

# Beyond the unnecessary self

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## Abstract

### Beyond the unnecessary self

In my 2013 paper *The (un)necessary self* (Frisk 2013) I further explored the idea of the *giving up of the self* as an important step towards the dismantling of the romantic idea of creation, and approach an understanding of creativity that is more closely aligned with the other. The other should be understood as anyone in the proximity of the artistic practice: a co-creator, a listener, a participant or a remote collaborator. The point here is to move the focus from the creator to what is created and to understand the roles of the various agents involved.

In music, hyper-capitalism of the twenty first century is eager to commodify the artistic output, the artist, as well as the listeners. This is not only a problem for the freedom of art (a concept equally complex), it also makes the role of the self difficult to understand. But in the radicalization of the role of the creator, both a new work concept and a review of the self is necessary, even beyond the notion of giving up of the self. The ethics in artistic practices, that is, the moral values that are expressed through artistic practices in music, specifically improvisation, may complement traditional views on ethics and is an important aspect when discussing the roles of the self. The notion of the *Care of the Self*, as discussed in Michel Foucault's Volume Three of the *History of Sexuality*, is used as a method to approach this complex area.

This presentation will be in the form of a lecture performance.

## Paper

In my 2013 paper *The (un)necessary self* (Frisk 2013) I explored the idea of the concept of *giving up of the self* as an important step towards the dismantling of the romantic idea of creation and individuality. Instead I wanted to approach an understanding of creativity that is entangled with the other in a way that emphasizes the relation between self and other rather than on the individuality of the artist. Related to this is the ambition to move the focus from the *creator* to what is *created*, and to better understand the roles of the various agents involved. The other should be understood as anyone or anything in the proximity of the artistic practice: a co-creator, a listener, a participant, an instrument, a remote collaborator, or anything with a similar impact on the artistic practice.

The hyper-capitalism of the twenty first century is eager to commodify any and all artistic output, as well as the artist and the listeners as objects of consumption. To take an example is the primary interest of the big streaming platforms not to deliver music or movies. Instead it is the eternal collection of data that happens in the background, hidden, in the dark corners of the entertainment apps that is at the centre. Delivering content is really not the main objective. This is clearly not a new phenomenon, the main point of commercial media has always been to sell space for advertisement, the role of the content is only to draw attention to the right demographic groups—those to whom the commercials are directed. Hyper-capitalism promotes itself based on the freedom of the individual it allows for where the individual is given the liberty to choose and consume whatever they like. However, since the main economic transaction happens hidden from the user, and in a different domain, this freedom is debatable, even though the concept of freedom itself is an equally complex area.

In this work, as in my original essay from 2013, American writer David Henry Thoreau's famous notion of the absent speaker serves as an inspiration: "The peculiarity of a work of genius is the absence of the speaker from his speech" (Thoreau 1854 p. 264). This absent artist is the unnecessary self—perhaps we may talk about the absent genius as well—but the partly disruptive dynamics of hypercapitalism as briefly discussed above plays an important role here.

The freedom of art makes the role of the *self* difficult to comprehend. Who is this absent self whose works are exploited on a market where the transactions are so convoluted and opaque that they are impossible to disentangle? In the attempt, then, to radicalize the role of the creator, both a new work concept and a review of the self is necessary, even beyond the

notion of giving up the self—even an absent self is a self—primarily in order to understand how the relations are interconnected.

The ethics in artistic practices, that is, the moral values that are expressed through artistic practices in music, specifically improvisation, is an important aspect when discussing the roles of the self. The notion of the *Care of the Self*, as discussed in Michel Foucault's Volume Three of the *History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1988), is used here as a method to approach this complex area.

The *care of the self* is a particular development between self and others, a method for developing an ethics through engaging with the self's relation to the self, a self that is rooted in "practices of freedom" (Foucault, Rabinow, and Hurley 1997 p. 283): "Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection" (Foucault, Rabinow, and Hurley 1997 p. 284). The care of the self is the activity of which these elements are a part, and it is not a solipsistic activity that is merely concerned with the self:

When you take care of the body you do not take care of the self.  
The self is not clothing, tools, or possessions; It is to be found in  
the principle that uses these tools, a principle not of the body of  
the soul. You have to worry about your soul—that is the principal  
activity for caring for yourself. The care of the self is the care of  
the activity and not the care of the soul-as-substance. (Foucault,  
Rabinow, and Hurley 1997 p.231-2)

The principle that uses the tools of artistic practice is in essence the aesthetics of the creative act: the practice itself. Though not philosophically grounded and although Thoreau may not have thought of it this way there, is an odd and interesting connection between the care of the self and the absent speaker. The self's relation to others as well as to the self is a condition for the absent speaker, since they still needs a present relation to the listener

One may also assert that freedom is the ontological condition for improvisation and continue to paraphrase Foucault: Improvisation is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection. It is in the reflective act here on part of the improviser that the ethics of improvisation may be developed and understood. The informed self takes responsibility for the reflection that develops the interdependence between freedom and improvisation. It is the activity that is instantiated in this process that plays a central and, as Foucault points out, the care of the self is the care of the activity. The ethics of improvisation, then, informs the act of reflection that

gives rise to improvisation out of freedom and becomes an activity that, once it is started, renders the self unnecessary. This can be compared to philosopher Gary Peters remark that "free-improvisation is not driven by a concern for other improvisers, but by a concern or care for the work itself" (Benson 2003 p. 59)

