Artistic Experimentation in Music

An Anthology

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Darla Crispin and Bob Gilmore (eds.)

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Towards an Ethical-Political Role for Artistic Research

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[1] Can the subaltern speak? In 1988, the Indian philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asked this question in an homonymic essay in which she investigated the relations between Western poststructuralist criticisms of the metaphysical subject and the representation of non-Western people (Spivak [1988] 2008, 109–30). According to Spivak one of the occurring problems was that contemporary Western intellectuals tried to speak on behalf of the suppressed, thereby unwittingly and imperceptibly reinscribing, co-opting, and rehearsing neocolonial imperatives of political domination, economic exploitation, and cultural erasure.

How then can the subaltern—or "the other"—speak? How can she or he be understood without or outside the discursive frameworks, conceptual conventions, and discourses that we have at our disposal? How can we recognise the heterogeneity or otherness of the other? Spivak points out two fundamental problems: first, a certain dependence upon Western intellectuals who "speak for" the subaltern rather than allowing her or him to speak for her- or himself; and second, the assumption of a subaltern collectivity rather than an accounting for their heterogeneity and individuality. Spivak warns against recognition by assimilation: a "true subaltern" is identified by her or his difference.

[2] Spivak's humbling and thought-provoking text came to my mind when I started thinking about the relation between artistic research and ethics. That artistic research contributes to the development of knowledge, to the disclosure of new knowledge, and to a critical reflection on already existing knowledge, is, by now, more and more acknowledged and accepted. However, the question of whether an ethical or ethical-political role can be granted to artistic research opens another discussion, perhaps an even more challenging one. To meditate on this role implies not only investigating the connections between artistic research and art or between artistic research and the production, distribution, and reception of knowledge, but also considering the potential position and function of artistic research within broader social spheres. Like art, artistic research not only represents and responds to social developments and ethical-political ideas; through artistic research these developments and ideas come into existence, are articulated and questioned, and receive their concrete forms.

[3] Can the subaltern speak? Can she or he speak *in* artistic research? Can she or he speak *through* artistic research? And can she or he speak *as* artistic research? These three questions will guide this short essay. My aim is not to provide conclusive answers but to chalk out the contours within which a discussion about artistic research and ethics could possibly take place. Three modest and rudimentary anchorages should serve as points of initiation forging a discussion on an aspect of artistic research that, thus far, has hardly been thematised.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to enter at length into the question of what might be considered artistic research; I have dealt with that topic elsewhere (see Cobussen 2013, 2011, 2009, 2007). The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for ethics (see Cobussen 2005, 2003, 2002; Cobussen and Finn 2002; Cobussen and Nielsen 2012). However, I will briefly and simply explain why I commenced with the Spivak essay.

Of course, the question whether the subaltern can and is allowed to speak is a thoroughly ethical question. Is the other *as other*, the other who is customarily speechless and neglected, allowed a voice that is not predetermined by already existing discourses and paradigms built around well-known concepts? In other words, is there some hospitality for the subaltern, for the other in its otherness? For, as Jacques Derrida states in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, "ethics is hospitality" (Derrida 2001, 16). It is with these thoughts in mind that I address the relation between artistic research and an unconditional hospitality towards the subaltern, towards another otherness.

[4] First anchorage: can the subaltern speak *in* artistic research, in artistic experimentation, in the artistic results of such research? The Six Tones is a musical (research) project by two Swedes, Henrik Frisk (real-time electronics) and Stefan Östersjö (guitars and banjo), and two Vietnamese, Ngo Tra My (*đàn bầu*, a traditional monochord instrument) and Nguyen Thanh Thuy (*đàn tranh*, a cither). As Östersjö claims in his PhD dissertation *Shut Up 'n' Play!*, one of the aims of this project, initiated by the Swedes, is to defer a collage-like superposition of two culturally distinct musics and attempt unprejudiced and free "collocation" instead of a music-political "assimilation" or "integration" (Östersjö 2008, 292).[1]

The sonic results as well as Östersjö's documentation provide us with interesting material regarding the circumspection with which the two Western (and male!) musicians approach the two Asian women, who were mainly educated in performing traditional Vietnamese music. Being aware of the pitfall of imposing—of reinscribing—any sort of cultural domination, the Swedes seem tentative during the first rehearsals, socially as well as musically. They are questioning their own position from the very beginning of the collaboration and are seeking to adapt to the input of the Vietnamese. Östersjö, for example, adjusts the tuning of his guitar in response to the characteristics of Nguyen playing the *đàn*

1 The initial intention of the project was to provide material for a piece by Henrik Frisk. Points of departure were some loose sketches in combination with the musical, cultural, and social backgrounds of the musicians. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJqzyDzXV5g.

tranh. In accordance with the Vietnamese musical tradition, notation becomes nothing more than a framework within which the musicians have a certain freedom to shape their performance instead of the far more prescriptive use of scores in Western art music. And by frequently using traditional Vietnamese songs as a source of inspiration, the Swedes enter the role of apprentices, the Vietnamese that of the masters (Östersjö 2008, 187–91, 292–97).

