

Beyond the unnecessary self

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Abstract

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In my 2013 paper *The (un)necessary self* (Frisk 2013) I 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 anything that affects the artistic practice: a co-creator, a listener, a participant or a remote collaborator as well as any non-human actor. The point was to move the focus from the creator to what is created and to understand the roles of the various agents involved. This idea is further developed in this paper through several new trajectories.

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 becomes 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.

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Introduction

In my 2013 paper *The (un)necessary self* (Frisk 2013) I explored the idea of the concept of *giving up of the self* in my artistic practice in improvisation as an important step towards the dismantling of the romantic idea of artistic creation and individuality as something firmly rooted in the self. Instead I wanted to approach an understanding of creativity that is entangled with the *other* in a way that emphasizes *relations*: the ambition was to move the focus from the *creator* to what is *created*, and to better understand the roles of the various actors involved in the process. The *other* in this context should be understood as anyone or anything in proximity to 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. In this article I will discuss this departing from a practice of improvisation on obsolete electronic instruments.¹

This attitude has some resemblance to the flat ontology and the theories promoted by the French sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour, such as actor-network theory, but this is a bigger discussion beyond the scope of this short paper. However, at a later stage it would be interesting to make an ANT oriented analysis of the material I am discussing below.

An aspect that I did not scrutinize in my 2013 paper was that of the various transactions that take place in artistic production and which complicates the relation-oriented analysis proposed. The hyper-capitalism of the twenty-first century is eager to commodify any musical output as well as the artists and the listeners as objects for consumption. Though this may not at first appear to have a big impact on experimental art practices my claim here is that it still influences some key factors that contribute to how artistic practices in music may develop and, more importantly, how the self develops through them. One crucial component is the opaque nature of the relations between commodified objects in commercial media. For example, the primary interest of the big media streaming platforms is not necessarily to deliver music or movies but is rather the eternal collection of data that happens in the background that represents real value in this system.

This is not a new phenomenon. The main point of commercial media has always been to sell space for advertisement, and the role of the content is

¹This research started in the project *Historically informed design of sound synthesis: A multidisciplinary, structured approach to the digitisation and exploration of electronic music heritage* and my colleagues in the project Derek Holzer and Andre Holzapfel have been important in the development of these thoughts.

commonly to draw attention to the right demographic groups—those to whom the advertisements are directed. Capitalism promotes itself by emphasizing the freedom it claims to offer—granting some individuals the liberty to choose and consume as they please. However, the significance of this freedom is debatable when core economic transactions are concealed from the user and frequently occur in unrelated spheres. Furthermore, even the concept of freedom itself—what it means and what it provides—is difficult to entangle. Given its complexity, this area demands a thoughtful approach, as the differing notions of freedom in capitalism and artistic practice can easily result in conceptual ambiguity. There is also a connection between freedom and ethics that shapes how the self is positioned—or more accurately, re-positioned—which significantly influences this discussion.²

Against this backdrop I will attempt to describe how a practice of improvisation with obsolete electronic instruments can use a different conception of freedom to deconstruct both the concept of the unnecessary self and the powers of commodification. Exploring the ethics of an artistic practice is a necessary part of this process which will be discussed later in this paper. Both here, and in my original essay from 2013 cited above, American writer David Henry Thoreau's famous notion of the absent speaker has served as an inspiration: "The peculiarity of a work of genius is the absence of the speaker from his speech" (Thoreau 1854 p. 264). Leaving the notion of the genius to the side this *absent speaker* could be seen to be related to the unnecessary self: only the aspects of the self necessary for the performance needs to be present, the rest can become a distraction. The disruptive tendencies of hyper-capitalism, driven by its emphasis on self-realization through consumption—impacting all facets of society, as previously noted—tend to place the commodified self at center stage. A grasp of this force, combined with the nuanced challenges of working with obsolete instruments, underscores the necessity of transcending the unnecessary self.

