

Punctures in the Periphery

Show-Bix and the Media Conscious Practice of Per Højholt.

Morten Søndergaard

Around 1967 and onwards, Per Højholt (1923–2004) performs a series of punctures in the periphery of a small and self-conscious avant-garde in Denmark – experiments that combine most of the known art forms and genres in a still more active dialogue with new media and technology.

One of the first things Højholt engaged himself in at the time was *Show-Bix*,¹ which is best described as an artist group consisting of the photographer and visual artist Poul Ib Henriksen, composer Gunner Møller Pedersen, and Per Højholt (at the time described largely as a poet). The group was operative from 1968 and until 1971, a period during which it conducted a series of complex experiments involving an audience as well as a media consciousness which is quite unique in Denmark – perhaps even more so today. In fact, I claim that *Show-Bix* is the visible proof of a paradigmatic change in Per Højholt's artistic practice, as well as in the overall definition of the contemporary art scene.

Nevertheless, these experiments have somehow been hidden or forgotten by the traditional (mostly literary) reception of Per Højholt. Only recently, some critics have focused on some of the media practice of Højholt – mainly his important sound- and radio works, like *Turbo – en spaceficering af Højholts digt / Turbo – A Spacefiction of Højholt's Poem* which Højholt executed in collaboration with Peter Kristiansen at The Danish Radio in 1968, which has received attention as his most important *lyrical* work – and justifiably so. But apart from reviews and a single literary critic, Steffen Hejlskov Larsen, writing a few pages about *Show-Bix* between 1969 and 1971,² the story of *Show-Bix* remains untold. This “blank” in the reception of Højholt's work is something of a mystery – which does not become less strange (and thereby interesting) when you realize, that it does not end with *Show-Bix*. On the contrary, as I am contesting in my PhD-dissertation,³ *Show-Bix* is just the beginning of something important. It is a

¹ *Show-Bix* literally means a “shop of shows”, or something that “bixes”, i.e. “mixes”, different things together to new entities, or rather new pieces.

² Steffen Hejlskov Larsen, *Systemdigtningen – Modernismens tredje fase*, Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1971, p.144.

³ Morten Søndergaard: *RUMPUNKTERINGER – Show-Bix og Per Højholts mediebevidste praksis*, (Spacepuncture – Show-Bix and the Media Conscious Practice of Per Højholt), diss., Roskilde University, April 12, 2007.

structural break with not only the past, but also with the literary production environment – especially, but not exclusively, the Danish literary modernism

This change is not only manifested in the experiments that are conducted in the context of *Show-Bix*, but also by important later works such as the performative media poetic *Show*, the TV-film *Stockcar*, the media book *Volume*, the video project *The loss of Place that I am walking in* and, not least, the performative parodies of *Gitte's Monologues* during the 1980s.

In the following, I will give an introduction to the experimental practice that was conducted – in real time – by *Show-Bix* and Per Højholt after 1967, by describing the process of re-staging one of these important works, *Surrounding*. I will in the course of the article, insert this re-staging into discussions concerning some of the key problematics that ‘content research’ is facing when dealing with the Media conscious practice of Per Højholt; especially the problem of making fugitive and mediated “hybrid” artforms visible to a field of research by existing theories and methods of reception and interpretation.

The uncovering of a new field

There is an increasing need for understanding the forms of art production and practices in the contemporary field of unstable, fragile, contingent, variable and ephemeral art-forms. The question is how to get access to and to even recognize this kind of art practice 20, 30, or even a 100 years from now!?

