

Rasmus Fleischer  
**How Music  
 Takes Place:  
 Excerpts From  
 “The Post-  
 digital  
 Manifesto”**

How to decide what music to listen to? Presented with boundless access, this is the perpetual question today. The standard response is to propose the use of automated systems of recommendation. Instead of spending all that time choosing music ourselves, we could just let software identify patterns in the statistical data we have left in our trail. Next, this software goes on to offer us radio stations specially tailored to our individual preferences, stations which often prove themselves shockingly adept at opening our ears to music we didn't even know we liked. In spite of this, the underlying principles of these recommendation systems remain quite primitive. “Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought ...” is the basic functionality, familiar from online bookstores. At the center of it all we find the individual, whose preferences are to be compressed and reduced into a statistical profile.



Swedish Pirate Bureau's "S23K" bus outside the Stockholm District Court, during the Pirate Bay trial days. Photo: Hannes Runelöf

Why assume that preferences come firmly lodged in the individual? The transitory bodily relations to music are constantly being reshaped, suggesting that what we usually call “personal taste” might be better understood as an aggregate of the supra- and the sub-personal. The everyday musical choices we make are influenced by factors like time of day, day of week, or season of the year. Other factors include weather, metabolism, intoxication, and the almost random way in which various sensory inputs seem to trigger associations with our earlier personal musical experiences. But above and beyond anything else, it is the people around us who exert the biggest influence on our musical choices – in our relations, through our desires. It is never the case that people who get together automatically and iteratively start to adjust their presumed internal preferences until a mix arrives that makes everyone happy. In real-life situations calling for musical selection,



Ad for the German National Theater picturing the German parliament.

direct democratic ideals must remain inapplicable.

1.

Music unfolds in the charged field separating the opposing poles of responsibility and irresponsibility. If there is no one present who is willing to step forward and assume responsibility for what is played, then it can scarcely be held that there is any music taking place at all. In such a situation, it would be more accurate to say that the room is being drowned in Muzak. And, on the other hand, if full responsibility were assumed by everyone – something verging on the hypothetical – no one would dare make a sound. The situation turns into silence, albeit a musical one. In musical improvisation, aiming for such a state of full and collective responsibility might be possible. And if that aim ever gets fulfilled, the music will have ended, with everybody present reverently holding their breath.

In the impulse to set the tone, to proceed from silence into the beginning of a new tune, there will also inherently be a backing off from individual responsibility. The first riffs of a saxophonist, the first beat of a drummer, the first track laid down by a DJ – these are all actions that cannot be justified on their own merits, precisely because they are (and must be) clichés. In order for music to begin, its initiators must temporarily cloak themselves in something recognizable. Here, the overflow of associations generated by any given musical genre makes for a lot of material for cloaking. The musician might choose to hide behind the name of a famous composer, behind stage clothes, or behind the mythic persona of an artist. In those first few bars of music, there must always be a relinquishing of responsibility, even if only momentarily.

Responsibility only makes its appearance at the moment when one individual starts to imitate the other. This might happen through a body swaying to the rhythm, or the voice which joins in on the chorus. The cliché, now turned into a musical springboard, presents itself as a profusion of possible associations; trying to imitate them all inside an event anchored in time and duration is simply impossible. Repetition therefore becomes something more than a source of clichés; in every repetition there is selection, and in every selection there is difference. This is what makes it possible for music to rise above the level of the cliché.

These lessons, derived from the musical situation, might successfully be applied to another situation in which the concept of responsibility becomes central: politics. The turn of the nineteenth century saw the instigation of the parallel construction of parliaments and

concert houses, functioning as political and musical temples for the rising bourgeoisie. The philharmonic (conductor–orchestra–audience) mirrors the democratic (chief of state–parliament–citizen); both are images of an idealized distribution of responsibilities, and both promise the future abrogation of all dissonances in one final chord of harmony.

The introduction of ever-more efficient forms of mass media meant dramatic changes for the worlds of politics and music. During the twentieth century, these new technologies came to serve as dominant filtering systems that managed the new surplus of opinions, presenting the end-consumer with a processed selection that consisted of a worldview accessible to the single individual. However, by the year 2000 it became obvious that mass media was struggling to maintain its position in this system. Now it is up to us to construct new technologies of selection and to make sense of this surplus of opinions.