Playing obsolete instruments

In my engagement to develop a historically informed performance practice in electronic music I find that the role of the self comes to the forefront in new and interesting ways. Previous hidden features of these historic instruments may be discerned and re-contextualized through an artistic practice in which

²See the project *(Musical) Improvisation and Ethics* For a related discussion of improvisation and ethics: "This project aims to develop an alternative understanding of ethical processes by engaging with a practice in which improvisational qualities of ethics are unmistakable: experimental improvised music." <https://improv-ethics.net/main>

the self's relation to the self is dissected. Playing the instrument is the method to understanding them. The giving up of the self in artistic practice is not an act of submission to others, but a conscious openness to dialogue with them, as well as with other instruments and non-humans. The instrument that I will be discussing here is a modular synthesizer and audio mixer designed in Sweden in the early the 1970's called *Dataton 3000* (See Fig. 1) This modular synthesizer and audio mixer was designed by Björn Sandlund in Sweden during the 1970's in an attempt to make a versatile instrument for electronic music and pedagogic uses (Sandlund 2019). In a slow and meticulous process of untangling the ways in which these instruments can be approached (Holzer, Shi, and Holzapfel 2021; Holzer, Frisk, and Holzapfel 2025, 2021) a certain proficiency with the interface was developed. In other words, rather than imposing a pre-conceived compositional or improvisatory framework onto the instruments, I sought to uncover possibilities through interaction with their broader context. Therefore, to grasp the specific qualities and nuances of the *Dataton 3000* modules—elaborated on further below—it is necessary to consider a broad array of parameters. Through the act of playing, the other may be conceived as the wider contextual framework of these instruments, parts of which emerge in the course of practice. 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, however, the relations between these attributes that I am interested in, not my dominance on one, or one parameter's dominance over me.

In a wider scope of contemporary technologies, the rate at which the development in general is progressing can turn technological and software objects sometimes less than a decade old incompatible with current systems, which makes working with these modules even more interesting. What are the properties, or uses, of the Dataton that have been concealed by the quick development of contemporary music technology? They did go out of production and disappeared from the main stream music technology market. An experimental hypothesis is that by learning from these early instruments, learning about the particularities of the interface, will alter the disposition of my self in relation to the instruments. This could potentially also illuminate new dimensions of the complex nature of improvisation in electronic music in general.

In an artistic practice that departs from use of obsolete instruments the interrelations between the various subjects and objects involved in the performance can become complicated, but they may also disclose the challenges involved in a fruitful manner. The most prominent is the aspect of technology itself. Though many examples of inventive music technology designs are incorporated into mainstream products, others are simply forgotten and abandoned



Figure 1: Six of the many Dataton 3000 modules in a picture from *Statens musikverk*

despite their sometimes explicit contribution to the development. The race for inventing new and even more laborious electronic instruments and interfaces, fueled both by inventiveness, need and by market economy and capitalism, makes artistic practices involving these kinds of instruments fragile and vulnerable to changes that renders all, or parts of the instruments, unusable. This may be software upgrades, abandoned hardware circuits, forgotten system-specific knowledge, or simply the fact that new upgrades are so much more compelling in its usability and sonic or musical qualities that it renders the old instruments obsolete. Traditional acoustic instruments are generally not upgraded in this fashion so this is a particular trait of electronic instruments.

That commercial aspects have a great impact in this field is also validated by Pinch and Trocco when they conclude that "from a flexible variety of possible control configurations, the synthesizer eventually stabilised into a keyboard instrument" (1998 28). In other words, over time the highly experimental field of design of electronic musical instruments appears to be narrowed, and standardization in collaboration with market forces exclude those items that are not successful enough, or simply incompatible with current production paradigms. This brings us back to the discussion relating to the impact that capitalism has on the field. Even instruments used within experimental artistic practices that aim to resist capitalist market forces are ultimately absorbed into the prevailing norms of efficiency, production, and design standardization. Repudiated and eventually incompatible with supporting systems such developed interfaces may eventually be rendered useless by the market. It is true that no Western instruments, electronic or acoustic, are independent from the commodifying forces of the market economy, but the way that the development of electronic instruments is aligned with the advancements of technology in society in general makes them particularly sensitive to this process. A certain merging of the fields is also occurring here where tools of communication such as the mobile phone are used and explored also for artistic performances. (Wang 2014; Madhavan and Snyder 2016).