This question is closely linked to the strategies that museums and artists today are addressing regarding the staging & preservation of ‘unstable’ art. As an art-curator with responsibility for an art-collection, I found an interest in looking at what Højholt was doing from 1967 and onwards from the angle and problematic of unstable and contingent art practices. The following draws directly upon the experience of staging the media conscious practice of Per Højholt at the Museum of Contemporary art in Roskilde – a process that involved many levels of staging hybrid artforms. I will primarily sketch out two main levels of strategy: One related to the museum, and another directly related to media art practice. The two levels are related, sometimes intimately, in that they both have a focus on the production of art, on the choices and judgements made in the process of creating the work of art. But of course there are also huge differences between the two levels. Museum strategy is primarily concerned with staging the artwork for exhibition, registration, and preservation purposes.

Artist strategy draws upon other resources and interests, and sometimes even undermines the museum’s strategies. As a third voice in the choir, ‘content-research’ performed by the universities are seldom in contact with the levels of

either production or preservation. But we all share an interest in understanding the practice – and it help matters to bring the different fields of expertise together, and use them in the uncovering of a completely new field: The transdisciplinary field of media conscious practice.

Media conscious practice – on the brink of categories

The modalities of media conscious practice from the 1960s or 70s are heavily dependent on possibilities of assessing the condition of the art-production when it took place, and how to re-stage this hybrid art-production today. Hybridity, in short, means that the “original” object is being divorced from the original context or medium, or even dissolved into other artforms. However, according to recent theories of the “preservation” of hybrid and contingent art practices, the associations and traces of these objects are not gone. Rather, these objects, Bushkirk claims, “retain traces of their previous histories even as they are reinscribed and dissolved into new contexts as part of a complex overlay of conventions” (Bushkirk 2003: p. 4).⁴

The material of Per Højholt has undergone exactly this process of dissolving of the original projects into new contexts, which makes it difficult today to claim a clear view of Højholt’s early media conscious practice, including *Show-Bix*. The empirical status of the artistic material originating from the media conscious practice of *Show-Bix* from 1968–71 is highly complex and even the objects are contingent and fugitive. This was partly the point of the aesthetic experiments of media conscious practice, of course, but nevertheless something any interpretation and reception must take into consideration. Or, rather: this contingency and fugitiveness in the artistic *material* and *strategy* lies at the very centre of the field of media conscious practice, and contains an epistemology of its own that we need to understand in order to be able to interpret, or even understand, the field of media conscious practice.

We need new interpretive and maybe even humanistic strategies, in other words, to understand the artistic strategies and epistemology of media art practice. And to achieve this it may be productive – at least I have found this to be the case – to operate in a domain that actively make use of the competences from both museum-research and university-research. Interpretive research becomes media conscious as well, and this means that focus on empirical

⁴ Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, Chicago: MIT, 2003, p. 4.

material, being dependent upon its original context, when losing that contextuality receives a new, but by no means less important, status:

In the process, the method and materials that the artist selects for creating the work are transformed, so that rather than functioning just as the raw matter or vehicle for the artist's aesthetic expression, the materials themselves generate associations that, together with the forms into which they are shaped, establish the subject or content of the work of art.⁵

This describes perfectly the status of the material that still existed from the days of *Show-Bix* when I gradually found and reinstated it into the context of an exhibition that I was curating between 2001–03: *Mellem ørerne – PERformer Højholt. Mediekunst 1967–> | Between the Ears – PERformer Højholt. Mediart 1967 –>*.

Show-Bix

Originally a live-piece (performed in 1969–70), *Surrounding*, like other live-pieces such as *March on the Spot (March på Stedet)* and *The Tumbler (Tumlingen)* (both 1969–70), or *Something (Noget)* (1971) – even the process of making the film *A quarter of an hour (Et Kvarter)* (1969) – only 'exist' today as a series of very vague (and inconsistent) descriptions in newspaper articles from this time, of material used in the performance, slides, a score (sometimes not even that), and a vague description of how it was all combined from letters written by the group members at the time. It was never documented at the time, neither in sound nor moving image.

