

# Machinic propositions: artistic practice and deterritorialization

Henrik Frisk and Anders Elberling

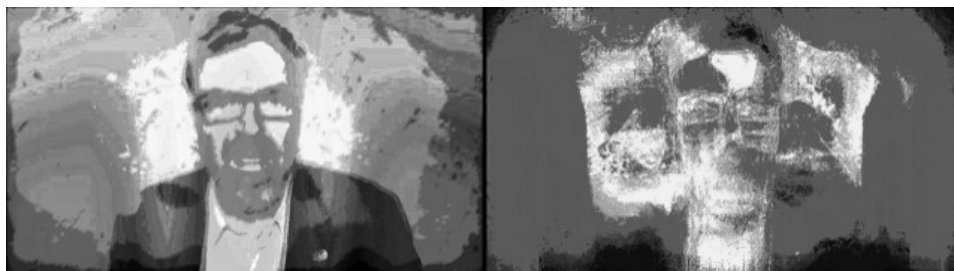
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## Abstract

*Machinic propositions* is a project started by the duo *Mongrel* in 2015. It is simultaneously an intermedial artistic project and an attempt to critically examine Deleuze and Guattari's theorems of deterritorialization as found in chapter seven and ten of their seminal work *A Thousand Plateaus*. The output has taken a few different shapes and has used different kinds of media. Like much of our other works *Machinic propositions* is part of the attempt to counteract the predominance of one medium over the other, in particular, video over audio. In this short paper we discuss our artistic method in which narrativity and improvisation play central roles. It has grown out of our thinking about contemporary media and an attempt to critically examine both our own pro-technical approach, and the hypermedia landscape we act and live in.

In this project, we have looked at the relation between the two media as a system of de/reterritorialization. Our practice, like many other artistic practices, may be likened to a rhizome, a network of ideas that in the beginning is spread out on a plane. Eventually, and partly through a self-organizing process and conceptual development, a folding of this space is taking place. Nodes that in the beginning may have been located far from each other may now be situated in close proximity. Thereby, they become accessible nodes of interaction in our practice.





## Introduction

One<sup>1</sup> of the great promises of artistic research is the way in which it allows for an insight into the inner workings of artistic practices. 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, 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, it is not uncommon that the research also introduces a change both into the practice and in the artist/researcher. In fact, this may be seen as one of its features (frisk-ost13).

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 is often referred to as the work of a director. The perspective of the originator is guiding the apprehension of, and also, to some extent, the understanding of the work of art. The points of reference in this view are the stage director at the theatre (rather than the actors), and the 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 to which a single originator may be attached 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*, Georgina Born theorized the changing ontology of music that opens up for "an approach that incorporates understandings of the social, technological and temporal dimensions of music" (Born2005). She points to several important aspects of this development relating to, among other things, the destabilizing effect that music in itself may

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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.



have on common dualisms such as subject/object and production/reception. This resonates well with some of the ideas proposed in this short text. Through artistic practice and consistent artistic methodology, the rigid conceptualization 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 deterritorialization as found in chapter seven and ten of their seminal work *A Thousand Plateaus* (deleuze80). The output has taken a few different shapes and has used different kinds of media such as text, live performance and fixed media format. Like much of our other works *Machinic propositions* is part of the attempt to counteract the predominance of one medium over the other, in particular, video over audio. This is not to say that we necessarily strive for their integration into one another. Instead the ambition is to allow one to become the other under certain conditions, comparable to what is described by Deleuze as "not an exchange, but 'a confidence with no possible interlocutor' [...]; in short, a conversation" (deleuze77).

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" (deleuze77). Our working process is, like any other artistic process, 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 deleuze77. 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 have looked at the relation between the two media as a system of de/re-territorialization. This has allowed us to depart from some existing theories of sound and moving pictures, such as the empathetic/anempathetic distinction proposed by Chion1994. Instead we have attempted to detach both sound and image from their highly defined modes of engagement. We examined the ways in which the actual rela-

tions could be re-established within our systems of working, using a range of approaches. One way through which we experimented with these issues was to change roles in the work and performance situation. Although we have our specific fields of competences, Frisk centered on sound and Elberling on video, we decided to change roles so that Frisk was in charge of the video and vice versa. As a result the attitudes towards the material obviously changed. To some extent, this is a question of creating usable interfaces for one another which in and of itself provokes a rethinking of one's practice. In this case the actual situation also changed our respective understanding of our practices consistent with the core ambition to deconstruct the relationship between sound and image.

