitude, to consciously *not* listen. *What* and *who* is it that we are listening to when we listen? Should our listening be limited to our fellow musicians or should we also listen to our audiences? When we listen, what is it we allow ourselves to be influenced by, and what part of our own expression should remain untouched by our listening? Obviously, the point of listening to the other in performance is not to completely give up the self and become the other but to attune to, or find a resonance with the other. It is in the interaction that the open and unbound improvisation is unfolding, between adjusting to the other while hanging on to the possibility for taking the initiative. Only in the instantaneous moment can one decide what path to take. In one instance there may be a demand for absolute and unconditioned control and in the next it may be necessary to completely give in to the other. What is the position of the self when listening is at the centre?

In the following I will attempt to elaborate on these questions and the idea of the projecting, autonomous performer for whom the individual will is the sole guideline. There are countless stories of intransigent musicians whose artistic and expressive choices are exclusively their own, even when this means they suffer economic loss. Pierre Boulez (1964) describes how structure is what dictates and constrains the compositional process. The composer alone is in control of this structure. The antagonist in this argument is the American experimental tradition in general and John Cage in particular. If Pierre Boulez is the emblematic representation of the

2 As an example of an extreme application of this posture is Sonny Rollins' performance at the Opus 40 quarry garden in upstate New York where he falls off the stage in the middle of his solo and breaks his heel, all while he continues to play. After the fall, lying down (Rollins, 1986).

Kantian notion of the true creative genius whose genuinely individual and enigmatic inspiration constitutes the creative force, the American experimental tradition can truly be said to stand in its opposition. The European composer, according to Boulez, takes responsibility for the work and does not neglect the "the choice inherent in every kind of creation" (p. 55). He does not give way to become "meticulous in imprecision" (ibid. p. 44), as Boulez claims the indeterminist does. With its focus on chance and repetition, this American reaction to several trends in the 20th-century European music is clearly a rewarding scapegoat for Boulez the serialist.

In the book *Silencing the Sounding Self* Christopher Shultis (1998) is primarily concerned with the difference between making process-oriented rather than goal-oriented art *within* American music and literature, but his argument can also be seen as an illustration of the more radical difference between serialism and chance operations. The question asked as a point of departure is whether the artist is controlling the process or whether he or she coexists as part of it (p. XVI). With Ralph Waldo Emerson and Charles Ives on one side[3] and Henry David Thoreau and John Cage on the other, he argues that in the work of the former, the self controls the process, whereas in that of the latter, the self coexists with it. The dualist–nondualist dichotomy is what Shultis uses to mark the important change that first Thoreau, and later John Cage, brought to American art. They both embraced a view in which the self and nature were united.

In *Walden* Thoreau (2004) carries out a two-year-long stay in the New England woods pursuing the exploration of the role of the self in solitude–a project with some interesting kinship to artistic research in that it probes a hypothesis using an experimental method which renders not answers but new questions. The Cartesian notion of dualism, on the other hand, is the idea that mind and matter belong to ontologically different classes. Though they may unite through a transcendental correspondence, nature and humanism are separate from one another. "For Emerson the human self is in control" writes Shultis (1998, p. 14). The abstract symbolism and extensive use of references and quotations are identifying marks of Ives' music and one of the reasons they were dismissed by Cage. I am not convinced that an artist with such great variation and massive output may be successfully exploited as an example of a single aesthetic theory, but it is undeniably so that *Central park in the dark*, for example, is a form of program music that paints a representational sound picture only possible if nature is seen as distinct from the self. Shultis, however, goes further and claims that Ives through his music is "symbolizing not what was observed but a translation of the observation into something else: a symbol of that something that corresponds to the memory of what happened rather than its actual occurrence" (Shultis, 1998, p. 27).

Was my own idea of giving up the self a move towards a nondual view of the act of creation? I am attracted to Thoreau's writings and his philosophy, which I read as a move towards the reinvention of ethical listening and understanding, as well as an attempt to turn to sources of knowledge other than text based. Its somewhat romantic

3 Emerson, who was familiar with Hegel and inspired by the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, did promote dualism in *Nature* (e.g. ch. 6, 'Idealism' Emerson, 2001): "In these cases, by mechanical means, is suggested the difference between the observer and the spectacle,–between man and nature" (ibid.) and his influence on American metaphysics was substantial. But he is commonly known to have communicated a nondualistic view as well, as in the essay *The Over-Soul*: "[The soul] is not wise, but it sees through all things. Then is it glad, young and nimble. It is not called religious, but it is innocent. It calls the light its own, and feels that the grass grows and the stone falls by a law inferior to, and dependent on, its nature. Behold, it saith, I am born into the great, the universal mind" (Emerson, 20000, p. 250).

