

Peter Ablinger

## CAN ART BE RESEARCH?

or:

"What we cannot describe is what makes us happy"<sup>1</sup>

Pauline Oliveros consecrated Alvin Lucier straightaway as the "Poet of Electronic Music" and Lucier seems to agree with the title. Because when asked whether there was a common thread in his works and their heterogeneous materials, Lucier answered: "Yes, it's an interest in the poetry of what we used to think of as science."<sup>2</sup>

Lucier is one of the prime examples and favorite victims of artistic research. The supposed scientific nature of his way of working is supposed to legitimize scientific research in the field of music as such. But can there be anything less scientific than the "poetry of what we used to think of as science"?

The criticism of Lucier's incorrectly assumed scientific nature is by no means my own invention. I met this already years ago, maybe decades, but couldn't find the source. One or the other reader has certainly an idea for it. The main argument of that criticism, if I remember correctly, was that Lucier is far from contributing the slightest knowledge to the state of sciences because he doesn't bother with contemporary science at all, instead derives his 'poetics' from measurement methods of the early history of scientific modernism in the 18th and 19th centuries, which are often no longer up-to-date, therefore from -so to speak- mythological ages of the history of science.

The counter argument for defending Lucier's alleged scientificness is usually his no less alleged "experimental" attitude. Hear what Lucier has to say:

"People who don't like what I do would say that I'm doing experiments that any physicist can do."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Footnote readers will be rewarded for answering the title question beforehand, which will be largely negative. I have the impression that I am giving the 'knight of the sad figure' here who sees his Dulcinea, the art, in the greatest danger and is ready to heroically undertake every battle with windmills to save art from research. However, "saving" arguments are, as usual, in the main text.

<sup>2</sup> *Poetry in Science*, Interviews with Douglas Simon, *ibid.* pp. 186-197, here p. 195.

<sup>3</sup> From: Robert Ashley: *Music with Roots in the Aether*, Talks with Alvin Lucier, found on the Internet at <https://vimeo.com/244882920>. Page last visited on June 30, 2018. The sentence quoted is found at 1'36". It is also the beginning of my piece *Alvin Lucier* from the series *Voices and Piano*.

In Lucier's eyes, people who call his music "experimental" are also people who don't like what he does. What was clearly in this statement is that people who do not like his art would rather hear it as an 'experiment' than as 'art'. Differently, he is concerned with letting "what we used to think of as science" now is appearing as artistic material. It is about the poetry that results from allowing an art-distant process, such as attaching electrodes to the brain, to take place on a concert stage. It is about transformation and transfer: What was science earlier, now becomes art.

And for the fact that an Alvin Lucier, if it really matters, throws scientific honesty and accuracy overboard, and sacrifices it to formal musical stringency, I think I even have proof that I found in the oh so rationally designed "experiment" *I am sitting in a room*.<sup>4</sup>

The best-known version of the piece<sup>5</sup> has 32 iterations or passes through the same text in a total duration of about 45 minutes, which, when first released, were divided on two record pages, 16 passes on page 1, 16 on page 2. The first 16 develop linearly and in accordance with the spoken text, which both transports the concept and the artistic intention of the piece.

But between the 16th and 17th iteration there is a break, which then gapes further between the 17th and 32nd iteration: New frequencies mix into the game while others are pushed back. In addition, the total pitch of the spectrum now slides lower and lower, so that in the end the frequencies of the source and final material have become completely incompatible.

[Listen to the internet: Alvin Lucier, I'm sitting in a room at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAxHlLK3Oyk>. The 17th iteration, which is initially the beginning of the 2nd side of the record starts exactly at 22:00 (page heard heard on June 18, 2018)]

I interpret it that way: Since *I am Sitting in a Room* had a much shorter previous version<sup>6</sup>, perhaps it was only in connection with the production of the LP that the desire to expand the piece to both sides arose, which I consider a consistent formal decision.<sup>7</sup> However, it was apparently produced in two steps. Perhaps initially only the length of a single record side - 16 iterations - was targeted, so that in

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<sup>4</sup> I had started studying *I am Sitting in a Room* because the original plan for my own Alvin Lucier piece from *Voices and Piano* was to use the initial text he had spoken for, with Lucier's permission. I gave up the plan later. See footnote 4.