That which we call politics will always involve, much like music, some kind of oscillation between responsibility and irresponsibility. If no one assumes personal responsibility for his or her actions, this could hardly be called politics; a better name for it would be administration. Most of what the media reports on as “politics” is predicated on the systematic shunning of responsibility, and the conjured phantasms (like “public opinion” or “the economy”) can therefore hardly be considered worthy of the name.

If all of us did the very opposite of this – taking full responsibility and acknowledging our complicity in the course of world events – the result would be a situation that could only be understood as a kind of revolution. Revolution not in the sense of some sudden outburst of militant action, but simply as a sort of electric, tremulous calm: nothing happens, nothing is planned, and no work is carried out – a concept in line with the idea of the general strike championed for so long by anarcho-syndicalists. It is a singularity beyond politics, but yet, as it subsides, it reveals politics turned on its head.

If revolution is conceived like this, it appears more like the consequence of a highly contagious sense of responsibility. Put this in contrast to the culture of the self-proclaimed revolutionaries who remain content with doing nothing more than dumping responsibility for the afflictions that plague us at the doorstep of others. “You are evil, therefore I am good”: the fundamental formula of resentment. This refusal of responsibility turns music into Muzak and replaces political agency with the banality of evil. No political party program could ever help guide us to the opposite shore, to revolution. But there is something truly revolutionary in the

03/10

e-flux journal #42 — february 2013 Rasmus Fleischer  
How Music Takes Place: Excerpts From “The Post-digital Manifesto”

04/10



Protest against inflation and unemployment stopped at a band shell at Lake Shore, 1973. Reverend Jesse Jackson is shown speaking.

musical insight that responsibility could be something else than submission to “the common good.”



The pirate bus reflected on a surveillance tower. Photo: Palle Torsson

## 2.

May Day. Every year an echo of the previous. “Attending rallies, that’s so yesterday!” go the groans of the haters. “Why even bother taking to the streets today, given the capacity of digital media?” In this argument, rallies get treated as if they were a kind of mass media: their sole purpose being to communicate a message, either to the external public or to the authorities in power. Similar ideas are often held by the organizers of rallies themselves, as shown by the tendency to either see rallies as a chance to cultivate their cult of the megaphone, or as an opportunity to stage something nice for the cameras.

From a post-digital viewpoint, a May Day rally becomes something different. Marches should not be classified as mass media; they are methods for handling a surplus of opinions through a process of selection rooted in material presence. Textually mediated politics – the type you would find at the annual meeting, in the op-ed, on the internet forum – does not require the same degree of prioritizing. If you need to satisfy some inner or outer contradiction or opposition, just insert an additional turn of phrase somewhere. A political rally, on the other hand, is an event constrained by time and space. Chants are restricted to one at a time. Flags are rationed to one per participant. Collective priorities are set, and as a result a common style is affirmed.

However, this selection – the color of the flags, the phrasing of the slogan – is not the only thing signaling the politics of a march. In fact, it is not even the most important one. The composition of a march constitutes a politics of its own, and if we turn our attention to the case

of the loudspeaker membranes, this becomes acutely visible. Are there activists to regale the crowd with megaphones, or is kick-starting the chants left to energetic protesters? The presence of megaphones will unconditionally turn a protest into a manifestation of dictatorship, no matter what messages they emit. It is for the minority to dictate, literally, the message. It is for the masses to read it back.

The question is brought to a head in the use of music in political protests. Here we find, on the one hand, a cultivation of traditions going back to the days before electrically amplified music was invented. The performances of brass bands and choirs become performances of dialectical music: the earth will rise on new foundations, by way of dissonances dissolved in a final chord of harmony. Here, every piece of music carries with it a message that appeals to reason. The brass band can be traced to a military musical tradition, and is regimented according to the principle of the division of labor: each individual specializes in one task or instrument. The choir, on the other hand, amounts to a humanism that bases its politics on the naked human voice.