appearance is nonetheless very radical, proved by the fact that he conceptually anticipated one of the more controversial composers of the 20th century by some eighty years. As intriguing as the two poles of the continuum from dual to nondual are, my interest is what happens in the zone in between. In his investigation of literary criticism and music, Christopher Shultis further categorizes Emerson and Thoreau as belonging to the projectionists and objectivists respectively: "The active 'eye' is the projective 'I' […] On the other hand there is the objective 'I' which observes rather than projects" (Shultis, 1998, p. 61-2). According to Shultis, for Thoreau the artist, writer or speaker is merely a medium, not a subject. This idea holds a strong intertextual relation to Cage's aesthetics of indeterminacy and non-intention. Artistic expression is not a means to convey a message; if anything, it is a method to create resonances in certain contexts. This seemingly objective and transparent 'I' is precisely the critical point that upsets Boulez's systematic and structural agency of production: To avoid or even neglect the qualified projection of the self in determination is simply irresponsible.[4] As powerful, engaging and pedagogic as the homophones Eye and I may seem, I will contest that the dividing line may not be so clear. As an expression of the transcendental movement, Emerson's exposition of the transparent eye-ball advocates nature and accentuates nature mysticism much in the same ways that Thoreau did in Walden:

> I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances,–master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature. (Emerson, 2001, p. 8)

Even if there is a distinction between the ideas in *Nature* and Thoreau's famous absent speaker[5] what is most interesting to me is not the differences in kind but the altered perspective and the movement 'in between'. For Emerson, "transparency remains within the concrete 'I' of the self" (Shultis, 1998, p. 61), whereas Thoreau sought to make the *self* transparent. These two methods of approaching the world, as the transparent eye or the transparent self, are not mutually exclusive. It is possible that both the projective eye and the objective I will at times become unstable, and that one may coalesce into the other. Exploring this continuum allows me to reposition within any imaginable listening position and listen to the audience, the critic or myself without the self getting lost: giving up the self in order to retain it.

Creation or discovery. Freedom

Ten years ago I was preparing for a concert on a tour arranged by the Swedish National Concert Institute. On this tour I was playing with a free jazz quartet (saxophone, guitar, bass and home-built instruments, and drums), and for varoius reasons I found it very difficult to find my way into the music of this group. Among the members of the group there were different opinions about aesthetics and about the way in which we should approach our task. The problems grew throughout the tour and by the time we arrived to the small town where we were playing the night in question I felt like the situation was getting out of hand. I had no code to follow

4 However, I am in doubt that he would embrace the idea of the projective self as promoted in works by Emerson and Ezra Pound, either.

5 "The peculiarity of a work of genius is the absence of the speaker from his speech" (Thoreau and Blake, 1891, p. 264)

except for my own, which I felt was quite inappropriate in the present context. We were at a venue that had a long tradition of presenting national and international jazz; for the most part, somewhat more traditional acts than ours were represented. This only added to my frustration and my feeling of being outside of my own comfort zone. About an hour before the show a senior amateur saxophonist came into the backroom to chat with me. I had met him before, and he was very keen on talking to me about mouthpieces, saxophones and reeds. We chatted for a while but I started to feel the panic; how could I possibly satisfy the expectations of this man, the other members of the band and the rest of the audience at the same time? Their expectations, I felt, represented three very different attitudes towards music making. What artistic method could I employ to solve this dilemma without losing myself in the process? By the time I was going up on the bandstand I was so confused and hindered that I started to doubt whether I could at all play. In a moment of clairvoyance, however, it occurred to me that the only option I had was to try to play as if I had never seen a saxophone before. I played as if I had no real conception of what a saxophone should sound like, let alone how it should be played: to play as if I did not know how to play.

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This recollection is in one sense the opposite of the previous one. Rather than making an attempt to fulfil the expectations of my acquaintance, I did what he least expected. His presence contributed to the stressfulness of the situation, but in my response I was not primarily addressing him. I believe that the clue to understand the behaviour that led to the choices I made is to look at the negative impact that habit can have on expressive freedom. By forcefully breaking my habitual musical and instrumental responses, I was able to communicate.