<sup>5</sup> on "Lovely Music"; published there in 1980 as LP and reissued on CD in 1990.

<sup>6</sup> namely in the magazine "Source" with an enclosed 10-inch record with a duration of 14:56.

<sup>7</sup> It could even be said that the rise of the piece to a classic of modern music was only made possible by the later long version.

the course of the extension the work was carried out in a set-up that could no longer be reconstructed with 100% accuracy. Furthermore, either another tape machine was used, or the tape machine has become unstable meanwhile and could not any more hold the speed.

Conclusion: Form comes before research.

Incidentally, my criticism applies to a lesser extent to those researches that deal with the practical and manual, such as the listing of all multiphonics for a specific wind instrument. However, even these don't get away completely unscathed, because the artistic value of such a fingering chart is of course a question for me. After all, a practical compositional application means nothing more than the use of templates. And if the resulting work does not itself take up and reflect the form and structure of the template-like, the redundant tabular arrangement and the sample catalog, such as in the *Chord Catalog* by Tom Johnson, the use of such templates is a reduction to pure craftsmanship and thus we have to record a certain distance from art in such practices. Therefore we would have to come to the preliminary finding:

The more research, the less art.

Another case study is the just mentioned Tom Johnson, who often has to serve as an alleged connection between mathematics and music or between rationality and music. So let's take his *Rational Melodies* and check their rational and mathematical content.



[Example: Tom Johnson, *Rational Melodies* 3, sample music. With thanks to Tom Johnson, Edition 75]

Tom Johnson's music is gladly, too gladly summoned for the research worthiness of music. But the mathematical level that is climbed in this example is likely to be around 2nd/3rd class elementary school. The real charm or the provocation that the piece still has to offer is precisely the outrageous undercommitment that lies in NOTWITHSTANDINGLY executing the completely predictable and over-redundant. There's something unprecedentedly unpredictable about doing the absolutely predictable. And other work title by Tom Johnson, such as *Power in Numbers* seems to celebrate the magic of redundancy without hesitation. Again, the actual event lies in the imposition of the form and in no way in its scientific knowledge potential.

Scientific research is known to depend on norms and conventions, on generally accepted standards. But although I only give representatives and sympathizers of artistic research the most well-meaning intentions, the attempt to subordinate art to these norms, i.e. the attempt to view art as research, amounts to an attempt to tame, to domesticate and discipline the art - against which I am resisting.

My concern in this context is not the production of knowledge, but rather the production of non-knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Places or moments of wordlessness and lack of meaning ... - nothing but an open mouth maybe - to achieve or provide THAT is for me by far the more noble AND more difficult task of art than the transfer of information and knowledge - than any transfer or communication at all.

Refusal to communicate, of course as communicated refusal to communicate, can be the intention or strategy of art. We just learned about the blessings of redundancy from Tom Johnson's music. Now an own example from 1994, which links redundancy with refusal to communicate at least in some of its aspects: the 4-minute piece "*Square*" from the *Weiss / Weisslich* series.

[Listen: Peter Ablinger *Weiss / Weisslich 7, "Square"*, at:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQdtUEmVQq8&feature=youtu.be>  
(page last visited on June 1st, 2018)]

Noise is by definition an overload, an excess, because Noise, White Noise, is the sum of all sounds. At the same time - and as in an '*Engführung*'\* - noise also has the exactly opposite imposition for us: the underload. For me it seems to be the acoustic situation with which we can do even less than with nothing, with silence. The inability to do something with it is what interests me in this context. And conceived as a

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<sup>8</sup> I owe Gösta Neuwirth, my first composition teacher, the almost identical term, that of "productive not-knowing".

\* '*Engführung*' is a musicological term often used in the metaphorical sense of near-parallelism or convergence.

piece, the "square" is one that, like other pieces before, disengages from the classic tradition of accumulating differentiation and increasing complexity, precisely at the point where the maximum information (all tones at the same time) turns into maximum entropy. What, in the artistic context, can also be experienced as a refusal to provide information and communication.