The percussionists’ mobilization of the body differs in that they do away with any detours through reason. Rhythm might be able to create the preconditions necessary for both dancing and marching, but it can never aim for dialectical resolution. While melodies necessarily come with durations and ends, rhythms must incessantly keep on repeating themselves. The difference in potential amplitude might vary hugely between any two percussive instruments, but nowhere is there any hierarchy between lead part and backing part, which is typical for melodic music. If the politics of percussion open up to the utopian, then these portals already have their presence in the acting out of collective mobilization.

Organizers of political rallies rarely show themselves to have more sense than shop-owners when it comes to the deployment of music. Clumsy attempts at playing “something for everyone” end up in a stale and soupy mix lacking taste. Movements that have committed themselves to attracting people of all ages and backgrounds often get carried away by the idea of music as an instrument of inclusion and never consider the fact that there will always be a corresponding degree of exclusion.

Musical direct democracy can never be anything more than a pipe dream, to put it bluntly. If all participants play one song each, this would simply be serial dictatorship. No truly meaningful musical experiences can come out of such practices. The responsibility of serving as a local musical dictator should be conferred on the



"Home Taping Is Killing Music" was the slogan of a 1980s anti-copyright infringement campaign by the British Phonographic Industry.

DJ, but we must reserve our right to leave for new premises, where other DJs are the temporary dictators of music. Serial dictatorships can't be preferable to multiple parallel dictatorships scattered in space. This explains why derelict factories and squats usually prove themselves so beneficial to the cultural life of cities. A post-digital sensibility of music comes with an inherent questioning of the ownership of the spaces where music takes place.

07/10



Detail of graffiti on the side of the Swedish Pirate Bureau's "S23K" bus. Photo: Hannes Runelöf.

### 3.

Somehow I was part of a group that found itself acquiring an old city bus. Totally ignorant of the inner workings of engines and keen on taking a trip, we then proceeded to restore it. Inside the bus, there was an unusually persistent feeling that digitalization had made it all the more important to "be there." And there we were, twenty-three of us, ready to occupy space, ready to sacrifice time. None of us knew everyone else, but everyone knew someone. Those connections that already existed had mostly been formed through the internet. Now, manifested in the post-digital, this loose patchwork of online friendships was processed into a more sharply delineated group. If you grow tired of an online conversation, logging off or switching windows is just a click away. Getting off a bus in motion and in the middle of a highway, well, this is something different altogether. All this had the effect of intensifying the presence we felt inside the vehicle.

Presence serves selection. It corresponds to certain needs, triggered by the surplus of both music files and of friends on the net. Sometimes it feels like the list of friends on the social network site stretches into eternity. Everyone always turns out to have some sort of connection to everyone else; six degrees of separation. There is immense potential in digitally mediated

friendships, but it is only when these are materialized in the post-digital – when selection becomes a pressing issue – that friendships can be said to *happen*. There are no physical rooms with room enough for an unlimited number of bodies. Being physically present does not allow for tabbing to the next chat window in order to get away from a tedious conversation. You might choose to leave, to go somewhere else and strike up a new conversation there. This is still not the same thing as typing into a new blank chat window, because there is an already existing situational context we must take into consideration before we act.

Something similar could be said of the cassette tape player. If a song starts to go stale, we just push the fast forward button or flip the tape to be instantly thrown into the midst of a new track. We are spared the parade of aborted intros that distinguishes the anxious skipping of the digital.

The tape recorder introduces a degree of unpredictability into music, a randomness different in nature than the algorithmic shuffling of the MP3 player. When you switch unlabeled tapes, you can never be sure what you will hear next. A fair guess is that it might be something that someone nearby liked ten or twenty years ago – at least if all the music available is stuffed in an old gym bag, stored on exactly a hundred tapes, all scavenged from closets and storage rooms. This was the situation in our trusty old bus, in which there was an unvoiced understanding that digital music players were off-limits. This decision had followed from the simple fact that internet access would be more than scarce during the voyage. Certain situations demand that you commit yourself to your set goals: maximum information, or maximum presence? We went for the latter. Thus, we turned ourselves into a mobile, albeit slow, laboratory of materializing internet culture during a summer week's drive from Sweden down to Italy.