Drawing the distinction between the projective and the objective self has some correspondence in the idea of artistic work, such as improvisation, as either an act of creation or an act of discovery. The dividing line between these two poles is blurred, to say the least. More than perhaps anyone else, Kant has provided us with the image of the genius artist whose powers of creation remain mystical and hidden. For him, the difference between discovery and creation was exemplified by the difference between the sciences and the arts:

> Thus we can readily learn all that *Newton* has set forth in his immortal work on the Principles of Natural Philosophy, however great a head was required to discover it; but we cannot learn to write spirited poetry, however express may be the precepts of the art and however excellent its models. The reason is that *Newton* could make all his steps, from the first elements of geometry to his own great and profound discoveries, intuitively plain and definite as regards consequence, not only to himself but to everyone else. But a *Homer* or a *Wieland* cannot show how his Ideas, so rich in fance and yet so full of thought, come together in his head, simply because he does not know and therefore cannot teach others. (Kant, 2007, p. 113)

According to Kant not even the artists themselves can understand what the nature of creation consists of.[6] At best we can reject Kant's description of artistic and scientific

6 Were this true, all and any artistic education, not to mention artistic research, would obviously be utterly pointless. Although now on the decline, I believe that some of the resistance against artistic research that we have seen over the years has its roots in Kant's romantic view on the arcane acts of artistic creation. Widely regarded as futile, should it somehow succeed in uncovering some parts of its hidden layers, artistic practice would forever be transfigured.

creativity as dated, but it is difficult not to see it as a crude pastiche of the processes involved.

Though it is possible to analyze my frustration in the situation described above, in which everything I had learned suddenly lost meaning, I find it difficult to describe it as an act of pure creation. I lacked conscious access to the method that could provide me with a possible solution, and it is plausible to assume that the key came to me in a moment of (unconscious) inspiration. This, however, does not make it into a pure act of creativity; it was much closer to a discovery, albeit a negative one: the discovery of how not to play the saxophone. In reality it is not very difficult to deconstruct the dichotomy of discovery and creation in creative work, be it artistic or scientific. This is what Benson (2003) successfully does when he introduces context as one of the primary agents, explaining that the important factor that often seems to be neglected is that any artistic activity takes place within, and is related to, a practice, tradition or community. In music, as well as in many other art forms, the practices, or discourses, and traditions are layered and create complex structures. To a certain extent the practices are self-regulative in that they constantly develop, sometimes by leaps and bounds. Furthermore, "discourses (or practices) have certain texts […] that are taken to be authoritative" (p. 42), which acts as a kind of dynamic resistance that allows for commentaries to be made–commentaries that may later form the basis for new texts. The versatility of these structures makes it difficult, perhaps not even meaningful, to attempt to understand an artistic practice such as improvisation as either discovery or creation. As it relates to context and practice, one's own as well as that of one's co-musicians and that of the venue, the tradition and the idiom, there is room for both discovery and creation. Benson turns to Shakespeare and, in the light of the discussion on discovery versus creation, asks about the famous line 'To be or not to be...' from Hamlet: "So what exactly was involved when writing that memorable line? " (p. 44). Shakespeare certainly did not invent the English language, and it is very likely that someone had, at some time, formulated a similar or even identical phrase before him. What he did, however–and this is what is significant in this discussion–is he "took that line (whatever its origin) and imbued it with a certain significance by placing it within a particular context" (*ibid.*). Following this line of thought and in this limited example we can conclude that one of the most famous lines from one of the greatest geniuses of western literature does not fulfil the first requirement of Kant's definition of a genius: To be original in the sense that what is created has not existed before. The comparison may seem unfair but I strongly believe that the requirement for originality *in general* needs to be contested and rethought.

Closely connected to this discussion on context, creation, discovery and practice is the concept of freedom. That freedom is a difficult topic is no news. Hanna Arendt points to the political domain, which we will return to in the next section. Without freedom, she claims, political life would be meaningless:

> And even today, whether we know it or not, the question of politics and the fact that man is a being endowed with the gift of action must always be present to our mind when we speak of the problem of freedom; for action and politics, among all the capabilities and potentialities of human life, are the only things of which we could not even conceive without at least assuming that freedom exists, and we can hardly touch a single political issue without, implicitly or explicitly, touching upon an issue of man's liberty. (Arendt, 1993)