If art in the 1960s and 1970s could still be understood according to certain movements or categories, a second phase predominant in the 1980s and 1990s has been characterized by artists who have felt free to pick and choose among the entire range of possibilities established since the late 1950s, pulling apart and recombining elements associated with many different movements.⁶

The reception of *Surrounding* is not only a matter of re-staging a performance. It is about the status of reception as such and our knowledge of the artworks/pieces

⁵ *Op.cit.*, p. 25.

⁶ *Op.cit.*, p.11.

of *Show-Bix*. *Surrounding* is framing, as it were, the very instabilities of contingent values in a mediated culture:

Adherence to external conventions that limit and control the production of otherwise inherently reproducible works is essential in order for such works to be collected in the context of a system based on the importance of originality and rarity. The mechanisms by which such authorship is regulated can range from assumed understandings to detailed written instructions, certificates, and even contractual arrangements.

Therefore, to enable reception to take place, it is necessary to create “a framework for interpreting artistic practices based on heterogeneity and a lack of stylistic consistency”.⁷

In the following, I will give an idea of how the reception of *Show-Bix* and the media conscious practice of Per Højholt are made possible only by creating a framework for understanding from a variety of material and living “survivors” at hand.

Re-staging a hybrid field

The hybrid and experimental art practice from the late 60s / early 70s manifest itself on many levels. It becomes important for the artist to be conscious of the mass media, as Per Højholt, who is echoing William Burroughs, who is echoing McLuhan, who in turn is echoing Walter Benjamin, puts it. By stating this, he suggests that to express oneself in one media only is not adequate for an artist today. You have to utilize every media available. At the same time, he suggests a critical consciousness of the uses of media in society as a part of his practice, which then should encompass the use of every means of communication available in an active dialogue with the public sphere. Here, among other things, the art engaged with the mass media and the performative / happening aesthetics enters the stage.

This is perhaps most visible in the many names that this practice receives in the research on art museums, where the condition of art from this period in time is described as: ephemeral, fragile, unstable, contingent, fugitive, time-based and/or dependent on variable media. I want to envision this museum in a larger perspective and define a common ground from which this art practice is both produced and perceived. This common ground, I would claim, is media

⁷ *Op.cit.*, p. 10.

consciousness – and I will take a little time here to develop this concept, and its history.

The media consciousness manifests itself on all levels, from the practice and habits of the production of the artist, to the ways a museum deals with the history of such a culture or art. And also, in the way ordinary life is organised. The ‘art-productions’ of media consciousness are not artefacts or art-works in any formalistic or modernist sense – but how, then, may this conceptual practice be described? And is it possible to identify something which is qualitatively new, something that is not part of or could be explained from an existing genre or the epistemology of a specific art form. Højholt himself describes the situation of media consciousness as something which resembles a process of conceptual integrations based upon the material and opportunities *at hand* within the given network of social and cultural contexts, including the relations of art to society, mass media and technology.

The material is [...] the totality of perceptions, as well as possible perceptions, which is available to the poet. It is his private life. It is his life with society and in society. It is the life of society around him. The Material is EVERYTHING that he is capable of using. This appeal should be as pure and coincidental as an echo sounder.⁸

Per Højholt is scanning everything that surrounds him, and wishes to make this influx of material as open and non-normative as possible – all inclusive. It is in this situation that Højholt makes the claim that “media consciousness is essential to the artist”.⁹

The word “artist” has a double-sense in the sentence, since Højholt uses the Danish term “artist” (performing artist) instead of “kunstner” (creative/producing artist) – the latter being the typical situation for a poet or a visual artist. By infusing the performing artist into the context, Højholt is doing something very important. He is not only pointing out the necessity of any artistic practice to come to terms with the issue of performativity and temporality, as well as contingency, that is the result of the hybrid condition of art. He also pointedly makes it his business to combine the performative and creative/producing artistic role into one strategic, and transdisciplinary, practice.

⁸ Per Højholt, *Cézannes metode* (The Method of Cézanne), Copenhagen: Schønberg, 1967, p.78. This passage, and the following, are translated by me.