Now for the subtitle of this essay: "What we cannot describe is what makes us happy". This is the paraphrase of a proposition by Alexandre Kojève from his Parisian Hegel lectures in the late 1930s, at a point where he discussed the "disappearance of man and the end of history".<sup>9</sup> Kojève asks what remains of man after history, after negativity, after all wars, after work and basically also after humanity, and he lists what remains "undefined": "art, love, the game, etc., in short everything that makes people happy." Decades later Kojève comes back to this state, and relativizes the "happy" to a "satisfied", which can probably be read as "satisfied and stupid", because in fact the homo sapiens has now become a "post-historical animal" for Kojève.

It seems to me that this is the characteristic gesture of the philosopher, who, since he stays in language, may not think of a permanent beyond of language. The gesture is widespread among philosophers. I mention Slavoj Žižek arbitrarily, who divides the world into on the one hand the intelligible (the differential, the signified) and on the other hand in dull enjoyment. There is only "either / or", nothing in between, and nothing beyond this distinction. Music, however, has no place in this distinction. It can neither be reduced to the intelligible nor to a dull enjoyment.

I therefore propose to linger a few more moments on "stupidity" and not be afraid to try to see it as constitutive for an essential aspect of music or art.

In "Data capitalism, knowledge and cognition has become a business model," writes Stefan Wagner, in: *Artistic Research, A Handbook*.<sup>10</sup> Knowledge is capital and capitalism expresses itself as being without alternative. As one of the last domains not yet fully domesticated, artistic creativity should now also follow this business model. And that's not all: The lack of alternatives should also be welcomed, one is forced to agree to it with pleasure. Everyone is creative or has to be, and it also has to be fun - mind you: it MUST be fun, that's an imperative. But if productivity and creativity have become a comprehensive and alternative paradigm: what does this mean

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<sup>9</sup> The discussion is taken from: Giorgio Agamben: *Das Offene*, Frankfurt / Main, 2003, pp. 15ff.

<sup>10</sup> *Künstlerische Forschung, Ein Handbuch* (Artistic Research, A Handbook), Zurich-Berlin, 2015, p. 274.

for a resistant concept of art? Could it be that instead of producing knowledge, we need nothing more than effective strategies of stupidity?<sup>11</sup>

In his lecture "Art as Research", it seemed to me, not without enjoying paradox, that Dieter Mersch described the work as that which can only be created under the condition of not thinking.<sup>12</sup> And from not thinking it is not far to not-being-able-to.

Giorgio Agamben meditates in "The Narration and the Fire" about not-being-able-to<sup>13</sup>, and comes to a conclusion that, due to his drastically increased paradox or imposition, should be somewhat indigestible for artistic research: Following this, mastery has nothing to do with ability, on the contrary, with the abstention of ability or the skilled. A bad or moderate piece is one that does what it can. But a good piece can do more than what it does.

Agamben discovers the figure of not-being-able-to as a central element in Kafka<sup>14</sup>, namely in the form of artists who are artists precisely because - and not though - they can not do their thing. Eg. the world record swimmer who says that he really can't swim at all, or the famous mouse singer Josephine ... Agamben adds an interpretation of these figures, which directly seem to turn against the mantra-like repeated formula of knowledge production in art: "Perhaps the common understanding of art as knowledge (...) has never been questioned more radically than through these figures." What is proposed here is not the idea of art as an ability, on the contrary, the ability is downgraded to the purely artisan, while mastery in art culminates in an override of ability. The thought of Agamben ends in sentences that speak of painting and poetry, which I would like to convert for this purpose in relation to music and art:

Music is the overriding of hearing.<sup>15</sup>  
Art is the overriding of perception.

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<sup>11</sup> *Strategies of Stupidity* was the name of a seminar I held at the University of Huddersfield in February 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Based on Alvin Lucier's piece *Music For Solo Performer* (1965). Dieter Mersch: *Kunst als Forschung* (Art as Research), INMM 2018 spring conference.

<sup>13</sup> Giorgio Agamben: *Die Erzählung und das Feuer* (Narration and Fire), Frankfurt / Main, 2017, p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p. 48ff.

<sup>15</sup> Those who find such a statement incomprehensible should only think of building a philharmonic hall. These self-celebrating palaces of modern civilization are not built to hear as much as possible, but on the contrary, to exclude as much of the audible as possible. (See Jacques Attali, *Bruits: essai sur l'économie politique de la musique*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977; R. Murray Schafer: *The Tuning of the World*. New York, 1977.) More on this in my text, *Cézanne und die Musik, Wahrnehmung und ihre Defizite* (Cézanne and music, perception and its deficits), in: *Musiktexte* 2014, issue 140, pp. 31-36.

