

Self and otherness, text and sound: the political dimension of artistic research

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Abstract

In this performance lecture I will discuss some of the implications of working as an artistic researcher. First by examining the conceptualization of the artist and the ways in which it may stand in the way of the research effort. Then, I will use a recent work as an example of method development and how information flows between both practice and research. Finally, I will present how the political dimension of artistic research may surface and how it may be developed in future projects.

Self and Otherness

One of the sections taken out from my 2008 PhD dissertation “Improvisation, computers and interaction” Frisk, 2008 was the one concerning the Self. From the beginning the idea of the Self as the defining difference between man and machine seemed to me one of the more important aspects of the investigation I was carrying out. Due to the way the project had developed, however, in the end it proved to be less important. The topic of human-computer interaction and improvisation had taken new and unexpected turns and cutting this section out was part of the often common process of narrowing down a thesis to give it more focus. After the dissertation, however, I wanted to approach this vast and difficult area of the Self and begin to look into its constitution in art and improvisation. It became the focus of my post doc research within the project *(Re)Thinking Improvisation*.

The self influences so many aspects that I have already explored, such as the concept of *control*, *autonomy*, and of the *work in motion*. In almost all my works during the five years that has passed since my PhD defense, the notion of the Self and its relation to the work, the collaborators, the audience, and the field has played a central role. I have been aiming for an expanded context for artistic production and research in which the 'author' is distributed among several agents. What I am discussing here is not to outsource parts of the work creation, nor to remove myself from the creative process. Rather, it is about taking responsibility for a relation with the other (listener, co-musician, co-artist, etc.) where *listening* is one of the key components. It is about the acceptance that control and result is less interesting than process and about giving up ownership and authority in an attempt to open-source the musical work. The prevailing image since the romantic era is

one where the artist is at the nucleus of artist production and communication and in the context of artistic research that image has to be dismantled. But even outside the narrow field of practice based research is this conception of the artist quite unproductive if the goal is communication and development.

Henry David Thoreau, a main character of the development of the objectivist view, whose work became an important inspiration for John Cage, speaks of the “transparent eye-ball” and the “objective I” (Thoreau, 1854/2004). However, objectivity is not the main matter here. Rather, it is the space for subjectivity that holds the key to the success of important aspects of collaborative practices: “Validity then is fundamentally a matter of making the subjectivity of the artist visible in the research design. The need for creating a multi-layered understanding of subject-positions does come out clearly in studies of collaborative creativity” (Frisk and Östersjö, 2012/2013). In collaborative practices negotiation and sharing are at the center, as is the general philosophy of being open to the perspective of the other, a generally phenomenological approach, and giving priority of eye over I.

This altered perspective opens up a number of interesting ethical dimensions but in my work they grew out of the artistic projects, in particular out of the Vietnamese-Swedish group The Six Tones and the different projects we engaged in. Its intercultural context made it necessary to probe the questions of identity, belonging, difference, otherness, ontology and epistemology in relation to our work, to music and to the inter cultural context we are situated in. In this dimension the important question of identity has to be investigated. The psychologically charged relationship of identity and Self has a special meaning in postcolonial theory as many of the common components for constructing identity are rooted in us-and-them binary relations. The hypothesis that I have been developing through this work is that the identity of the Self as described in a binary relation to the other (as in soloist-accompanist, composer-performer, performer-listener, art music-traditional music, Westerner-foreigner, etc.) may be deconstructed in artistic practices through the tools I developed in my thesis. These are primarily the ideas concerning the distribution of the creative process. The main artistic contributions with reference to the Self are the double CD *Signal in Noise* (Tones, 2013) and the composition *The Transparent I* (Frisk, 2011) and in *Improvisation and the self* (Frisk, 2014) the social and political aspects are discussed:

We must also include and consider the fact that the self is continuously constructing the other, and similarly, how the dynamics of the self is influenced by social and political powers. Finally, it is important to remember that the social and political domains themselves may be influenced and even altered by how the self and the other is constituted.

In a complex interplay between music, improvisation, consciousness through reflection, experimentation, methodological rigor, practice, the social and the political I have begun to deconstruct the Self in a way that makes possible an alternative understanding of relations to the other. It is in this respect that I see art as an inherently political act. Because of the communicative aspect of performative art it is also a practice and theory of influencing other people. It is, however, also a practice that may easily deceive us to believe that the artist is merely a medium rather than an actor. But we will return to this soon and focus on a related bearing of political and social structure.