⁹ Per Højholt, *Intethedens grimasser* (The Grimaces of Nothingness), Copenhagen: Schønberg, 1972, p. 12

The echo sounder of Per Højholt picks up the different signals, practices and theories, of the period, and mixes them up, infusing them with media consciousness. The hybrid artforms is the product of the artistic practice that this media sensibility creates – one which, according to Per Højholt, preconditions the dissolution of genres. Why? According to Højholt this leads the artist closer to a condition that may express something that is important and has a chance of finding a real public; it is a way of making us witness a process and what is behind the scene of (common) sense-making. The experiments conducted in the context of *Show-Bix* reverberate through all of Per Højholt's productions from around 1968 and onwards. In fact, *Show-Bix* is the first example of a media conscious practice that becomes the general momentum, a paradigm, in Per Højholt's artistic productions – or more accurately: artistic communications. He expresses this as a wish “to break free from the literary environment of production” and “to involve and coordinate several aesthetic discourses and artforms in a meticulously planned strategy”.¹⁰ The experiments with *Show-Bix* are the first examples of in what direction this paradigmatic break with a fixed artistic environment of production would bring Per Højholt as an artist. First of all, it brings him into the periphery of the avant-garde and the new artistic movements of the late 60s, with which he is only somewhat familiar at the time. However, he finds it necessary to work within this avant-garde, at least for a start, to be able, later, to move on. Secondly, the practices of Per Højholt take on the characteristics of investigations, rather than finished artworks. The experiment quickly develops towards a practice that, when viewed in the light of the uncompromising changes of forms of communication and cultural patterns that media and new technologies have brought to human society in the end of 20th century, investigates what art in this situation can do to communicate to an audience – because hermetic conditions holds no future!

Surrounding the audience – piece by piece

In this article, I have chosen to focus on one particular piece by *Show-Bix*: *Omringning*, or *Surrounding* (1969–70). This is a very important piece as well – as important as the soundwork *Turbo* (1968), I would claim. If not in fact more important, in the sense that this is the first piece that Højholt is doing that does not begin as a poem. *Surrounding* is not merely a reading or redoing of a poem

¹⁰ Per Højholt: ”Et kvarter – Den litterære idé” (15 Minutes – The literary Idea), Part of a Show-bix application to The Danish Film Council, 1968. Unpublished material, MFSK tracking code, B1-031b.

by other means. *Surrounding* is visually, sonically and textually conceived as a completely new piece. It is conceptually framed by the idea that *Show-Bix* should operate like a “pop-group”, being on “a tour” and performing in front of a live audience. Another key idea lies in the form of *Show-Bix*, which points towards the piecing and mixing together of a show from fragments of many different sources – including, but not exclusively, different artforms and genres (hence the meaning of *Show-Bix*, i.e. it is a mixer – a device, an open form, or even a shop, which mixes) and adapting them to the new media of the day and for a stage.

Like the other pieces in *Show-Bix*, any analysis and interpretation must be based upon documentation, props, sound recordings and other material used in the performance as well as letters from the participants, describing the processes *Show-Bix*.¹¹ From this last source we learn a lot – including the important point that the instability of the *Show-Bix* pieces was in fact already something of an issue in the time of *Show-Bix*:

what I have been working on mostly in [the] last year has been SHOW BIX – a performance that is poorly represented in a score. The score and tape I send you is a compromise, since the original 5 channels of sound is collected onto a stereo-tape. If a description of this piece has to make any sense, you have to imagine the performative situation as well as read out loud the spoken text according to the score.¹²

¹¹ Basic principles when dealing with the registration and conservation of unstable and contingent, hybrid and mediated artforms, are:

- 1) Documentation is a limited source with regards to site-specific, performative or otherwise ephemeral art works.
- 2) Conservation of such work is problematic in case of obsolete technology – staging today will be non-synchronous with initial production.
- 3) Interaction with context – problem of authorship when art is realized in non-art spaces.
- 4) The basis of “aesthetic” judgment: To understand how a work of media-art was realized includes far more than an insight into its aesthetics and use of artistic materials. It is much more a question of what the judgment is based upon – which often may imply a description / instruction or simply a “text” / outline / manuscript /score. The object of art is supplemented or even supplanted by information about the artist’s conception.