Eva Geulen takes the poets that Plato wanted to have banished from his state as an opportunity to return to the hostility between philosophy and poetry in her book on Agamben.<sup>16</sup> According to her, this hostility has persisted to this day in the form of mutual exclusion, "as if literature had what philosophy lacked, and vice versa." And again I convert: "... as if music had what philosophy lacked, and vice versa." I continue to paraphrase: "If music is given its object sensually, it cannot be an object of its knowledge. Philosophy knows about its object, but it does not have it. Because it is not given to it sensually, it can neither enjoy nor represent it."

Sensual givenness and knowledge are therefore mutually exclusive. Nothing that could put the two on the same side. Consonance or agreement is not possible. That could be my final word, my conclusion. However - and after having positioned some things against artistic research here, I hope to surprise my readers a little bit with the following - because, right here, from this point of mutual exclusion of sensual givenness and knowledge, it is possible to take a step towards research. So we are not finished yet. The mutual exclusion is exactly the edge, or, to speak with Deleuze, "the fold" - more precisely: the fold point, the hinge where sensual givenness and knowledge touch IN THEIR MUTUAL EXCLUSION.

But the touch won't be easy. We have to take 'stupidity' a little further. Julia Kristeva's efforts to see an attack on the regime of the symbolic in art<sup>17</sup> can, with permission, also be attributed to the strategies of stupidity. Resistance to the regime of the symbolic, to the regime of language, to any kind of hegemony is not compatible with "positivist" research. The actual place of art is where it escapes meaning - how can this be compatible with artistic research as long as it is unable to reflect precisely that 'negativity' - the above-mentioned exclusion or 'fold'!

But that is not to be concealed either: art itself is also worth being criticized in the sense contested, especially the (post-)conceptual art of the past two decades; And in it even more the visual than the sounding art, in which there is still an enormous need to catch up in comparison to the former. An essential characteristic of the big art exhibitions and

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<sup>16</sup> Eva Geulen: *Giorgio Agamben*, Hamburg, p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Julia Kristeva: *Die Revolution der poetischen Sprache* (The Revolution of the Poetic Language), Frankfurt / Main, 1978. I link the reference to Kristeva with a reference to my recently published text, in which Kristeva plays a more detailed role: *Das Ungesagte - über Psychoanalyse und Zahlensymbolik* (The Unspoken - About Psychoanalysis and Numeric Symbolism), Positions, 2018, Issue 115. This text can be seen as a continuation of it.

biennials of the past years seemed to me that often only art was shown in it that legitimized itself essentially by its "concept". Concept not understood in the sense of the founders of concept art, such as Sol LeWitt, that is, concept art as a score for a largely abstract execution intention, but "concept" as a post-conceptual program or strategy paper that seems to be defined by the fact that everything that appears in this art as "sensual", is based on a verbally well-founded ground, typically of a socio-political nature. An art that does what it does because it has understood what it is doing. An art of knowledge, and therefore an art that has been accommodated and domesticated to a certain extent. Such art, which can, and typically always has, a good reason in each of its traits, I call 'the art of good reason', which is primarily intended to show its limits.<sup>18</sup>



[Image source: [br.de/themen/kultur/inhalt/kunst/richter148.html](http://br.de/themen/kultur/inhalt/kunst/richter148.html)]

One of the last major manifestations of an art that had something decisive to counter the 'good reason', namely its own inexpressibility, was - for me - the exhibition "Eight

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<sup>18</sup> On the subject, a notebook entry after visiting the Berlin Biennale 2016: "UNIFORM. The visual arts have become very uniform lately. Despite all its apparent diversity, their approach / strategy / attitude has one and the same mechanism at work. Such assimilated approach is that of a certain kind of discursivity. Everything that constitutes the work is designed in such a way that it could just as well be narrated that it could just as well be made into a written text of artistic research or a thesis. In principle, everything that happens can be 'said', nothing anymore is 'shown'. Everything has a *theme* - like a *sonata*. There is nothing left than the thematic and motivic, nothing but rhetoric. Everything knows what it does and why. Everything can be justified, everything is well argued and follows an argumentative economy. Everything is exposed - nothing remains to be discovered. No more questions. Nothing but answers."