Musical notation and the division of labour into composer and performer is a relatively recent invention in the history of music, and improvisation as an expression of musical freedom is often seen as the exception. Could we perhaps say that it is not so much that improvisation is free, but that music based on preconceived and composed structures is constrained and absent of freedom? In that case, would it not

be more appropriate to talk about reinstating freedom in all aspects of musical creation and abandon what are seen by many as a problematic dichotomy between improvised and composed music? [7] In fact, improvisation as such is no guarantee for achieving expressive freedom. In some improvising genres and musical cultures, the freedom of improvisation may be defined by completely different standards, and sometimes improvisers are so strictly tied to a particular aesthetics or style that on the surface freedom may not appear to be a strong agent.[8] But even in improvised music that is strongly identified with freedom, its stylistic qualities may be so prominent that the meaning and impact of freedom may be debated. Looking at it from the other side, however, even in music with a strong idiomatic identity, such as bebop, in which performers are musically and socially tied to a defined and, in a sense, limited set of phrases, the organization of the material is still freely decided by the musician. And if we approach the idiom from a slightly wider angle, and on a greater time scale, we can clearly see that there is a huge difference between the stylistic interpretation made by Charlie Parker and that made by Thelonius Monk. Both are exponents for bebop but have approached the idiom freely, with exceptional individuality, and with a greatly varied aesthetics as a consequence.

The claim on jazz musicians to be both strongly individual and free improvisers at the same time quickly becomes problematic, as the first requirement influences or limits the second. To attempt to do both at the same time, one may end up using one's freedom to claim the right to control the situation at the expense of the freedom of the other. In essence this is interaction-as-control, and it is a surprisingly common mode in jazz improvisation. In his book, *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, Gary Peters (2009) discusses the phenemenon as the "aporia of freedom". Freedom is generally thought of as something positive, deliberating and emancipatory, but it is a mistake, according to Peters, to neglect "freedom's questionable duality" (p. 21). In an interview by Roger Dean in the book *New Structures in Jazz and Improvised Music*, saxophonist and composer Anthony Braxton gives a remarkable account of his doubts concerning the interpretation that the idea of musical "freedom that was being perpetrated in the sixties might not have been the healthiest notion" (Peters, 2009, p. 22). Consequently, in his book on the emergence of AACM[9], of which Braxton became a member in 1966, George Lewis points out that they rarely spoke of their music as 'free jazz', 'avant-garde' or even 'black music', though the association had a lot in common with the other black grassroots organizations that were being formed at the time (p. 98 Lewis, 2008). The balance between the individual and the collective [10], between freedom and adaptation to the collective, and between composer and performer have likely contributed to the internal freedom from freedom itself (Peters, 2009). It is again the context that needs to be considered. For the Chicago musicians that started AACM in the 60s, they created a frame within which individuality, as well as freedom and collectiveness, could manifest themselves as agents of creativity. In

7 Which, I should add, I strongly believe is an erroneous model. There is no opposition between composition and improvisation, these are two very different processes and one can effortlessly exist within the other at any time. I suspect the reason there is a persistent desire to keep them in opposition has to do with social and political issues.

8 Some of these expressions could be referred to as idiomatic improvisation, as labeled by Derek Bailey (1992).

9 The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. A still active, nonprofit organization for creative music, collectively run by musicians, that was initiated in 1965 in Chicago, USA but which can now be found in several cities throughout the US.

10 Muhal Richard Abrams claimed that AACM was a collection of individuals (Lewis, 2008, p. 498)

the paper "Negotiating the Musical Work" we discussed the notion of subculture as a means to develop and better understand the ideas that arise in our collaboration:

> We might try to approach this symbolic system in relation to a common context, or subculture created by the agents involved in it. Both composer and performer are working within the frame of their own cultural contexts which defines their respective understandings of the evolving work. The subculture is a result of interaction, and negotiation ('*What is it we are developing?* ', '*How are we talking about it?* ', etc.), between the two agents and their inherent cultural contexts. Their mutual expectations and their understanding or imagination of the work in progress is of importance when they attempt at co-coordinating their actions, for instance towards a definition of the performance instructions.

Is it possible to suggest that this subculture may develop a sense of freedom both in relation to the surrounding context and between its members? In this field a symbolic system may emerge that can freely redefine itself in the course of the artistic work, both in its preparation and its execution. In the text cited above we discuss the context of an emerging collaborative composition, and we were observing how our understanding of it was shaped both by the work itself but also by our individual interpretations of what was going on. I.e., in the work process the practice as well as our understanding of the practice was evolving at the same time. Would this be a working definition of freedom? That the concepts are being formed and reshaped in the work process? In this case the effect would be that freedom in improvisation is not the freedom of one musician at the expense of that of another, but rather is something that takes place in the context of the artistic practice and that has to be constantly renegotiated.