¹² Application to the Danish Arts Council by Gunner Møller Pedersen, translated by Morten Søndergaard, original written on typewriter, dated 26/2 1970. Part of the collection of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Roskilde. Inventory number: B1-014.

Fortunately, the score in question still exists, and this fact combined with the existence of the original sound tapes makes it possible to re-stage *Surrounding* in a way that formally, if not contextually, is very close to the original. In connection with the research for my dissertation *RUMPUNKTERINGER – Show-Bix og Per Højholts mediebevidste praksis 1967–>*.¹³ I had the opportunity in 2004 to exhibit the media conscious works by *Show-Bix* and Per Højholt, including a restaging of *Surrounding*. In close collaboration with Gunner Møller Pedersen and Per Højholt, who was at the time very ill, it was decided to make a version that was based on a combination of the original tapes and recordings of the “live”-voices (and thus replacing the 3 live-performers). The original tapes were cleansed and digitalised. For his voice, Per Højholt suggested that we used his recorded voice from the radio piece *Round About* (1971) which textually is almost identical with *Surrounding*¹⁴. Gunner Møller Pedersen recorded the two other voices for the installation.



Figur 1. Photo documentation from the restaging of *Surrounding*, taken at the exhibition *Between the Ears – PERforming Højholt. Mediart 1967–>*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Roskilde, Denmark, June–September 2004.

Of course, in the 2004-restaging, a very central element was missing: the performing artists, the live voices, and the interaction with the audience. The restaging thus became a kind of sound installation based on what we know about the original *Show-Bix* piece, but this in turn was not without precedence. Existing documentation shows that *Surrounding* also was performed in a version based mainly on recorded material and one live voice.

¹³ Søndergaard 2007.

¹⁴ *Round About / Omkring Rundt* (DR, 1971) is in fact a later version of *Surrounding*, that Per Højholt made in his own name for the Danish Radio.

Re-staging *Surrounding*

With *Surrounding* the collaboration between the three performers – Poul Ib Henriksen, Gunner Møller Pedersen, and Per Højholt – finally strikes off on a high ambitious note. From correspondence between the three *Show-Bix* participants we know that from the very beginning of the working process, it is clear to all of them that there should be some kind of movement circling around the audience; and from that notion there is an energetic brainstorming taking place between them. During this process, the piece is often referred to as “Kredsgang” – the “circulating walk” – but other metaphorical terms are being heavily researched which is apparent from a handwritten list of words:¹⁵

Rundkredse (sitting around), omkredse (circumference), omkredsning (circulating), cirkulation (circulation), cirkel (circle), Chr II (Christian II, danish king), Rundt på gulvet (confused), Rundtenom ((walking) around), Enebærbusk (bush), kredse (hovering), kredsnings (hoverings), omringet (surrounded), rundt i ring (circulating), Ring i ring (ring inside ring), rundtur (a trip around town), Kørom (drive around), Koldskål (Danish summer dish), 4. politikreds (4th police district), Århus amt (The greater city of Århus), omgang m. opera (taking a turn with Opera), ord (words), musik (music) etc., omgangsform (code of conduct), omgangskredse (social circles), omringninger (Surroundings), ombæringer (carrying around), rotation (rotation), omfarer (redirection), forbifart (passing by), sightseeing, den rette omgang (the right way), én ordentlig omgang (a thorough beating), det går på omgang (passing around), i denne omgang (at this time), omgående (immediate), omkvæd (refrain), omlyd(e) (word sounds), omtale (referring to/ mentioning).¹⁶

The working process is sometimes at a distance, sometimes around a table – where ideas are plotted and drawn on a piece of paper as the can be seen from the example shown here.

