

Improvising with humans and improvising with machines

Reflections seven months into the project

#1

Often, I have been thinking that technology is more interesting when it is broken. Obviously, this does not apply to all technology, you don't want "interesting" heart starters, electronic tooth brushes or coffee makers. You want those to work as intended. Perhaps it only applies to the technology I use when I make and play music. Or, at least, *some* of the technology I use for that.

#2

During 2018 all the FM radio signals are completely shut down in Norway. What a stupid thing to do! I used to listen to the FM radio when driving in and out from Oslo. There was one particular area where the radio in my car jumped between stations due to the fact that the FM frequencies were crowded with networks. This caused lots of interesting glitches in the music I listened to on "my" radio channel. Tiny, short and sudden glimpses from other music interfered with what I listened to. Or from conversations, interviews, commercials, weather reports. Fun and enjoyable. The DAB glitches are not very interesting.

#3

I came to think of a Brian Eno quote on failing technology. I looked it up and found that it is from his "A Year With Swollen Appendices", a diary released in 1996. This is from his diary entry on December 19th:

Whatever you now find weird, ugly, uncomfortable and nasty about a new medium will surely become its signature. CD distortion, the jitteriness of digital video, the crap sound of 8-bit - all these will be cherished and emulated as soon as they can be avoided.

It's the sound of failure: so much of modern art is the sound of things going out of control, of a medium pushing to its limits and breaking apart. The distorted guitar is the sound of something too loud for the medium supposed to carry it. The blues singer with the cracked voice is the sound of an emotional cry too powerful for the throat that releases it. The excitement of grainy film, of bleached-out black and white, is the excitement of witnessing events too momentous for the medium assigned to record them.

Note to the artist: when the medium fails conspicuously, and especially if it fails in new ways, the listener believes something is happening beyond its limits.

Brian Eno, 1996

#4

The Norwegian Wikipedia gives the following example to describe the term cybernetics: A boat needs to keep its position to load or unload. Waves, wind and ocean current are calculated in order to give the captain information on how to keep the position.

The English Wikipedia has this:

The word cybernetics comes from Greek κυβερνητική (cybernēticé), meaning "governance", i.e., all that are pertinent to κυβερνάω (cybernáō), the latter meaning "to steer, navigate or govern", hence κυβέρνησις (cybérnēsis), meaning "government", is the government while κυβερνήτης (cybernētēs) is the governor or "helmperson" of the "ship".

Performing with a set of both failing and not failing technology often give me an impression of trying to navigate a (sinking?) ship. The technology is the waves, winds and currents, and I'm doing my best trying to keep some kind of balance. Often, I quite enjoy heavy winds and big surprises, and I don't really need to know where I'm going. I just don't want to sink. What happens if I, when we play, consider KimAuto to be the captain in charge, the helmperson, and I'm just throwing in waves and winds for it to work on?

#5

I improvise because it is how I learned to play music and it has always been my main method for creating and playing music. I improvise because I'm drawn to the social aspect of creating something collectively. I improvise because I'm intrigued by what a group of musicians can create together in real time, which often is more than (or at least very different from) the sum of its parts. (I'm scared and fascinated by how horrible that sum can be on a bad day.) I improvise because I'm interested in surprises and unknown territories—both prerequisites for being an improviser. Although, for years I have been more drawn to small changes in known material, small nuances, how different an improvised piece of music can be by turning the same elements over in new ways.¹ Also, in improvisation there is a short travel between musical thought and its realisation that I find intriguing.

#6

What is a successful improvisation to me? When does improvised music *work*, to me? Oddly, perhaps, answers to this varies from day to day when I listen to others. I can love something one day and hate it the next. My thoughts on this are much more consistent as a *player* than as a *spectator*. (Why?) My thoughts and taste *as performer* can still vary and hopefully it develops over time. But still, elements I often find represented when I'm satisfied with my own and my ensembles' improvisations are: *surprises* (surprising new variations of known musical content, surprising new combinations of known elements, surprised by an ensemble mate's choice in the moment and at the same time find that very choice completely obvious and necessary); *lack of control* and the *collective* play with losing control and regaining *balance*; time and *patience* to *focus on sound* and the inner life of sounds; when sounds merge and blend so I'm uncertain whether the sound comes from me or from my band mates.

¹ During my research fellowship project "[Ensemble & Ensemble of Me](#)" (2011-2015) I elaborated on my motivation and inspiration for improvising, both solo and with the two ensembles *Dans les arbres* and *Huntsville*. I also tried to pinpoint how I improvise and, to paraphrase Haruki Murakami, *what I think about when I think about improvisation*.

#7

Surprises, struggle for *collectiveness*, *play with control* and lack of such are also key elements in my interest for human-machine interaction. As mentioned above, I often like the surprises failing technology offers, and I like what such failures do to me when I improvise, how it pushes me and how I have to fight to maintain a certain balance.

At the moment, we have worked for 7 months in this project, and I have been able to play quite a bit with our technological counterpart KimAuto and other technological tools. I wonder how (if) we can create a “world” or a “system” (or a piece of music) that I find *believable* and *convincing* in its own peculiar ways. I am asking myself: if I’m truly interested in collective improvisation I should let KimAuto take more responsibility, and I need to accept *how* KimAuto takes responsibility. (And, by the way, who am I to define what balance is?) At the moment KimAuto and I manage to create music that I find interesting for about 3-5 minutes. After that I begin to understand the nature of the piece and we can’t seem to change direction. We have plenty of work to do. We both need to work on our behaviour and how we play and listen to each other.

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