If now we return to the situation in the concert described above: What was the significance of my non-playing of the saxophone that evening? Was I giving myself too much freedom, i.e., did my co-musicians suffer? I think, in a way, I was. What is more, rather than acting out my own frustration, I could have acted more sensibly to the other members of the group. Instead of looking at my dilemma as a personal problem I should have realized that it was a collective one. In that dialogue, provided all members shared a kind of sensibility, we as a group could have become much freer, and in that earned freedom we could have communicated better among ourselves and with our listeners. Meanwhile, when I forgot how to play the saxophone I created a commentary to the musical discourse that we were engaged with in the group. This commentary could have provided us with a recreated 'text' which may also have boosted our collective freedom and development.[11] Although I was not aware of it at the time, the act of forgetting is a common technique to short-circuit the habits of playing. Ornette Coleman wanted to "create as spontaneously as possible—'without memory,' as he has often been quoted as saying" (Litzweiler, 1992, p. 117) and without any 'real' training he started playing the violin and the trumpet. In the process his memory and meta-knowledge about saxophone playing was neutralized, and he felt he could approach a truer expression.[12]

The answer to the question of the significance of the rupture created in the performance above may lie in the way the self and the body interoperates. Creation and discovery alike are activities that rely on the way also our tactile senses function, and in an embodied process the 'I' and the 'Eye' are inseparable. In Roland Barthes

11 The reason was not realized was due to the fact that the group was discontinued soon after this tour, for reasons not specifically related to the events described here.

12 There are many other examples. Marcel Duchamp talked about forgetting with his hand, DJ Spooky has talked about forgetting with his turntables and it all leads us back to Nietsche's concept of "active forgetting".

seminal essay *The Death of the Author* we find many interesting ideas that parallel the concepts of embodiment, de-individualization and habit destruction as "abrupt disappointment of expectations of meaning"(Barthes, 1977). The importance of individuality in many expressions and the ego-centered view on artistic production mentioned in the beginning of this text are in many respects related to the role and significance of the author brilliantly interrogated by Barthes. Although my discussion has been focused on the role of the improvising musician, Barthes's discussion revolves around the literary author, a role significantly different. In a live improvised performance of music it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to separate the creator from the music as Barthes suggests we do with the creator and the writing.[13] However, the way in which the artistic 19th century genius has been shaped has created a mythology so powerful that it has had an impact on much of our understanding of *any* artistic figure, authors, composers and musicians alike. The creative act is so strongly soldered to this romantic image that even the understanding of an improvising musician, whose creativity depends not on work creation, but on the real-time impulses in performance, which are very volatile by nature, is informed by this notion. In opposition this romantic view Barthes claims that:

> Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. (Barthes, 1977, p. 142)

Furthermore, the preoccupation with the author is a consequence of the view of the work as emanating from its creator. Hence, the only relevant way to understand the work is through understanding the author's background, life, and context: "The *author* still reigns in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoires (Barthes, 1977, p. 143)." The reading in the larger sense of the word is the process of decoding the message, not in an act of critique but an act based on a reconstruction of the author, recombining the parts that he constitutes and, through this structure, being able to understand the true meaning of the work. As we know, this is in essence the focus of traditional musicology, to reveal the composer bit by bit and understand his work through the history of his life: Where did he live? Who was his maid? What did he eat? Where did he study? Though these questions may well be relevant for the study of our cultural and social history, the extreme focus on the individuality of the composer has had a strong influence on the interpretation and reading of his work at the expense of the position of the listener and that of the performer.

If we transfer Barthes's statement that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes, 1977, p. 148) to the domain of music, the subjectivity of the performer would not be operative in the act of listening to an improvisation. Its unity is instead in the destination, the listener. Even today, almost a half century after the text was first published, this notion is still provocative, but Jean-Luc Nancy and Mandell (2007) go even further:

> It is not a hearer, then, who listens, and it matters little whether or not he is musical. Listening is musical when it is music that listens to itself. It returns to itself, it reminds itself of itself, and it feels itself as resonance itself: a relationship to self, stripped of all egoism and all

13 The disengagement of the work from the author is a hermeneutic thought brought forward also by Paul Ricœur (1991) among others. The author is not the one-way sender of a message the way we often want to see it, because in the act of writing he is removed from the work (See also Frisk and Östersjö, 2006). What Barthes instead suggests is to sacrifice the author in order to reinstate the position of the reader.