¹⁵ The list is appearing on a piece of the typically striped, yellow notepaper that Højholt used. It is now at the Royal Library in Copenhagen. Many words from the list are hard to translate without losing the subtlety and playful ironic and parodic tone of the word-game – but I have tried to indicate as much as possible in the list)

¹⁶ This handwritten note can be found in original at the Royal Library, Copenhagen. It is placed in “Håndskriftsamlingen”, and is part of ”Højholt’s letters and manuscripts”, capsule 22.

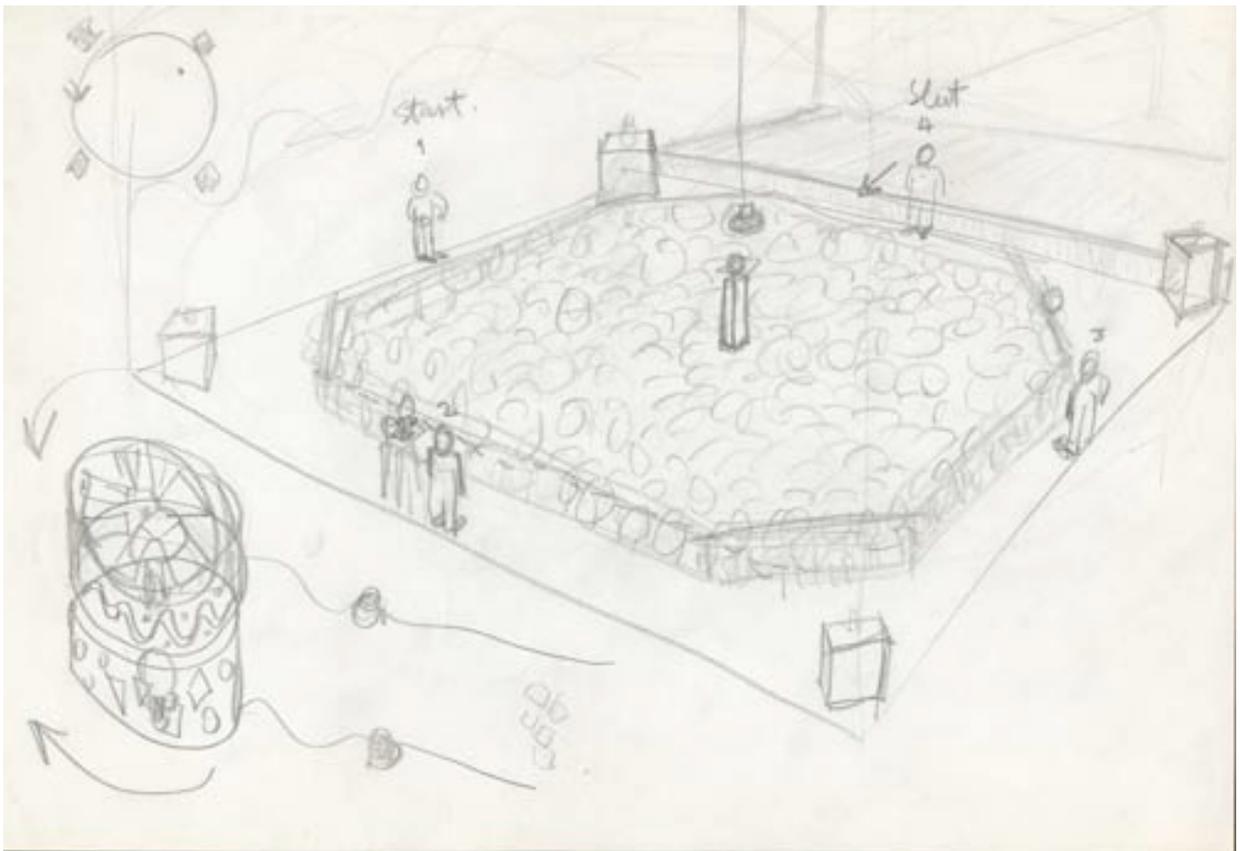


Figure 2. Hand drawn sketch of the physical set-up of *Surrounding* by Poul Ib Henriksen and *Show-Bix*, in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Roskilde (MFSK). Archive tracking code: B1-026.