At first sight it thus seems that the subaltern—in this case Vietnamese music, instruments, and women[2]—was clearly given a voice. By reversing the conventional, historical, and sometimes still proclaimed hierarchy in which the Western world regards itself superior to the East, the Six Tones avoids all kinds of neocolonial imperatives.

However, the project and interactions are more complex than this: hierarchies are not only subverted but also unmasked as superseded prejudices. Two brief examples should illustrate this claim. First, Frisk is presented as the composer of most pieces and, although traditional Vietnamese music doesn't know the concept of the composer, Nguyen and Ngo try to adapt to that authority. That is, they are trying, from the position of an outsider, to understand and respect concepts from another culture. However, Frisk neither plays nor accepts the traditional role of the Western composer as the one who describes and prescribes what and how to perform. Shifting from composer to performer and back again, Frisk represents a general move in Western art music towards more interactive ways of producing musical works. He thus emasculates these ideas assumed by Nguyen and Ngo, not by reversing the hierarchy but by deconstructing it.

Second, the considerable role of electronics gives the music a clear contemporary Western flavour. What seemed to be a tribute to traditional music from an exotic culture becomes a far more complex interaction between "Western" and "Eastern" influences, perhaps inclining towards the dominance of a Western musical language. However, is this a turn to re-establishing the old hierarchy? This is how Nguyen sees it: "I know normally people like to hear something Vietnamese from us. Sometimes I think I could do something that is not Vietnamese and still make people like it" (Nguyen in Östersjö 2008, 191). Nguyen seems to challenge the Eurocentric view that artists coming from other cultures are first of all "typical" or "representative" of their culture. In other words, Nguyen implicitly confirms Spivak's proposal that the subaltern should be considered heterogeneously instead of as a collective.

What appears as an artistic research project on potential and actual collaborations between composers and performers turns out to be full of ethical issues and questions about concrete moral behaviour in and through music. Through the Six Tones, four Northern European and South-East Asian musicians confront themselves—perhaps inadvertently and in an unplanned way but nev-

2 Perhaps one could say that Spivak's notion of the subaltern does not apply (anymore) to Vietnamese music, instruments, and women: their position has been emancipated over the past decades. However, by being so aware of potential Western dominance and trying to avoid it, the Swedes made the idea of otherness and subalterity manifest.

ertheless inevitably and with full dedication—with several cultural prejudices and generalisations. The project appears to be a platform for mutual learning, a meeting point where these prejudices and generalisations must be challenged in order for the musicians to be able to make music together. On a local, singular, small-scale, non-discursive level where all that matters is exactly difference (or perhaps it is better to speak of *différance* here), *a* subaltern gets a voice, a musical voice.

[5] Second anchorage: can the ethical speak *through* artistic research? Can we encounter ethical and moral issues through specific forms of artistic experimentation? Again, I am not searching for new generalisations, alternative *grand narratives*, or substitutional moral paradigms. Instead, I focus on small and local artistic interventions that question and disrupt accepted and well-known social behaviour, thereby offering a mirror through which we can encounter our own ethical or moral presuppositions and prejudices.

Brian Rush is a North American artist who in 2010 started a series of projects joined under the name *Relational Prosthetics*. The projects consist of participatory objects leading to face-to-face interactions that can be humorous and hilarious but also, and simultaneously, engender uncomfortable and confrontational feelings. *Bench*, a project from 2011, is a construction of steel and aluminium in a public space of which the seat, sloping downward from the sides towards the middle, consists of rotatable cylinders. The effect is easy to predict: two people, preferably not knowing one another, and therefore following the social convention of seating themselves at either end of the bench, will soon end up in the middle, unavoidably engaging in physical contact. Judging from the photos shown on Rush's homepage (www.brian-rush.com) most people are definitely able to see the joke; they laugh and seem to enjoy the new situation. However, it is certainly not unimaginable that some people will start laughing uncomfortably. Almost ending up in the lap of a complete stranger might very well arouse embarrassment and discomfort, and this is exactly what interests Rush.[3]

Bench plays with and questions automatic social habits in public spaces, temporarily hacking them. Physical contact or rapidly entering into close proximity with a stranger is a taboo in the West, where too much eye contact can lead to aggressive comments. How do we cope with that? What socio-moral reactions can we observe when we are thrown into unexpected situations? Those are questions that can arise when one experiences Rush's work.