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The expansion of the notion of the unnecessary self was inspired by the line of thoughts presented in the paper *Sounds of Future Past* (Holzer, Holzapfel, and Frisk 2021) where the concept of an *ethics of instruments* is explored. This radical idea was first presented by professor of history of art John Tresch and professor of music Emily I. Dolan in the paper *Toward an Organology of Music* Tresch and Dolan (2013). It is based on some of the conditions for, or elements of, ethical relations which in turn relates to the *technologies of the self*, a concept also introduced by Foucault in a related work (Foucault et al. 1988). Tresch and Dolan explore this experimental ethics of instruments through four analytical categories, highly related to the four axes that makes up "Foucault's analysis of the self's relation to the self" (Tresch and Dolan 2013 p. 284), namely the ontology, deontology, asceticism and the teleology of the instruments. Their idea of an *ethics of instruments* is leaning on the notion that the material aspects, mediations and the telos of an instrument can provide grounds for an analysis of its *ethics*. It may appear odd to speak of ethics in relation to dead objects such as a musical instruments and it is reasonable to critique such a notion based on the fact that not all humans enjoy ethical rights yet (compare the feminist argument against post-humanism that not all humans have been treated humanly).

My argument here is that with the tools that are defined through the technologies of the self, the notion of the care of the self opens up a focus on the relations between the self and the things that surround it. Relations that eventually renders the actual self less important. Whether or not one is willing to accept the idea of an ethics of instruments is not the main point here, but what can be gathered from Tresch and Dolan is that the self's relation to the self promotes the autonomy of some of these objects which then makes them less dependent on the self. Through the unwrapping of the various discourses of power, also on the micro level, such as the ones between improvisation and freedom, self and other, and self and self these processes are revealed. It is not only that these relations exist and that they matter, but that they need to be good and respectful. In this sense ethical relations may appear important between all objects in the network that constitutes the context of musical improvisation. Even if this does not extend all the way to an ethics of instruments, a deep understanding for these

relations may contribute to a developed sense of ethics, an ethics of artistic practice in improvisation. In this space the *care for the self* is the process that deconstructs the object/subject division necessary for this process to unfold.

— It makes the subject important and unimportant at the same time.

But back to these *Dataton 3000* instruments that I just played on. What is the difference between the traditional method for musical interpretation, rooted in Western musical practices (really art history), and the excavation of the technological and cultural significances of a particular electronic musical instrument of the past? The former is so well described by Roland Barthes in the famous essay *The death of the Author* (Barthes 1968), where detailed biographical and historical knowledge about the composer is at the core of a true interpretation of a work.

(What is it that we are looking for in this field of tension, and what kind of knowledge may there be?)

My idea is to develop a historically informed performance practice, only loosely related to the HIP movement of early music. This would be informed by previously, possibly, hidden features of historic instruments. The instruments I have approached here are a modular synthesizer and audio mixer designed in Sweden in the 1970's. To attempt to understand the qualities and the particularity of this instrument a wide range of parameters need to be considered related. The context in which it was originally created is one of them. Should this analysis not be successful there is a risk that the instrument's proper qualities are misunderstood, or that one ends up recreating what has already been done with it, or both. It is the relations between these parameters that I am interested in, not in my dominance on one, or one parameters dominance over me.

In a wider scope of contemporary technologies, the rate at which the development in general is progressing can turn objects sometimes less than a decade old incompatible with current systems. A hypothesis is that by learning from early electronic instruments using the methods I have proposed it may be possible to better understand the complexities of what can be seen as a media archaeology.

In design history we can see how inventive design is incorporated into mainstream products and others are simply forgotten. It is not unlikely that some stuff has been forgotten or suppressed in the fast development of technology over the last half century. As Pinch and Trocco concludes about the synthesizer: "from a flexible variety of possible control configurations, the synthesizer eventually stabilised into a keyboard instrument" (Pinch and

Trocco 1998). In other words, over time the field is narrowed and standardization and market forces excludes those items that are not successful enough, or simply excluded because they are don't fit the paradigm.

My primary interest is not the objects in themselves. If it were, we could for example say that there is nothing outside a piece of equipment like a Dataton module, to rudily paraphrase Derrida. There is only the object and what it tells us, everything is there, contained within it. Though I believe that there is some merit to this thought it is no the single solution here. Nor is my sole interest an artistically driven project where the end goal is a "work", but where at the centre there is still an *author*. It is the interactions that are made possible by engaging in an artistically driven play with the objects, a free play that does not have a purpose and no particular meaning, though it may well develop in other directions in the future. In this free play I can engage with certain questions in a way that would otherwise not have been possible. Improvisation is part of the method that allows me to do this.

The biggest difference between the two models, that is, the traditional musicological approach, and a historically informed exploration of a electronic music heritage, is that the first has an origin (the composer) and the second supports a network of relations that includes an originator but does not necessarily privilege them. The ladder, I would argue, is not normative on the level of practice, it doesn't prescribe how one should do something, but it rather proposes how one may understand something one already does. The added value is that it opens up for an expanded ethical dimension of artistic practices that value the larger context of, in this case obsolete instruments, and the relationships between the various agents involved in their past and current practices:

The *giving up of the self* along with the *care of the self* are not contradictions - they feed upon each other and allow for an approach and an epistemology of creativity that is more closely aligned with others than the solely the self.

(This presentation will be in the form of a lecture performance.)