> ipseity. Not 'itself', or the other, or identity, or difference, but alteration and variation[…] (p. 67)

Self and other

In 2005 Stefan Östersjö and I initiated a long and still standing collaboration with two Vietnamese musicians, eventually named The Six Tones. *The dean of the artistic faculty of Lund University had helped us to get in touch with Nguyen Thanh Thuy and Ngo Tra My, two master musicians whose primary musical interests up until then had been traditional Vietnamese music. They played Dan Tranh, a Vietnamese zither, and Dan Bau, an electrically amplified mono-chord, respectively. Neither Stefan nor I had any previous experience of playing Vietnamese music and Thanh Thuy and Tra My had very little experience playing contemporary Western music. The first time all four of us met in the composition studio at the Malmö Academy of Music to play, Stefan on guitars and I on laptop, we set out to try some sketches of mine. It was a set of loosely structured improvisations and the ambition was that these would provide input for a piece for the quartet that I would compose. One of Stefan's and my primary interests in initiating this project was to understand more about the way improvisation is used in traditional Vietnamese music and explore ways in which we could create a common platform between our respective traditions. In the session, and with these goals in mind, I became incredibly self aware of the dissymmetry between Stefan and I, the two western men, and our Vietnamese female colleagues. Given the history of Vietnam in particular, and the history of the white man in general, I was afraid that simply because of my identity and cultural background, my activities and my ideas would get in the way of Thuy's and My's origin and mask the culture they carried with them. I believe this was a relevant concern, but the problem was that I only had awareness of the inequality and, no knowledge of what to do about it. The purpose of the project would easily have been defeated if we had not found a way to deal with the imbalance. However, the consequence of my misguided concern was that I became so hesitant to take any kind of initiative that the session almost collapsed. Thuy and My told me in hindsight that, more than anything, they were confused and wondered whether I knew what I wanted at all or what I was after. In fact, that was not the problem–I had a very clear idea about what it was I was after musically–but out of fear for appearing as an authoritarian leader, I lost the ability to express my intentions clearly. My self-consciousness concerning the general idea of the power relations in the group got in the way of my abilities to communicate.*

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As we may observe in this incidence, the particularity of the self can get in the way. Simon Emmerson reconsiders Trevor Wishart's ideas on sonic masking (Wishart, 1985), applying them on the meeting between two musical traditions. Aspects of one sound from one tradition may mask those of another; or, slightly rephrased, one 'self', e.g., the conscious, may mask another, e.g. the unconscious. Emmerson, furthermore, goes on to discuss the different modes of exchange that we may have access to when different musical cultures collide, and the "particular mix of these may result in a range of outcomes: on the one extreme, appropriation with no exchange or understanding–for example, a composer 'plundering local colour for sampling'–through to true exchange with the possibility of real mutual understanding" (Emmerson, 2006). Even if we were not interested in a merging of the musical traditions we were certainly clear about wanting to avoid appropriation. So was I appropriating Vietnamese music when I applied electronics to the acoustic performance? Or was Stefan doing so when he played the 10-stringed guitar with a

slide in order to make it sound like an idiomatic Vietnamese instrument? According to Emmerson the unsuccessful exchange between two or more idioms is one where properties of one hide properties of another:

> [A] situation where two sounds are played together and one masks the other (or a perceptual aspect of the other) such that it can no longer be perceived. We can generalize this from sound, to performance and even to aesthetic aspects of music. Throw two traditions of music making together and aspects of one may mask aspects of the other (sound subtlety, performance practice tradition and aesthetic intent). This may be inevitable in any intercultural work as there are bound to be incompatibilities. But we must ask–have we masked something 'significant' as seen from within the culture? (Emmerson, 2006)

Masking will probably occur to a certain extent in any kind of music, but the question asked by Emmerson at the end of the quote is material: It is not so much *if* something is lost as *what* is lost, and what the importance of the property is. The ambition to avoid masking my new Vietnamese friends resulted in a collapse in which nearly everything was masked.

