

# Machinic Propositions

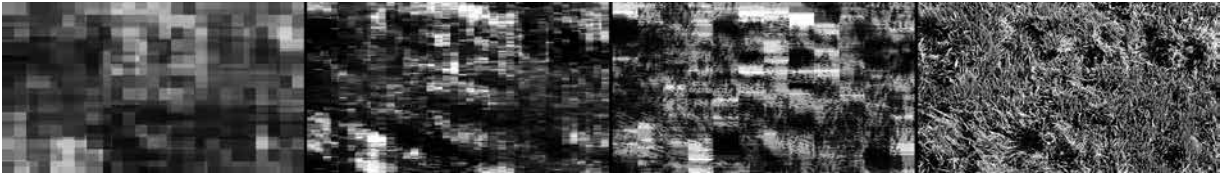
## Artistic Practice and Deterritorialisation

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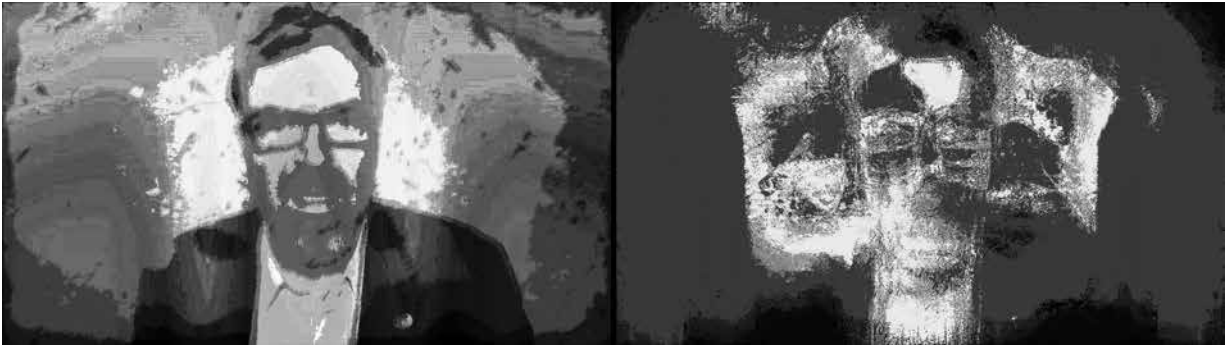


### INTRODUCTION

One of the great promises of artistic research is the way in which it allows an insight into the inner workings of artistic practices.<sup>1</sup> Given an appropriate methodology, the researcher may tap into the artistic processes or into the actual performance itself. Although other research fields, such as art history, musicology, and ethnography, along with many others, have also shed light on some of the processes behind artistic production, what makes artistic research both challenging and interesting is the double role played by researchers/artists. In part due to this special condition in artistic research or research focused on artistic practices, the research also frequently changes both the practice and the artist/researcher. In fact, this may be seen as one of its features (Frisk and Östersjö, 2013, 27).

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<sup>1</sup> All images in this text are screen dumps from the latest version of *Machinic Propositions*, an intermedia work and ongoing project by the authors.



That changes in the processes that lead up to an artistic work may change the outcome may not come as a surprise. What is remarkable, however, is the extent to which the artistic *work* in Western culture is still often seen as an immutable object and the product of one single originator. Even relatively distributed artistic practices, such as film production, are often referred to as the work of a director. The perspective of the originator guides the apprehension of and, to some extent, also the understanding of the work of art. The points of reference in this view are theatre stage directors (rather than actors), and composers (rather than the musicians that play their music). For other fields, the configuration of the agents involved may be of a different kind, but the dominance of the artwork by a single originator is not to be mistaken, especially in music.

There are, however, several indications that this view is slowly changing. In 2005, with reference to Lydia Goehr's important work *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (1992), Georgina Born (2005, 8) theorised the changing ontology of music that has opened up to "an approach that incorporates understandings of the social, technological and temporal dimensions of music." She points to several important aspects of this development relating to, among other things, the destabilising effect that music in itself may have on common dualisms such as subject-object and production-reception. This resonates well with some of the ideas proposed in this short chapter. Through artistic practice and consistent artistic methodology, the rigid conceptualisation of music as an object rather than an activity may be questioned.



## MACHINIC PROPOSITIONS

The duo Mongrel has worked for several years on numerous intermedia projects with the overarching ambition to critically examine the nature of the relationship between auditory and visual elements in intermedia works. Our works have been performed in the United Kingdom, Denmark, Sweden, France, Belgium, Germany, and Vietnam. *Machinic Propositions*, a project that we started in 2015, is simultaneously an artistic project and an attempt to critically examine Deleuze and Guattari's theorems of deterritorialisation as found in chapters seven and ten of *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Mongrel's output has taken a few different shapes and has used different kinds of media such as text, live performance, and fixed media formats. Like much of our other works, *Machinic Propositions* is part of the attempt to counteract the predominance of one medium over another, in particular, video over audio. This is not to say that we necessarily strive to integrate them. Instead the ambition is to allow one to become the other under certain conditions, comparable to what Deleuze describes as "not an exchange, but 'a confidence with no possible interlocutor' . . . ; in short, a conversation" (Deleuze and Parnet 2007, 3).

