

Different Ways – The Aesthetics of Heiner Goebbels by Dr. Kersten Glandien

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When I first met Heiner Goebbels at a symposium in 1983 in my hometown East Berlin, something happened that seemed rather strange to me at the time. Although we talked to one another in our mother tongue, things did not quite seem to make sense. We were using the same words, but the different socio-cultural experiences we grew up with in our respective Germanies imbued them with different meanings. So we understood each other through constant misunderstanding.

This effect was curiously enhanced by Heiner's unusual way of thinking – which not only threw me into bewilderment, but also the entire symposium. He made the most bizarre analogies and told peculiar stories that triggered unexpected associations, leading to surprising revelations. His approaches challenged our conventions of thinking and, believe me, we needed it.

Over the years I have always found my exchanges with Heiner stimulating and exciting. In the course of writing about his work, I have learned something about the mechanisms and attitudes that inform his way of thinking and fuel his creativity. When asked to introduce him to the School of Sound, I was tempted to speak about the more obvious connections between his music and film: his practical ventures into film itself, and video - or about the intriguing use of video footage in his recent music theatre piece *Eraritjaritjaka*, or even that his way of composing is substantially influenced by cinematic techniques: montage, “cutting techniques, flash-backs, close-ups, perspectives, video technology, the use of sound tracks, ... the power of the image, narrative value etc.”¹, but also by the cinematographic attitude.

However, when I considered what intrigued me most in Heiner's work over the last two decades, I decided to take a more general view and tackle some of the aesthetic dimensions of his oeuvre that are pertinent to the exchanges between the different arts pursued here at the School of Sound. I hope, this will give some background to Heiner's talk – coming up afterwards.

Inspiration

In the context of the increasing ossification of music – and of most conventional art genres - towards the end of the 20th century, as a musician and composer Heiner Goebbels began to look for “inspiration from the outside”², from other artistic disciplines and from outside the arts altogether. He became a wanderer between different worlds - always interested in breaking the mould, exploring unknown territories and experimenting. In the course of his life so far he has ventured into many different areas of music: learning to play the piano and the cello as a child; founding an anarchist Street Brass Orchestra and a Jazz Duo in the mid 70s; then playing for 10 years in the alternative Rock Band *Cassiber*. He initiated experimental projects with international musicians; produced ground-breaking radio pieces; composed for theatre, film and video; wrote ensemble and orchestra works, and eventually moved into multi-genre settings of his own: staged (scenic) concerts and music theatre. Though these plural trajectories, working sometimes in two or three media in parallel, he acquired an impressive artistic multiplicity – moving freely across the borders of genres and cultures.

Collaboration

His wilful work with people from different fields influenced both his aesthetics and his work method. In fact, even his trademark works - the staged (scenic) concerts and music theatre pieces - evolve collaboratively; away from the composer’s desk and the conventional dichotomy between creation and execution. Driven by curiosity and by the desire to go beyond himself, Heiner gathers for each new piece a strong team of individuals with distinct artistic identities and improvisational skills. This includes not only musicians, actors and singers, but also sound-technicians, costume-, set- and light designers, video-operators, and occasionally pyrotechnicians. Each collaborator contributes to the final work with his or her unique abilities and experiences through a non-hierarchical, inclusive process of extended improvisation. In free-style rehearsals, ideas and practical suggestions from all participants are tried, probed, adopted, discarded, expanded and accumulated. Improvisation becomes the “creative motor” of this generative practice.

Such an open process of creation requires from each participant flexibility, patience and trust. Because of its extreme fluidity, - with no written script to hold on to -, the work often only falls into place shortly before the premiere, sometimes even after.

This freestyle method requires the director-composer to inspire the process throughout, to monitor and gently direct it and, at a later stage, in a final act of solitary composing, to pull it all together.

But even in its settled form the work remains open – providing a productive space, which “let(s) the audience in” (HG). It inspires them to make their own connections, spin their own stories, spark their own associations; it “give(s) fantasy a chance” (HG). After a performance, Heiner always mingles with his public, gathering reactions and readings of his piece. He knows very well that the success of a work depends as much on the audience as on the performers, technicians or himself. And he happily admits that “one can not invent all this on one’s own”³. In this way, he both relinquishes and retains authorship, while genuinely empowering his audience. This to him is “the attraction of a freer form of listening”⁴

Material

But how is this way of working reflected in the shape of the piece? What kind of piece will emerge from such a collective process?

By the 1980s the innovative power of art - in particular of music - was severely attenuated. In fact, Heiner went so far as to proclaim that “all imaginable ... musical material has (already) been discovered”⁵ and “As of now the ‘artistic self’ can only articulate itself through shifts.”⁶ For Heiner it became crucial “*How* one quotes, combines, estranges, uses, twists music ...”⁷

Much like Bourrioud’s *Semionauts*, he sifts through the debris of past and present culture, searching for pathways, connections and perspectives. “One does not invent, one finds”⁸. Heiner works with fragments and samples – with prefabricated splinters lifted from various sources: with snatches of texts, snapshots of images, transposed gestures, plundered musical samples, even entire pieces – irrespective of their high art or popular origin. His secret lies in the cocktail / mix. With a fine feeling for arrangement, Heiner works strictly non-linearly – layering and laminating millefeuilles. Each layer is made of many moments that can be connected to any other (Deleuze/ Guattari Rizome). The hierarchy of perception is thus undermined and the power of association released, encounterers are encouraged to find their own pathways through the fabric of the piece, opening it up to their own imaginations and experiences.