Crossing the Alps in a bus manufactured in 1977 and originally intended for city traffic has all the trappings of a seriously risky enterprise. It can't be said that there is any less risk in squeezing together twenty-three people – most of whom know each other only vaguely through some chat channel – and having them live in highly cramped conditions in a bus for a week. Anything else would be a lie – especially considering the total lack of any sort of pre-arranged division of responsibilities. In some situations, such muddiness might lead to a dilution of presence and the scattering of the group to the four winds. On other occasions there might be a material framework acting as a glue during events, making the question of

e-flux journal #42 — february 2013 Rasmus Fleischer  
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responsibility unavoidable, and thus intensifying presence. The maximum level of intensification (and consequently also the capacity to be lit up, let down, or let in) is reached if getting there and back again turns out to be time-consuming, arduous, or even impossible. As we increasingly come to experience music as synonymous with effortless digital skipping from track to track there is also a corresponding growth in the richness of the strenuous exertions that have to be endured before breaking through to the spaces where music might happen.

In the post-digital, almost any barrier to the boundless flood of music can be turned into a resource for the production of presence: basements lacking room for no more than a certain number of people; time running out and limiting the number of songs in a session or on a tape; loudspeakers incapable of delivering sound levels above a certain decibel or outside of a set spectrum of frequencies; instruments featuring no more than thirty-two keys; cops breaking up the party; backs that break when trying to carry that one extra kilo of vinyl; geographical distances; disk space; grit. All these levees, these barriers that determine how music happens – they feed the post-digital with the traction needed for the production of memorable

events.

The family just seating themselves in front of the TV, eager to watch this evening's episode of "So You Think You Can Dance" is just as involved in the post-digital as the thousand ravers dancing through the night inside the abandoned factory. Both cases represent examples of musical events giving rise to a production of presence, a process constrained by the specific situational limitations that events impose on themselves. If it so happens that the intensity inside the factory is stronger, this is not because the crowd involves more people than the living room. Rather, the intensity of the experience is caused by the crowd having accumulated greater potential for experiencing a collective crossing of some barrier or threshold. Conversely, it would be unfair to blame a less intense TV experience on bad programming alone. In the bus, we felt the presence of an urgency and intensity exceeding the sum of the individual contributions of all of the twenty-three passengers. This intensity of presence was specific to the intermingling of two distinct technologies: the bus and the cassette tape.

Our methodology could certainly (and with some justification) be accused of nostalgia. According to the transportational logic governing

08/10



Laocoon Loudspeaker or Follyphone, circa 1912.



the tourism industry and the art world alike, traveling is what you do in order to present yourself at an end destination. Travel is thus reduced to nothing more than the distance you have to cover in order to get from point A to point B. This has the consequence of making air travel seem a more rational choice than going by bus. According to the logic of high fidelity so keenly propped up by the consumer electronics industry, sound quality is just a question of either being good or bad. In light of such logic, cassette tapes would unarguably seem the inferior alternative when compared to digital audio formats.

The question becomes, then: Why should hanging on to tapes be considered reactionary when the same does not apply to forming a rock band? The intermittent staging of spectacles that are supposed to represent a “return to the roots of rock’n’roll” seems to be a favorite pastime of the record industry. It should be kept in mind that the format of the rock band in itself represents a set of restrictions on musical possibilities. In terms of the production of presence, there is nothing to say that such constellations necessarily outrun or equal what others, given the right time and the right place, achieve using nothing but a boom box and a bag of tapes.

It is precisely because the bus trip took our common experiences of the digital superabundance of information as a starting point that our vision of the post-digital as a counter-movement appeared with such clarity and force. This experiment proved extraordinary in that it taught us so much about the limits of materiality; about bigger and smaller collectivities; about high as well as low frequencies; about the future, and about the past.