Furthermore, there are parallels between the way we work and the idea put forward by Deleuze of style as the ability to "stammer in one's own language" (Deleuze and Parnet 2007, 4). Like any other artistic process, our working process is situated in our personal conditions and flaws; but in *Machinic Propositions* we use them to gain access to the ability, discussed by Deleuze, to stammer in language while avoiding it in speech (ibid.). Among other things, we weave in Elberling's dyslexia and use his misreading of the text as concrete material in the process allowing new meanings to rise from the mistakes.

In this project, we looked at the relationship between the two media as a system of de/reterritorialisation. This allowed us to depart from certain existing theories of sound and moving pictures, such as the empathetic/anempathetic distinction proposed by Chion (1994). Instead we attempted to detach both sound and image from their highly defined modes of engagement. We examined the ways in which the actual relations could be re-established within our systems of working, using a range of approaches. One way through, which we used to experiment with these issues, was to change roles in the work and performance situation. Although we have our specific fields of competence—Frisk centred on sound, Elberling on video—we decided to change roles so that Frisk was in charge of the video and vice versa. As a result, our attitudes towards the material obviously changed. To some extent, this is a question of creating

usable interfaces for one another that in and of itself provokes a rethinking of practice. In this case the actual situation also changed our respective understanding of our practices consistent with our core ambition to deconstruct the relationship between sound and image.

Concerning the theorems of deterritorialisation, certain interesting and immediate observations may be made relating both to the challenges of combining audio and video in general and to our particular practice. For instance, theorem two quite literally has some bearing on the factual reality of digital sound and image: “The fastest of two elements or movements of deterritorialization is not necessarily the most intense or most deterritorialized” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 193). The current rate of digital audio and video is in the region of 1764/1;<sup>2</sup> yet video is commonly the dominant medium in this relation.

Our practice, like many other practices, may be likened to a rhizome, a network of ideas that in the beginning is spread out on a plane. The nodes representing these ideas are highly distributed in both space and time and appear to be unorganised. Eventually, through work processes and conceptual development, a folding of this space takes place and virtual wormholes are created. Nodes that in the beginning may have been located far from one another may now be closely situated. This is to some extent a self-organising process that finds some resonance in *A Thousand Plateaus*. In the opening chapter, citing Rosenstiehl and Petitot (1974), Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 17) comment: “To these centered systems, the authors contrast acentered systems, finite networks of automata in which communication runs from any neighbor to any other, the stems or channels do not preexist, and all individuals are interchangeable, defined only by their state at a given moment—such that the local operations are coordinated and the final, global result synchronized without a central agency.”

Artistic work is to some extent a practice that takes place in material reality, even if the perception of such actions may approach the virtual. In music, the practice often needs time to develop—although some processes are better developed outside time. Nevertheless, the way Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 12) talk about the rhizome as “a map and not a tracing” is, at least for the work method we have developed, both a fitting description and a useful mode with which to further develop our processes. Mapping the patterns we are creating—our own as well as each other’s—is a process that may be seen as the attempt to reduce the number of possibilities in our project, while at the same time attempt to increase the number of possible connections. Just before we started working on *Machinic Propositions*, we wrote in our work journal that “the solution lies rather in the attempt to move away from trying to synchronise the perception of sound and video, and instead focus on common processes that bind the elements together.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is not how we attempt to synchronise the mediums with one another but rather how the activities construct these mediums in the first place.

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2 This obviously depends on the sample rate and the frame rate respectively; but, as a comparison, audio is sampled 44,100 times per second and the typical frame rate of video is 25 frames per second.

3 Project diary, 11 March 2015, translated from Swedish by the authors.

## Machinic Propositions

Through the theorems of *A Thousand Plateaus* we began to work out an abstract intermedial work trying to maintain a critical attitude towards Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy, specifically, and the very notion of using philosophy as the input to artistic processes, in general. With the use of the theory, we further developed our conceptual tools, and more specifically, the way we used our senses *to see* and *to hear* in the way we tackled the theory. Together this helped create a zone of relative freedom that might provide possibilities for a new understanding of what we do as artists and researchers.



### CONCEPTUAL DEDUCTION

Our artistic method is one in which narrative and improvisation play central roles. It has grown out of our thinking about contemporary media and our attempts to critically examine both our own pro-technical approach and the hypermedia landscape we act and live in. The method has been developed on the basis of our artistic ideas, the needs of the projects we engage in, and the conditions of our respective practices. Our process is slow and meticulous. Work on *Machinic Propositions* began in 2015 and is likely to continue for another few years. In other words, what is commonly seen as the actual artwork—the work in performance—only materialises at the very end of a relatively long process of interaction. Furthermore, in our method, it may continue to develop through numerous iterations long after that. However, the work in itself, in terms of a resulting performance, is in this context less important than the process, to the point where there is almost a reversal of the two terms: the *work* is the process and the actual performance work is simply one of many possible parts of the process.