Acknowledging or questioning a system of domination or an unequal relationship is not in itself a means to transform it. To move beyond merely describing it and in order to politicize and defy despotism, it is necessary to question the self and assume an altered perspective. In the words of Trinh T Minh-ha: "It is not sufficient to know the personal but to know–to speak in a different way" (Trinh T Minh-ha, 1991, p. 164). The social impact of the Eurocentric view of the world should not be underestimated. Stefan and I belong to what Mark Slobin (1987) labels "the superculture" (p. 31), and the complex political and economic imbalance between East and West plays an important role in our understanding of the other in our multi layered work with traditional Vietnamese music in general, and with The Six Tones in particular. From the outset the idea with the project was to aim to create a music whose identity was neither Vietnamese, nor Swedish or European, but both at the same time, or, preferably, music with its own distinct character. We wanted to avoid the simple superimposition of one tradition on top of the other, instead aiming for the coexistence of the two elements on equal grounds. Slobodin defines three categories of intercultural work:

1. *Industrial interculture*, which evokes the notion of a commodified system whose main function is to project the first world order, spiced with an unobtrusive element of difference (p. 61)
2. *Diasporic interculture*, which emerges from the subcultural interactions across the borders of nations (p. 64)
3. *Affinity interculture*, which describes a "global, political, highly musical network" in which musicians are interacting and communicating through a negotiated musical space (p. 68)

At the time we were not fully aware of the implications of our ambitions, nor had we thought much about the political dimension of our endeavour, but our process was most closely related to the above category of affinity interculture category above. Our network has grown significantly since the start, both in Vietnam and in Europe, and the context for the group is now multidimensional both geographically and stylistically. Social activist Gloria Jean Watkins, also known as bell hooks, approaches her own background in racist America in the significant *Marginality as site of resistance* (Hooks , aka G. J. Watkins). Describing the railway tracks as the demarcation between her home ground and the centre she identifies marginality as "the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance" (p. 341). The first mistake, as is shown by hooks, is to think of marginality as a space one wishes to surrender and

give up to instead gravitate towards the centre. Hooks and her friends and relatives would at times trespass into the other domain, to work "as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes", and when they did, "there were laws to ensure our return". To refuse to give in to the expectation of wanting to relocate from the margin to the centre is to invalidate these laws and dismantle their meaning. Vietnam, being both politically and economically in the periphery, is in every respect marginalized as the other, the foreign, the different and the obscure. And, just as there were laws for bell hooks and her friends to ensure their return when they trespassed, our Vietnamese co-musicians have learned that there are laws to ensure their return to Vietnam from Sweden as well. We may think that the global perspective has broadened our view on the world and blurred the boundaries, but in the eyes of the legislators in the West there is no doubt as to what the centre is, and what the periphery is. Furthermore, though we may think that the regions demarcating the inside and the outside are large continents and political systems such as East versus West, or democracy versus dictatorship, the many uprisings in the suburbs of cities in countries such as Sweden, Great Britain and France show us that the local territories are also disunited and parted.

What bell hooks is referring to in the text cited above is an institutionalized oppression and marginalization that has been going on for centuries and clearly operates on a completely different scale compared to The Six Tones. As Trinh T Minh-ha reminds us, merely reading about it will not let us understand the experiences described. What it does allow us to do, however, is to understand that the effects and the processes in the development within the The Six Tones are similar to those operating on a larger scale. It is in this sense that artistic activity also has the potential to engage in a political consideration, reflection and introspection, not in the meaning that the artistic expression itself needs to be politically imbued, but rather that the site for artistic practice and artistic research can be taken advantage of as a site also for politically oriented questions.

The response to the unevenness in the relatively innocent context of this first rehearsal with The Six Tones was based on the thesis that, rather than stepping back and allowing social interaction to take place, I evaded the uneasiness by action, thereby disallowing change to take place. In his reading of Lacan, Slavoj Žižek (2011) points to interpassivity as: "*I am passive through the Other*" (p. 26). And further: "In a group situation in which some tension threatens to explode, the obsessional talks all the time in order to prevent the awkward moment of silence that would compel the participants to openly confront the underlying tension" (p. 26). Eventually, according to Žižek, we move from the "the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of Other deprived of its Otherness" (p. 38). Though it is important to remember that once we started playing in the session described above, we relatively quickly approached a working situation in which some of the issues discussed here were resolved, it is equally as important to recognize that political topics also may infringe on artistic practice unless they are properly identified. Furthermore, my main point is that the practice may effectively provide a contingent unfolding of the same topics.