Gray" by Gerhard Richter in 2002 in the Berlin Guggenheim. The exhibition consisted of 8 large-format gray monochrome panels with a reflecting surface. Inaccessible rather than inviting. The clearest sign of themselves was exactly what they were NOT themselves: the reflection of the exhibition space and its visitors.<sup>19</sup>

[more pictures on the internet: Gerhard Richter, Acht Grau, [http://www.art-in-berlin.de/hb\\_gerhrichter.htm](http://www.art-in-berlin.de/hb_gerhrichter.htm) (last visited on June 30, 2018)]

In my eyes, it is about a rebellion against the mechanisms of the production of meaning, those incessant and unstoppable processes which result essentially from a constitutive excess of meaning. 'Surplus' (*Überdeterminiertheit*) is the Freudian term which, together with the 'displacement' (*Verschiebung*) is chosen to the actual "work master" (*'Werkmeister'*, Freud) for dream work. Since Lacan, these two work masters have become the main agents of language and desire. No further details can be given here.<sup>20</sup> I am only interested here in the bubbling of meanings, which can no longer be stopped, and which springs from the interaction of overdetermination and displacement. And I am even more interested in those moments when this source seems somehow blocked or even threatens to dry up. The example that I have in mind is the stammering of some of the most verbose among the philosophers in the face of such dis-utterances in art such as the black square of Malevich.<sup>21</sup> It seems to me that art has advanced the most, closest to itself, when it achieves this deficiency, this rejection of surplus, this 'surminus', and leaves that stammering on its way. It is as if the otherwise never ever ending mill of meaning suddenly stopped for a moment.

The central point of art is not to generate meaning. Anyone can do that, it happens inevitably. The greatest fortune of art is to give - "existence to the EMPTY" would be too much promised, because perhaps it is only a question of the dwindling existence of a flash, a tear, a gap in meaning that is otherwise woven like a dense, all-encompassing network. The greatest art is to find a gap within this all-covering fabric, and not only to find it, but also to endure it, and then - which is almost hopeless - to keep it open.

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<sup>19</sup> Richter himself formulates the intention of being inexpressible in this way: "Painting is the creation of an analogy with the unspeakable and incomprehensible, which is to take shape and become available in this way." (Quoted from: <http://www.hubertkoenig.de/koe/statement/> - page last visited on June 30, 2018)

<sup>20</sup> See for example: Kai Hammermeister: Jaques Lacan, Munich, pp. 73f.

<sup>21</sup> See for example: Slavoj Žižek: *Weniger als nichts* (Less than nothing), Berlin, p. 969.

Well, as already indicated, my rejection of artistic research<sup>22</sup> is a dialectical one, and my delimitation of art from research is actually the bridge that can be made. The dialectic of this rejection lies in the fact that it is precisely this, the rejection itself, that is targeted as the place where noteworthy research takes place. Only in learning to understand what is inaccessible to understanding, in the exact measurement of its limit, can we produce a precise description of what I call the 'negative form of the possible', something that (with Foucault) can also be formulated as follows:

Drawing boundaries necessarily say something about beyond the border.

*[The text - German title: "Kann Kunst Forschung sein? - oder: Was wir nicht beschreiben können, ist das, was uns glücklich macht" - initially was written for a lecture at the Frühjahrstagung des Instituts für Neue Musik und Musikerziehung in Darmstadt, on April 6, 2017. In 2019 it was published twice in German: MusikTexte, Heft161; and in: Erkundungen, Gegenwartsmusik als Forschung und Experiment, Institut für Neue Musik und Musikerziehung Darmstadt, Band59, Schott.*

*The English translation by google-translate and the author is rough and unedited.]*

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<sup>22</sup> My text is admittedly imprecise in not being able to tell who exactly deserves which criticism. Of course, I don't blame musicologists for doing scientific work. Criticism is focused on them, for not targeting the boundaries of scientific activity. They shouldn't be afraid to admit their inability, but on the contrary: Exactly the capturing of the boundary would put them in the position to set a limit towards the unspeakable itself. On the other hand, all those composers and creators who adorn themselves with the label of the scientific, arouse all my anger and I accuse them of betraying God: for thirty silver coins they sell art to science.