This method of conceptual deduction is related to a variety of contexts and may primarily be associated with scientific research and systematic inquiry perhaps not commonly referenced in the context of artistic research. In *Monad Rrenban's* book on the early works of Walter Benjamin, he writes: "Benjamin suggests the practice of philosophy is not the conceptual deduction (deduction into concepts) characteristic of research but is also somewhat distinct from the metaphorical determinateness . . . in the artwork" (Rrenban 2005, 117). For us, however, both metaphorical determinateness and conceptual deductions are

part of the formative movement towards a performance. In *Mongrel* we use it freely, mainly as a tool to reason our way through the constructive phases of our artistic practice. In some ways, this is not so different from using improvisation as a method, as improvisation may also be concerned with the creation of models that contribute to bringing the negotiation of material forward. Hence, it is a process in which we align and synchronise the general ambition of the work; perhaps most importantly, it brings differences in our respective aesthetics to the surface in a way that is useful to us. We might start with an existing story, a fictional character, or a philosophical text, but we end up with something quite different. As it is artistic practice, the goal of the method is to create a performative platform that we share and that we later use to guide the development of material for our works.



Although it is a time-consuming process the strength of which is not always evident in the practice, it can lead to the kind of pivotal moments where the entire structure needs to be rethought. As was mentioned, the basic premise of the method, the way we use it, is that we start with a general story or concept that we explore together.

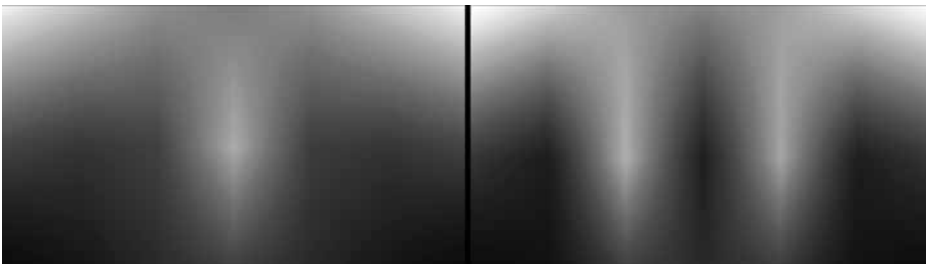
#### DISCUSSION

Part of our method is to improvise in the studio, as a means both for generating material and for evaluating the effectiveness of the performance situation. In these recorded sessions, the impact of the listening position is sometimes quite obvious. For example, the immediate memory of the quality of the playing may be that it was highly consistent. Listening back to it later, however, the impression of the performance may be rather different, such that several edits are necessary for it to work. In this project we have discussed this phenomenon

as a process of deterritorialisation; the improvisation taking place in real time is deterritorialised into a hybrid composition in fixed time and a composition affords a different kind of listening than an improvisation.

Ellestrom (2010, 11) comments, “the understanding of what a medium is and what intermedial relations actually consist of has vital implications for each and every inquiry in old and new fields of study concerning the arts and media: ekphrasis, cinema, illustration, visual poetry, remediation, adaptation, multi-media and so on.” Unless we attempt to understand the underlying processes that come into play when an improvisation is recorded and then listened back to, we cannot use the information we get from listening to the recording in a way that contributes to our work. This process is similar to what is described in theorem five of *A Thousand Plateaus*: “deterritorialization is always double, because it implies the coexistence of a major variable and a minor variable in simultaneous becoming (the two terms of a becoming do not exchange places, there is no identification between them, they are instead drawn into an asymmetrical block in which both change to the same extent, and which constitutes their zone of proximity)” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 306). The music, first improvised and then recorded, becomes a double articulation and the content in both contexts changes to a degree where neither may be understood in the way they could prior to the deterritorialisation. The recording expropriates the content transforming it from the original improvisation and it *becomes* a composition.

The continuous iterations of practice–reflection feedback loops alongside the theory–method interactions that may surface as a result are among some of the most interesting aspects of artistic research. These may involve de/reterritorialising the borders between preparation and performance, between design time and playtime and between different media. In these lines or blocks of becoming there is an opening for a radical and experimental research practice that has social as well as political connotations; but most of all it contributes to our artistic practice.



For musicians, it may be second nature to understand and go beyond differences between modes of listening to the development of material and a complimentary listening to the result of the same process. Partly, artistic research is the attempt to extract the implications of the knowledge development in these and similar processes, collect the data, and then return and develop the

musical possibilities that the new information allows. Nevertheless, it is also an attempt to understand the results outside the field of artistic practices. In this sense, artistic research is interdisciplinary, transformative, and deterritorialising. It opens up new perspectives on the roles of the various agents in the field of performance, such as the audience, sociocultural contexts, and many other. Even though the history of art practice is full of examples of practitioners who have worked in this very manner—and as a consequence this aspect of artistic research is not unique or new—the transformative aspect of artistic research should attempt to continuously move the borders of what is possible, in art as well as in research.

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