There are both differences and similarities between the study of traditional methods for musical interpretation, rooted in Western musical history and practices, and the excavation of the technological and cultural significance of a particular electronic musical instrument of the past. Since at least the romantic era the definition of the artistic work has been constructed from the vantage point of the composer in a strictly hierarchical structure with the self of the originator at the centre. This is well described by the French literary critic and philosopher Roland Barthes in his famous essay *The death of the Author* (Barthes 1968), where the basic critique is that detailed biographical, geographical and historical knowledge about the composer, rather than the text itself, is at the

core of traditional interpretations of a work. Hence, following this line of thought a true understanding of the work has to go through the understanding of the *auteur* and their many attributes. This structural organization of the musical work makes it susceptible to commodification, but also, or perhaps even more so, turns the author into a commercial object whose presence in social media defines their value. My distancing, or giving up of, myself is part of my attempt to distance myself from this perspective and instead establish a artistic practice that where the self is in constant motion, where there is no center or origin, only relations. The work concept in this case will also be in constant motion rendering a structural analysis rather meaningless through the amalgamation of the self with the process.

As already mentioned the instruments in this study through which I have explored the processes of the self are the *Dataton System 3000*. Despite its utopian vision these modules were not widely used, neither as musical instruments, nor were they fully explored for as pedagogical tools.³ It thus exemplifies the kind of harsh expulsion that the market carries out on unwanted and commercially useless objects. My primary interest here, however, is not the objects in themselves, nor is my engagement grounded in a fetishism for pre-digital equipment. My fascination for these instruments arises from an effort to contextualize them within a wider framework and apply that understanding to my musical practice and creative exploration. This includes, but is not limited to their historical origins. From a point of interpretation of the instruments one could rudely paraphrase Derrida's statement that *il n'y a pas de hors-texte* (Derrida 2016). A full understanding of the instrument can only be attained through a broad understanding of what the context is. A signal generator in a *Dataton 3000* module is not like any signal generator; it is a signal generator that pertains to the greater context of this particular instrument. This assumes, again in a very rough interpretation, that there is only the object and the contexts that it is and has been used in. The *reader* is an important part of the construction of the understanding of the object in a way that is also related to how Roland Barthes privileges the interpreter rather than the author. Though I believe that this line of thinking is useful in performance there is still a risk of creating hierarchies in the relations between the various actors if the instruments and the interpretation of them are put at the centre in this way. Neither is it my interest to design an artistically driven project where the end goal is a *work*, which undoubtedly also would construct a hierarchy around the artifact.

³It should be noted that there are some highly interesting compositions made with the *Dataton 3000* such as *Sirrah* composed in 1975 with the Dataton-system by Swedish composer Leo Nilsson. The music was used by the dance-company "l'Etoile du Nord" in the performance "Star-75" where the dancers moved them self with lights over a Buckminster Fuller-Dome.

Instead I am interested in the interactions that are made possible by engaging in an artistically driven play with the objects I am playing with. While I make use of the knowledge produced in the process of interpretation discussed above, when performing I become part of the context and this changes the conditions for the interactions within the system. I engage in a free play, unbound by purpose or meaning, though it may eventually unfold into something more. The result may be one or several works, but they are not the goal, they are subordinate to the process. In this free play I get involved with certain questions in a way that would otherwise not have been possible, and improvisation is part of the method that allows me to do this.