Choice

But there is nothing fashionable or arbitrary about Heiner's work with fragments. His keen cultural intuition and skill for arrangement underwrite a precise choice of elements, ensuring his audience's ability to "combine the elements subjectively in very different ways."⁹ As much as he sees improvisation as the creative motor of his work, he deeply mistrusts its structuring power. When composing, he follows "internal coherences and connections, even if they are not consciously decipherable by the listener."¹⁰ He often works with three or four topics at once, intuiting subtle connections. In his music theatre piece *Repetition*, for instance, he follows the connections between repetition, voyeurism, jealousy and seduction, drawing on texts by Kierkegaard, Robbe-Grillet and Prince (the artist formerly known as). In *Max Black* he ponders by way of Wittgenstein, Valéry and Lichtenstein about vagueness, the enigma of thought, exploration and obsession. But these topics are mere moments in the work, tendencies to produce motion. Texts merge with music, sound processing, gestures, movements, light and projected images, costumes and stage installations. Conventional dominance of plot, or dramatic development, based on text and the reinforcing doubling of means give way to a juxtaposition of fragments from different media. In Heiner's theatre of experience linear perception becomes spatial and the individual senses become engaged in a multi-sensorial spectacle. A narrative that started as spoken text may be taken up by music, continued by gestures or a moving image and completed by a rotating spotlight (or any other way around). Heiner's pieces are filled with poetic moments that stay with you: lit cigarette papers rising into the air; a flute playing a duet with a whistling kettle; stage doors suddenly opening onto the outside world; a balloon turning into a skirt; the rhythmic sound of high-heels on a pavement; the ceremonial unwrapping of a Koto; small blue flames running across the stage. The list is endless. No single means is primary. All are equal in creating the event. However, this interlocking of means still supports the autonomy of the elements: far apart, yet connected, and only to be brought together in the mind of each observer. The relations between fragments produce intensities, and it is they that make the drama, not the plot, not some linear movement towards a dramatic climax.

The open form provides experiences often unobtainable from our familiar surroundings, or through the common mechanisms of our perception. Such experiences might even question those of everyday life,- at best, burst the familiar world asunder. In experience lies, most importantly, one of the *raison d'être* that art today can still claim for itself.

Heiner Goebbels is not interested in handing out messages. He wants to inspire, to exchange experiences, and "to offer (his) experience with the material to the audience"¹¹. Often following an intuition of what a relation between certain elements might be, uncertain at times of what those elements may have in common, he embarks on an exchange, a voyage of discovery. This way his works remain processes of exploration throughout. I have never encountered another artist who is so utterly pleased when confronted with an unusual, even a ridiculous, reading of his work, one that he has not yet thought of himself, that introduces a new twist to the story – and thereby transforms it.

All this makes Heiner's work as pleasurable and challenging for me today as it was 20 years ago.

¹ Heiner Goebbels: *Prince and the Revolution*, in: *Argument* 175, May 1989, p.425

² Peter Kemper: ... *auf nichts soll musikalisch mehr Verlaß sein. Von Grenzgängern und Gratwanderungen*, in: Rainer Erd (ed): *Kulturstadt Frankfurt – Szenen Institutionen Positionen*, Frankfurt/Main: S.Fischer 1990, p. 60

³ Goebbels: *Gegen das Gesamtkunstwerk: Zur Differenz der Künste. [La Reprise, à l'opposé de l'oeuvre d'art totale. Beitrag zum Kolloquium De la différence des arts]*, IRCAM, Centre George Pompidou, Paris 1997] in: Sandner, Wolfgang (Hg.): *Heiner Goebbels: Komposition als Inszenierung*. Berlin 2002, S.136.

⁴ Goebbels, interviewed by Achim Wollscheid: *Leeres Zentrum, Art Position, Experiment* 21, 1992

⁵ Goebbels: *Prince and the Revolution*, p. 421

⁶ Goebbels: *Das Sample als Zeichen: Zwischen Klischee und Gedächtnis*, in: *MusikTexte* 71, 1997, p.11

⁷ Goebbels, interviewed by Thomas Delekat: *Hilflosigkeit, Langeweile*, in: *Die Deutsche Bühne* 3, 1996, p.21

⁸ Goebbels: *Das Sample als Zeichen*, p.11

⁹ Goebbels: *Opening the Text*, in: *Performance Research*, vol 1, no.1, Spring 1996, p. 55

¹⁰ Goebbels: *Das Sample als Zeichen*, p.12

¹¹ Goebbels: *Opening the Text*, p. 57