Discussion

The world is not legible, it is audible, announces Jacques Attali (1985, p. 3). Despite the extreme focus on visual communication in the hyper-capitalism of the early 21st century the chasm, as it is referred to by Marcel Cobussen (2008) in his excursion in musical spirituality, between what is the seeing subject and the seen object has no equivalent in sound: "The ocular subjectivity implies a not-involved witnessing, a necessary distance, an external relationship: the seeing subject can be located at the edge of the world. Conversely, the ear has no opposite".[14] The ear is immersed in sound and has no way to 'shut its eyes'. One may speculate if it is this possibility of detachment from what we see that is being exploited by media; is it possible for us to consume images without getting fully involved, making way for unconscious influence? When listening I am within the sound, captivated in it, as we are reminded by Nancy. What would inevitably restrain the potential for openness towards the other in listening is the desire for autonomy, although musical practice the dividing line between openness towards the other and the autonomy of the subject is considerably more complicated, as we have seen in the three examples from my own practice presented here.

A lot can be said about these stories, used as point of departure. They are perhaps not very original; many musicians and artists may have had similar experiences. My main concern, however, has been to attempt to understand the ways in which the self can, and will, interact with my creativity and my interaction with the other: the self as *I* or *Eye*, as a vehicle or inhibitor of freedom, and as obstructing social and political power structures. The common denominator in these stories is the way in which the self, and consciousness about the self and other, alters the planned artistic and expressive trajectories, and the focus of this essay is how the impact and meaning of these intersections between the internal and external worlds of artistic expression can be discussed. Looking at the different positions, or perspectives, of the self, the subconscious activities and choices made in performance become accessible and possible to penetrate. Approaching a critical view on freedom reveals its dual nature, and the dynamics and destruction of habit formation allows for an improvisation that may also be non-free. I agree with Griffiths (2010) that "understanding the self and its place in research is crucial in the carrying out and presentation of arts-based, practice-based research" (p. 185). Griffiths also points to how artistic research may become an important counterpart to the way that neo-liberalism valorises the impersonal (though it is always referred to as the *personal* choice). I would like to go even further and argue that through artistic practice, with the help of artistic research, we are able to approach difficult socio-political issues and become aware of the necessary transformations needed within the domains of self and of society.

We are reminded by Deleuze (1994) that "self-consciousness in recognition appears as the faculty of the future or the function of the future, the function of the new" (p. 14-5) and part of my argument here has been that self-consciousness in recognition is also the first instance that will allow the new. In all three recollections my failure to recognize my instant responses as valid made me analyze my behaviour as irrational and flawed. Instead of seeing the self as capable of responding soundly to a given situation, its reactions were seen in relation to the socially or culturally moulded reference image of the performer or composer. This image is ruled by the awareness of culturally defined roles and may be seen as the faculty of the past, the opposite of self-consciousness in recognition. The improvising musician is in many cases as crammed with artistic codes as is the composer or the writer, and the concept

14 For an artistic research project with a focus on seeing and being seen, see the PhD dissertation Leiderstam (2006).

of freedom often associated with improvisation makes it even more complex. To be free and authoritative are central properties of the jazz musician, problematic in themselves and together they may become plain confusing. Both of the first two stories are related to these concepts and possible solutions lie in regarding the group as a dynamic subculture and changing the focus from the origin to the destination. Barthes' claim that writing is not the creation of a voice but its destruction, a space where all identity is lost may seem counterproductive to my case, but the loss of identity is where the self may be found. This is a claim initself exemplified by the third story where identity was the obstruction in the first phase of our inter-cultural project.

The self in artistic practice is constituted by a complex weave of interrelated aspects including, apart from the psychological, the social, cultural, political, aesthetic and philosophical. In a globalized world, not limited to the intercultural context, it is useful to attempt to deconstruct common binaries central to most Western artistic production, and decisive to the way our cultural understanding of the role of creation has been shaped. These include producer–consumer, performer–listener, improvised–composed,[15] and dual–non-dual. When the impact of these, and similar, concepts are penetrated, the self can be informed by what is now going on in the process rather than by what has traditionally shaped the it, e.g. the self as a composer is defined by the particular needs imposed by the context and not by what is culturally or aesthetically expected of that role. The subsequent reciprocal effect is that a new opening for examining the potential consequence in the political dimension is revealed. The first instance of change, of the future, is to determine what needs to be changed, and artistic practice is a location where this may be aptly established.

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15 Though this is not a binary opposition I include it here for the reason that it is so commonly discussed as a dichotomy.

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