To summarize, in the field of music one may imagine two models of analysis emerging from this discussion. The traditional historical and author centered approach, and a historically informed exploration of a electronic music heritage. The first has the work at its origin and the second attempts to understand a performative context that supports a network of relations that also includes an originator, but does not necessarily privilege them. This approach is related to the HIP movement for authentic classical music performance, but our work in the project *Historically informed design of sound synthesis*, which frames this project, is not concerned as much with authenticity as it is with an exploration of the wider practice using obsolete instruments. Within the HIP movement there is a wish to recreate the performance of a piece of music as it sounded at its time of creation. Our focus is not on revival, but on understanding a historical context and develop it. The key distinction between these analytical models lies in their perspective: the first adopts an external viewpoint, treating the musical work as an objective entity often centered on the author, while the second embraces a performative approach, fostering a network of relationships that includes the originator but does not grant them inherent privilege. The latter, I would argue, is not normative on the level of practice as it doesn't prescribe how one should do something, but rather proposes how one may understand something one already does. The practice analyzed here is based on improvisation and is a method or a form that freedom can take. This freedom enables the development of a different understanding of the self, one that is rooted in the practice's many interrelations. The added value is that this model presents an expanded ethical dimension that is likewise relieved through the freedom in artistic practice. This will be further discussed in the next section.

Freedom

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, Frisk, and

Holzapfel 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 connects to Foucault's notion of the *technologies of the self* (Foucault 1988a). Tresch and Dolan explore this experimental ethics of instruments through four analytical categories which in essence are adaptations of the four axes that makes up "Foucault's analysis of the self's relation to the self". Tresch and Dolan "have tweaked and tuned them in order to apply them to instruments" (Tresch and Dolan 2013 p. 284). The four categories relate to the instrument's materiality, its mediation or level of presence, its greater context and its telos (see Holzer NO_ITEM_DATA:Holzer2025 for a more in depth discussion).⁴ Their idea of an ethics of instruments is leaning on the notion that these categories can provide grounds for an analysis of an ethics of instruments such as the *Dataton 3000*. As an analytical model, it offers a framework for examining obsolete instruments and exploring how complex issues—such as accuracy, responsibility, and freedom—can be addressed. Whether or not it is possible to consider that material objects possess a notion of ethics is a different question and beyond the scope of this paper, but one may argue that priority should be given to ensure that all humans and animals enjoy basic ethical living conditions before considering the moral rights of objects.

Thoreau's effort to efface the self from the work of art illustrates how the author's individual ego or personality becomes dissolved in the creative process. This is difficult at a time where artistic works are exploited on markets and social media and where the transactions are so convoluted and opaque that they are impossible to disentangle. In the attempt to understand the role of the creator, both a new work concept and a review of the self and its roles is necessary. In the way that the relations between them can be unwrapped the artistic practice may be seen to explore a particular form for ethics. The ethics in artistic practices, that is, the moral values that are expressed through artistic practices in music, specifically improvisation, is by all means an important aspect when investigating the roles of the self. These values are disclosed in the way music is negotiated in improvisation and may turn out to work in ways that are different, or even opposed to social ethics.

The notion of the *care of the self*, as discussed in Michel Foucault's Volume Three of the *History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1988b), may be used as a method

⁴In Foucault's terminology the *technologies of the self* that have inspired these categories are the four axes of ethical self-formation: ontology, deontology, ascetics and the teleology.

to approach this complex area, even though this short format do not give justice to the theory. 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 1997 p. 283). Foucault proceeds to outline the relationship between freedom and ethics, positing that freedom is the essential condition for ethical practice, while also insisting on the need for critical reflection on the nature of freedom (Foucault 1997 p. 284). The care of the self is the activity in which freedom and ethics are a integral parts, and it is not to be understood as a solipsistic activity merely concerned with clothing, possessions and physical attributes.

The care of the self is the care of the activity, in this case the artistic activity, and not the care of the soul-as-substance to use Foucault's terminology.⁵ The practice, the doing, transcends the self and has priority over it and the principle that uses the tools of artistic practice is in essence the aesthetics of the creative act rather than the self. Hence, I argue that there is a useful relation here between the concept of the soul-as-substance—as well as the general critique of the dominance of the author discussed above—and the ambition to give up the self in artistic practices. It may even be necessary to first give up the self in order to see how the practice may contribute to the necessary freedom. It can appear counter-intuitive at first that giving up the self is a process associated with Foucault's care for the self, but in this reading it is a condition for the self's relation to the self and its freedom. The soul-as-substance here is a domination of the self propelled by capitalism in ways that makes the subject normative rather than one that allows for an engagement of free play: it is a threat to freedom as a necessary condition for improvisation.