Helmets, also from 2011, consists of a suspended rail on which two helmets are connected, facing each other. Attached to the helmet is a handle by which the headgear can be moved back and forth along the rail. Whereas in *Bench* people are condemned to physical contact once they seat themselves, *Helmets* offers its participants the opportunity to choose how close they would like to get to the other. This can lead to a fascinating play of interactions, considera-

3 Video illustrations relevant to this article may be found online at http://www.orpheusinstituut.be/en/anthology-repository

tions, provocations, and refusals. Imagine two strangers, one of whom takes the initiative to approach the other. Possible reactions of the other might include responding in kind by moving the helmet in the first person's direction, refusing the advances by going back, or maintaining the same position and waiting to see what will happen next. Of course, the reaction of this second person will be influenced not only by the movement of the first person per se but also by his or her interpretation of the bodily and facial expressions that accompany this movement: laughter, timidity, aggression, overt advance, etc. In turn, the first person will attune her or his behaviour, more or less, depending on the reactions of the second person.

Is art articulating the ethical here? Are these investigations into human social behaviour in specific, possibly uncomfortable situations—investigations taking place in and through art works—confronting us with moral regulations and opinions? It is clear that Rush is not offering the participating visitors of his relational prosthetics a clear set of rules, prescribing how to behave; it is up to each participant, in each particular situation, influenced (or not) by another participant, to make decisions regarding how to (re)act. The ethics at work in Rush's interactive installations is not one of preconceived and clearly formulated ideas about correct behaviour, about doing the (universal and predefined) good, about concrete moral prerogatives. Instead, works such as *Bench* and *Helmets* simply investigate what will happen when a human being affects and is being affected. This is an ethics of engagement and an ethics of difference, an invitation to encounter the unexpected, the confusing, a (sub)alterity *within* our society, instead of the premeditated. This ethics is based on active participation and responsible sensitivity (with)in/through a full-body engagement. It is a move away from understanding or theorising ethics towards an ethics that is realised in the moment of doing the art work. Through Rush's artistic research, collective and individual social and ethical behaviour can be investigated, observed, and tested; his *Relational Prosthetics* function as a kind of social laboratory.

[6] Third anchorage: can the ethical speak *as* artistic research? Can there be something ethical in artistic research *as* artistic research? Or, again, could artistic research in itself and as itself be regarded as a subaltern, as a possible manifestation or a virtual voice of the other?

Roughly following Christopher Frayling's well-known categorisation (Frayling 1993), Henk Borgdorff distinguishes in his book *The Conflict of the Faculties* between research on, for, and in the arts. Focusing on the first and last only, their main difference lies in the relation between subject and object. With research *on* the arts, most often reflective and interpretative, the object remains untouched by the inquiring gaze of the researcher. In other words, there is a theoretical distance between researcher and art work or event. Conversely, research *in* the arts does not observe this distance: the artistic practice itself is an essential component of both the research process and the research results. Concepts and theories are interwoven with art practices (Borgdorff 2012, 37–39). Because it is the artist who is simultaneously the researcher, her artistic

production will undergo changes; being the alpha and omega of her research project, her art cannot remain untouched, unaffected, uninvolved.

Because today much (artistic) research takes place in the space between these two poles, I prefer to consider them as paradigmatic constructs or ideal/typical oppositions. This being assumed, is the proposition legitimate and worthy—and I want to emphasise my circumspection here—to investigate whether there is a possible connection between research in the arts and the subaltern condition? Is there some truth in the claim that musicology, art history, theatre studies, media studies, or comparative literature attempt to "speak for" the arts and artists rather than allowing them to speak for themselves? Is it too far-fetched to scrutinise to what extent these academically approved disciplines make use of methods that only allow the arts and artists to respond within the frames and constraints of those very same methods? Is it possible—and perhaps even necessary—to re-evaluate to what extent these discourses often re-disseminate generalisations, simply because they make use of discursive language whereas art emphasises the particular, the singular, the unique?

This is not to suggest that with the rise of artistic research all potential problems underlying these questions will be solved soon. Rather, the rise, development, and rationale of artistic research makes posing these questions, ethical questions to some extent, possible, urgent, and relevant.

At present artistic research takes place in the margins of art production as well as in the periphery of scholarly and academic work. As such it presents a *topos*, a utopia or perhaps an *atopos*, which is somehow commensurable with Spivak's subaltern. To a certain extent, differing from one project to another, artistic research withdraws from the accepted researches *on* the arts. By speaking about art in and through art, different voices can be heard, different perspectives open up, different movements take place, different spaces are constructed, different plays are performed, different knowledge is presented, different language is necessary, different strategies are developed.

Furthermore, artistic researchers (can) seldom speak in general terms; through the very nature of the process, they position their own artistic work in the centre of their research, thereby almost automatically reinforcing heterogeneity and individuality. If there is some truth in this argument, it might become clear that the subaltern can also be located in the heart of Western culture and not only in those areas which were for too long considered as geographical peripheries.

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