

Introduction for a Discussion at the Transmediediale Exhibition – Berlin Feb. 2005

I made my debut both as a composer and as a visual artist at the same time. It took place in 1960 in a Stockholm downtown gallery. At that time I belonged to a small group of artists and architects in which we shared an interest in how to utilize serial compositional techniques both for visual works and music and other artforms. For my debut I composed a quartet for brass instruments and displayed an enlarged version of the score in the gallery. The music could be heard all along the opening hours of the gallery. At the same time four paintings were shown. One of them is shown now in the exhibition at DAM on Thucholsky strasse. The idea was to show that the same structural ideas could be used both for image and music.

The serial composition technique had reached its peak around 1960 and was at that time the most dominating and favoured method of composing among the leading avant-garde and experimental composers of art music, but strangely enough, just one or two years later, these aesthetic and composition concepts became totally obsolete.

The artistic ideas and aesthetic philosophy emanating preferably from John Cage took over and the serial approach to composition was suddenly the ideas of yesterday. Today it is considered as merely an academic discipline and is mostly practised by university professors in North America. John Cage's influence on Music, Sound Art, Performance Art and the Fine Arts have been tremendous. I think we have greatly underestimated the magnitude of his aesthetic leadership and as a source of inspiration for many artists and composers.

Well, I have to admit that I was also attracted and fascinated by his ideas. In 1965 I had the favour of working with him on a daily basis for a month and that was worth more than a year of composition studies anywhere in the world. My music and Sound Art composition took an entirely new direction, but it did not change my attitude and my thinking vis a vis the visual arts.

In my activity as a visual artist the point of departure have been the constructivism tradition ranging from artists like Malevich, Mondrian, and further on. In Sweden artists like Olle Baertling had a strong influential effect on me.

For me the most important thing of this art domain is the almost total absence of mimetic factors and the absence of a content that invites the spectator to start making an interpretation of what they see, trying to find out what the underlying message could be.

I see most of the art of today as being extremely orientated towards storytelling and pronounced mimetic effects. It could be one explanation why photographic images are so dominating on the contemporary art scene. Another thing about constructivism is that there is almost no intention of being expressive and purposely try to create an emotional radiation. However, I am fully aware of the fact that practically any art

object **may evoke** an emotional reaction among the viewers, but that is something beyond the control of the artist.

It may have been the resemblance to music that caught my interest in the constructivistic artforms, namely the self-referential aspect. Stand alone or "pure" music is said to be self-referential, which means that it can not represent anything else besides its own expressive means. It has to be mixed with non musical elements like words or images to generate something of a narrative effect.

On the other hand I have observed how easily even an image which is based on purely abstract or geometric elements could turn into an anecdotal mode and give one the impression that there is some extra meaning added to the image.

The serial technique was a perfect tool for my work because it helped structuring any visual elements so it could be quantized and converted into number or letters. Various image-parameters could be set up and controlled according to the overall serial schematic. It reinforced the objective nature of my artistic work. On the other hand it could to a certain degree predict the outcome. I still believe that the serial techniques are useful in visual art.

In 1960 I became a member of a study group in Fylkingen, the society for experimental music and intermedia art in Stockholm. One of the objectives for that group was to prepare ourselves for future work with computers. We were absolutely convinced that the artistic work of the future would take place in the digital domain, even if the term "digital" was hardly used at that time. Instead we talked about computers as electronic brains and data-machines.

The problem with these studies was that none of us had seen a computer in real life. The number of computers in Sweden in the beginning of the early 1960:s was probably below a dozen and they all belonged to some big corporations or universities. Artists had definitely no access to these machines. So the nature of our efforts was like "dry-swimming", learning how to swim without being in the water.

Nevertheless we achieved some general understanding of the principles behind programming. One highlight of these studies was Yannis Xenakis' visit to Stockholm and that we managed to get him to conduct a few seminars about his use of computers for orchestra composing. I think Xenakis was the first composer who convincingly used computers for artistic work.

However the most important thing for me was that I started to think along new lines. New concepts were introduced like aleatoric procedures, statistical and random processes, etc.

With my computer studies came also an algorithmic thinking with rule based applications. Instead of setting up a serial chart that controlled the outcome of the image I started to formulate a number of control rules, often of a statistical nature. For instance how many visual elements that should be built up the image, their properties and how they should be distributed over the image field.

The "motor" in many programs, used for purposes like mine, is a random number generator. In 1962 there was not a chance for me to get access to a computer, so I had to make a manual simulation using a table of random number instead. There is one picture from 1962 at the DAM exhibition where I used this method. For a long time I was happy with these methods, but in 1968 I had the my first opportunity to use a real computer, which was very exciting. Today, when practically everyone can have a personal computer, it may be hard to understand how very difficult or expensive it was to get access to computertime. Having a computer of my own was like taking down the moon. In 1973 I had started to teach at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm and I looked into the possibilities to set up a computer-music program for the school. The Stockholm Univ. were willing to sell computer-time for a 110 euro per hour. That was extraordinary expensive in 1972, especially when you knew that it took more than an hour to create about 30 seconds of music. Real time work was out of question.

My work was still based on algorithmic thinking and the computer produced a print out with number and letters that had to be translated manually into visual elements. There is also an example of this kind in the DAM exhibition. In my visual work I am still faithful to the constructivistic idiom, but my work in the Sound Art domain has taken almost an opposite direction.

In recent years my interest in the aesthetic aspects has been growing substantially. The strange thing is that in my experience most artists and composers are rather reluctant to participate in aesthetic discussions and analysis or they seem to have a very indifferent view for such issues. They seem to gladly leave these things to the rest of the art community like critics, curators, academic aestheticians, etc. I find this slightly disturbing since the artists really are the driving force in the art development and a more intense awareness could be very important for art progress. This a problem in particular in art music realm.

One reason for this predicament is perhaps that the technological development is so rapid and demanding. that it doesn't give the artists much time to contemplate these things. It is unfortunate because I think that the artists could contribute a great deal in that respect.

My approach to aesthetics is what sometimes is called "ein Ästhetik von unten". One starts from the bottom with the actual art works and see what conclusions could be made. Of special interest for me has been to study the aesthetic preferences that make up the work of a chosen artist or composer. Value questions are important to study. Quality evaluations like what is good or bad are often of a nature that many artists seem to fear. On the other hand I think it is very important that evaluation procedures should be discussed openly, they take place everywhere in the art community anyway but in an obscure and close way.

Once in a while new art terms are popping up and I will finish my presentation here by making a few remarks on one of them, namely "Digital Aesthetics". After Sean Cubitt's book by the same title there seem to be a lot of writers who has felt an urge to make a contribution and a comment to this concept. I took a quick look at internet recently and Google suggested

562 000 hits. Random spot tests show that many of the titles really indicated that they were about this subjectmatter.

I guess it will take a lifetime only to read through the titles. It is rather peculiar that so much effort has been spent with – as far as I can see – so little impact on the art discussion. I would be interesting to know how the concept "Digital Aesthetics" differs from other types of aesthetics. What are the characteristics of "Digital Aesthetics" that serve as borderlines in a comparence with other aesthetic fields? How can a purely technical term be turned into a generic art term? We never talked about "Analogue Aesthetics" or "Acrylic Aesthetics" as far as I can remember. Today when practically all artists are using computers and an enormous number of works and styles in all art genres are created it seems somewhat trivial to talk about contemporary art as digital. So, how can such a term be used as a "comprehensive umbrella" when it seem to have no meaning at all.