Pirate bus at the Chaos Communication Camp 2011, Telecomix Village. Photo: Jonatan Walck

#### 4.

In ancient Greece, the seven or eight-stringed lyre was not just the symbol of music: it was music. Music, in its turn, was not seen as just a

manifestation of the harmony of the spheres. The cosmos was itself music, music was mathematics, and the lyre a magical artifact capable of transmuting those principles into sensations that could be experienced by mortals. The lyre itself has since been replaced by other stringed instruments, such as the guitar or the piano, whose tunings are based on alternative mathematical principles.

To us, arguing that a piano is music would seem slightly absurd. Before we can begin to talk about music, there must first be someone sitting down in front of it and selecting which of its eighty or so keys to play. From music as a thing, to music as an activity. What if the same shifting of perspectives could be applied to the post-digital? We have only to approach MP3 files as not being much different than ordinary musical instruments. The file does not equal music, but it contains certain musical potentials, which can become realized as soon as someone sits down and starts playing with it. Playing a MP3 file on a device means that a specific configuration of both hardware and software is mobilized, situated in time and space, in the presence of a limited selection of people. If you randomly bang on all the keys of a piano, you can expect to produce music to the same degree that shuffling a playlist containing all the songs ever recorded would pave the way for music to take place.

This line of thinking could, to some extent, be said to represent a devaluation of the status of recorded music – which is certainly the case, at least in comparison to the soaring heights that resulted from the CD bubble of the ‘90s. It does not, however, exclude any difference in musical quality between recorded objects. Rather, we now have the opportunity to reformulate our criteria for quality assessment: a great song which is captured, fixed, and stored – and it is irrelevant if it is encoded into an MP3 file or written on a music sheet – will harbor greater potential for being realized as great music, just like a well-built and well-tuned piano will harbor greater musical possibilities than a piano recently recovered from the garbage dump.

But given the right hands and the right situation, even the most miserable wretch of a piano is capable of producing fantastic music. Analogously, a great singer might pull off a fantastic performance of a song that up until then had been written off as terrible. The same thing goes for the possibilities open to the remix artist who works with low-quality recordings. The thing is that raw materials like these (in the form of notation or recordings) will put greater demands on artistic skill by virtue of placing greater constraints on musical maneuvering. On the other hand, this basic idea of enforcing constraints on musical options is what every

musical instrument really is about – to apply specific tunings to stringed instruments is just one of many ways to express this idea.

The development of new musical instruments seems to have ground to a complete halt during the heyday of autonomous music, back when the natural position of the composer was at the top of the pyramids of aesthetics and copyright legislation. New music meant new compositions – not new instruments. The modernist avant-garde composer also seemed content with the available selection. Pianos were certainly prepared, and scores were written that imposed on the musicians the most grueling and exotic playing techniques. But the performances still involved the same old instruments. With the emergence of electrified music, however, the barriers that kept composer, musician, instrument builder, and sound technician apart slowly started to crumble. Performance-wise, there might not have been many new additions for audiences to remark on (same old electric guitars), but what they got to hear was the sound of a constantly mutating constellation of effect modules and boxes.

If viewed from a distance, all unique combinations of instrument and sound effects start to resemble something more like meta-instruments. The same thing happens if we consider hardware and software, and the different ways in which they can be configured to produce sounds. The development of the musical means of production finds its expression in innovations made at this meta-instrumental level, and these show themselves for the most part to be the results of collective experimentation without any identifiable single author. The effect of the easy access to digital copies of music production software is to significantly lower not only the threshold for production, but the costs of distribution as well. In this way, the digital superabundance seems to practically feed on itself.

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This essay is an edited selection from Rasmus Fleischer's book "Det postdigitala manifestet," published in Swedish in 2009. This is its first English translation, thanks to Mikael Kopimi Altemark.

Rasmus Fleischer (b. 1978) is a Swedish historian, writer, and occasional musician. He was involved in the anti-copyright collective Piratbyrå (The Bureau for Piracy) which was active 2003–2010 and which is known for founding The Pirate Bay, but was also active in the fields of art, theory and politics. Other books by Rasmus Fleischer include *Boken & Biblioteket* (2011) about the transformation of publishing and the future of libraries, as well as his PhD thesis *Musikens politiska ekonomi* (2012).

10/10

e-flux journal #42 — february 2013 Rasmus Fleischer  
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