Though Thoreau may not have thought of it this way *the absent speaker* that was discussed above references the care of the self in odd and interesting ways. Both gives priority to the activity rather than the subject, and the practice is a tool through which the care for the self is developed. The *giving up of the self* and the *care of the self* are not in opposition as they may first appear to do, instead they feed upon each other. They both allow for an epistemology of creativity and an understanding of practice as the core of human activity more closely aligned with others than the self. The care for the self is the care of the relations to the other and a method for giving up of the self.

Freedom is the precondition for ethics as well as for improvisation.⁶ This

⁵The meaning of soul-as-substance can be compared to Foucault's famous quote that "The soul is the prison of the body" (Foucault 1977 p. 31) and relates to how the soul can become a set of techniques for domination.

⁶For improvisation the importance and impact of freedom is somewhat dependent on the style of improvisation.

notion appears to open up a possible connection between ethics and improvisation in that both depend on some concept of freedom. This freedom, however, is elusive and may easily be mistaken for the freedom of the self, a freedom rather attached to a popularized notion of self-emancipation and consumer freedom in a capitalist market economy. But if improvisation is to be considered an act of ethics a further paraphrasing of Foucault may read: *Musical improvisation is one of the considered forms that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection*. This highlights the importance of the reflective act, necessary in most artistic processes, as the mediator between freedom and improvisation. Reflection, then, is the activity that instantiates a recursive process between freedom and improvisation.

The ethics of improvisation arises from freedom. The condition for this relation to develop is the self's reflection upon itself and upon the practice, but it is mainly the results of this process that are of interest, not the self itself. 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). To summarize this discussion very briefly, my claim is that improvisation on obsolete instruments such as the *Dataton 3000* is driven by a care for the context of the instruments as well as a process of a care for the self as a method that results in a self entangled with the process rather than the work and thus rendered unnecessary.

Final notes

My argument here has been that with the tools that are defined by Foucault 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 self, and the surrounding context. Relations that eventually renders the actual self less important. 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. Through the unwrapping of the various discourses of power, also broadly, such as the ones between improvisation and freedom; self and other; and self and self, the particularities and aptitudes of the instrument discussed here, the *Dataton 3000*, is revealed. By way of a preliminary understanding of an ethics of instruments these relations exist, matter and they need to be good and respectful. In this sense ethical relations appear important between all objects in the network that constitute 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. The *care for the self* is the process that deconstructs the object/subject division

necessary for the meaning of the relations to unfold (see Bergamin (2023) for a related discussion on this topic).

In the attempt to construct an artistic practice where the self as subject is unnecessary there are a number of factors that have been discussed here. One is the objectifying forces of the hyper capitalism that not even experimental musical practices manage to evade. Creating sustainable relations between the self, the practices of the self, and others is made difficult by the logics of the global market economy. Another is the influence of the instruments the practice is engaged with and the fact that these themselves may engage in a process of subjectification that plays an important role on the general ethics of the practice. Yet another is that the general ethics of the artistic practice as firmly rooted in the care for the self is constantly challenged by external forces that impact, if not the freedom, at least the way that freedom is understood. Nevertheless, through the practice of the care of the self I believe that a genuine and useful idea of an ethics of artistic practice with obsolete instruments may resist the influence of capitalism. By putting focus on the others in artistic practice, primarily in improvisation, the practice will be strong enough to render the self unnecessary beyond my initial thinking, and the instruments I play with participate actively in this restructuring of the self.

I have presented a theory behind my artistic practice with obsolete instruments. A following study will focus on the practical results of this process and how this thinking more concretely affect the artistic results.

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