Language. Language is the ultimate political tool. It is constructed in a power relation to both the speaker and the listener. The logocentric attitude in the West is probably obvious to most and artistic research exists not outside of it but neither fully within it. Personally I am leaning on an assumption that the epistemology of art is to be sought in the expression of the artistic language rather than in its constitution. This is opposed to de Saussure's claim that the structure of *parole* is revealed through the structure of *langue* and alligns with Derrida's deconstruction and a center being outside of its centre.

By related reasons the Self cannot be the centre of the artistic research practice while it is the very centre. It is the centre outside of centre that allows for the subjective stance. These relations that would be obscured by the Self as centre similarly to how the work as art would risk to cloud the work-in-motion. Escaping the central point of reference and negating the hidden structure within is for me what allows for an act of research that retains its openness to change. *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*. Which turns our attention back to the politics of artistic research.

The work done while preparing for the recording of *Signal in Noise* by The Six Tones turned out to be the beginning of a new direction for the group. The way we engaged with different aspects of the diversified musical life of Hanoi was an idea the artistic influence of which we had not anticipated. We boldly emerged into quite radical improvisations with traditional Vietnamese musicians, and we brought our own acoustic expressions to the studio with the contemporary electronic playing of Tri Minh and Vu Na Than. These sessions exemplify the potential complexity of artistic work. In music we often speak of the "natural" or "what comes naturally", as something that is effortless or that is meant to be. Our playing in these sessions was effortless but at the same time there was a considerable resistance involved, a resistance that did not necessarily had to be overcome—it would in fact have been a mistake to try to overcome it—but that had to be dealt with. Hence, though we quickly arrived at a satisfying result, the process was anything but effortless to me. Partly, the issue was related to the political and social aspects of me as a white man abroad making use of the traditions and knowledge of people economically much less fortunate than me. The CD project made these thoughts surface and I make an attempt to discuss them in the chapter *Improvisation and the self: to listen to the other* in the book *Soundweaving*:

In order to truly be able to encounter the new and the unforeseen, challenging different aspects of the notion of "center" and "periphery" was necessary: is Western art music the norm and traditional Vietnamese music an exotic other? Are Stefan and I 'visiting' a music outside of our own sphere, or is it rather Thuy and My that are forced to approach us. Is it at all possible to communicate on equal terms? The social impact of the Eurocentric view of the world, however, should not be underestimated. Stefan and I belong to what Mark Slobin (1987) labels "the superculture" (p. 31), and the complex political and economic asymmetry 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. (Frisk, 2014)

In the project The Six Tones I place myself in a context where I *have* to consider the political impact of my artistic activities even before they themselves become political. After

all, if we were not be able to avoid becoming part of an act of cultural appropriation the ambition of the project would fail.

Jacques Attali (1985) points to the merchandising prospect of most music and how that implicitly adds a political facet to it. But music, however, also heralds a subversion and a possibility for “a radically, new organization” that is yet unimagined (ibid. p. 5). Artistic research in general, and the projects discussed above, may be considered an arena where such new organizations may advance and flourish.

Drinking and working with text

In a recent project we are turning to text. Text as a carrier of non-semantic meaning, as sound. We attempt to break down the power structures of language as meaning and turn to other readings, if you wish. The background and starting point for this project was a piece we did with a Thai poet Zakariya Amataya whose recording of a reading of one of his poems we used as a basis for a structured improvisation. The method, listening to the sounds of his voice and building new relations between the utterances was stimulating and inspirational.

In a new piece, not yet recorded, I worked with *A Drinking Song* by W. B. Yeats in a translation to Vietnamese, read and recorded by Nguyen Thanh Thuy. Using the recording I made several layers of analysis based on timbre, velocity, loudness, pitch, etc. Then I mapped this data to different parameters of the graphic layouts in five different layers. It is difficult to say anything about the result yet but based on a first rehearsal the score conveys information to the performers valid to the attempt to make musical meaning out of an abstract text.

This method of working I find interesting in the light of the discussion of the political aspect of artistic research. Dismantling language as the dominating vehicle for distributing knowledge, and one of the major oppressive factors is in itself a goal worth aiming for. But the more interesting relations lies in the attempt of this project to use the errors in translation as a creative power.

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