Concerning the theorems of deterritorialization, there are some interesting and immediate observations that may be done relating both to the challenges in combining audio and video in general, as well as 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." (deleuze80) The update 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 appears to be unorganized. Eventually, through the work processes and the conceptual development, a folding of this space is taking place, and virtual wormholes are created. Nodes that in the beginning may have been located far from each other may now be situated in close proximity. This is to some extent a self-organizing process that finds some resonance in *A Thousand Plateaus*. In the opening chapter, by reference to rosenstiehl974, deleuze80 comment that 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. (deleuze80)

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 out of time. Nevertheless, the way Deleuze and Guattari talk about the rhizome as "a map and not a tracing" (deleuze80) is, at least for the work method we have developed, both a fitting

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<sup>2</sup>This obviously depends on the sample rate and the frame rate respectively but as a comparison audio is sampled 44100 times per second and the typical frame rate of video is 25fps.



description and a useful mode with which to further develop our processes. Mapping the patterns we are creating, our individual 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 engaged in the work on *Machinic Propositions* we wrote in our work journal that "the solution lies rather in the attempt to move away from trying to synchronize 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 synchronize the mediums with each other but rather how the activities that construct these mediums in the first place.

Through the theorems of *A Thousand Plateaus* we began to work out an abstract intermedial work trying to maintain a critical attitude towards the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari 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 participated in creating a zone of relative freedom that may provide possibilities for a new understanding of what we do as artists and researchers.

## Conceptual deduction

Our artistic method is one where 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 based on our artistic ideas, the needs of the projects we engage in, and the conditions of our respective practices. Our process is slow and meticulous. The 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 materializes at the very end of a relatively long process of interaction. Furthermore, in our method, it may continue to develop through

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<sup>3</sup>Project diary, translated from Swedish by the authors, March 11, 2015.



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 out of many possible parts of the process.

The 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 Monrad Rrenban's book on the early works of Walter Benjamin, he writes that "Benjamin suggests the practice of philosophy is not the conceptual deduction (deduction into concepts) of research but is also somewhat distinct from the metaphorical determinateness [...] in the artwork" (rrenban2005). For us, however, both the metaphorical determinateness and the conceptual deductions are part of the formative movement towards a performance. In *Mongrel* we are using it freely, and 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 synchronize the general ambition of the work and, perhaps most importantly, it brings differences in our respective aesthetics to the surface in a way that is useful to us. We may start with an existing story, a fictional character or a philosophical text, but we may end up with something quite different. Being 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.

It is a time-consuming process the strength of which is not always evident in the

practice and 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

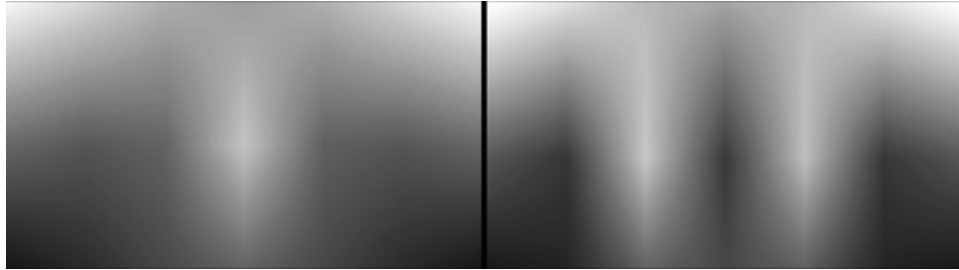
Part of our method is to improvise in the studio, both as a means for generating material and for evaluating the effectiveness of the performance situation. In these recorded sessions the impact of the listening position is sometimes quite obvious. For example, the immediate memory of the quality of the playing may be that it was highly consistent. Listening back to it at a later time, 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 deterritorialization; the improvisation taking place in real time is deterritorialized into a hybrid composition in fixed time and a composition affords a different kind of listening than an improvisation.

Ellestrom comments that “the understanding of what a medium is and what inter-medial 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, multimedia and so on” (Ellestrom2010). 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*:

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). (deleuze80)

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 deterritorialization. The recording expropriates the content transforming it from the original improvisation and it *becomes* a composition.

The continuous iterations of practice-reflection feedback loops and, along with them, 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/reterritorializing the borders between preparation and performance, between design time and play time 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 the musician to understand and go beyond the differences between the modes of listening to the development of material, and the complimentary listening to the result of the same process, may be second nature. Partly, artistic research is the attempt to extract the implications of the knowledge development in those and similar processes, collect the data, and then go back and develop the musical possibilities allowed for with the new information. But also to attempt to understand the results outside of the field of artistic practices. In this sense, artistic research is interdisciplinary, transformative and deterritorializing. It opens up new perspectives on the roles of the various agents in the field of performance such as the audience, the sociocultural contexts and many other. Even though the history of art practice is full of examples of practitioners that have worked in this very manner, and as a consequence, this aspect of artistic research is not unique or new. However, the transformative aspect of artistic research should attempt to continuously move the borders of what is possible; in art as well as in research.