It is fairly clear from the documentation how the level of associations at the one hand is working rather freely across the table, but at the other always has the final goal in sight: The cognitive function of the form of *Surrounding*. The performers and creators of *Show-Bix* often describes themselves as functionaries, which primarily aims to describe the role of the sender (we are taking a step back and put ourselves in the service of the audience, who, in turn, decides what it all means); but the idea of the artist as a functionary carries deeper levels as well which is the revolutionary notion that the artist is only the caretaker of a situation or a frame (of mind or a spatial framing).¹⁷ The functionary is placing something at the audience's disposal. The functionary is also the servant of cultural enlightenment and democracy, you might say. He communicates a hidden structure – a structure beneath the known and visible structures. Apart from being a brainstorming, the game of words are good examples of how

¹⁷ Cf. Vilém Flusser: *Medienkultur*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999 [1993].

thoroughly the role is developed from being merely a clever idea to being a perfect artistic form of action: A surrounding. Or: A practice.

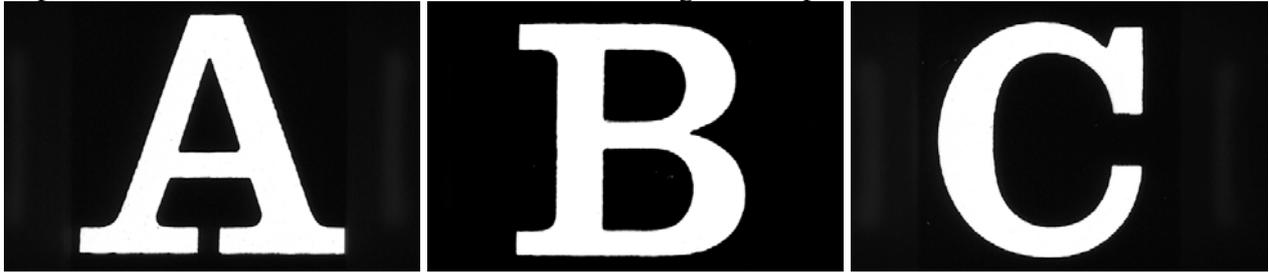


Figure 3 Slides of the first three letters used in *Surrounding*.

This collective working process had an influence on everything that is produced individually by the three artists. This includes the quinta phonic sound as well as Højholt's text that is being produced for *Surrounding*, and which often needs a lot of reworking and simplifying when entering the space of mediated identity – and in the process the text receives both a sonic and visual presence in space, as well as a *timing* which is essential when communicating the frames of mind to the audience:

As you can see, I have tried to do [the text] much simpler, as we discussed. From this it follows that it becomes more monotonous, but that is perhaps as it should be, since the circulation of music, light and text already is rather complicated. Perhaps it would be possible to let two layers of voices work on the same tape and let them be transmitted from the speakers with a small or dry “snap”, a dry dead sound in between? Same sound could move like a metronome, in intervals, between the speakers in the corners so that it would always appear in the opposite corner from where the sound came from. A snap, a clap or the like – I have dreamt it like this, you see, and it worked out formidably. It would introduce a kind of timing into the piece that on the one hand would mark out the diagonals of the space and on the other hand partly would give room for textual breaks and maybe even an ending with great effect. MAYBE. I have been thinking – now it is your turn.¹⁸

¹⁸ Letter from Per Højholt to Gunner Møller Pedersen, not dated. MFSK archive code: B1-027.

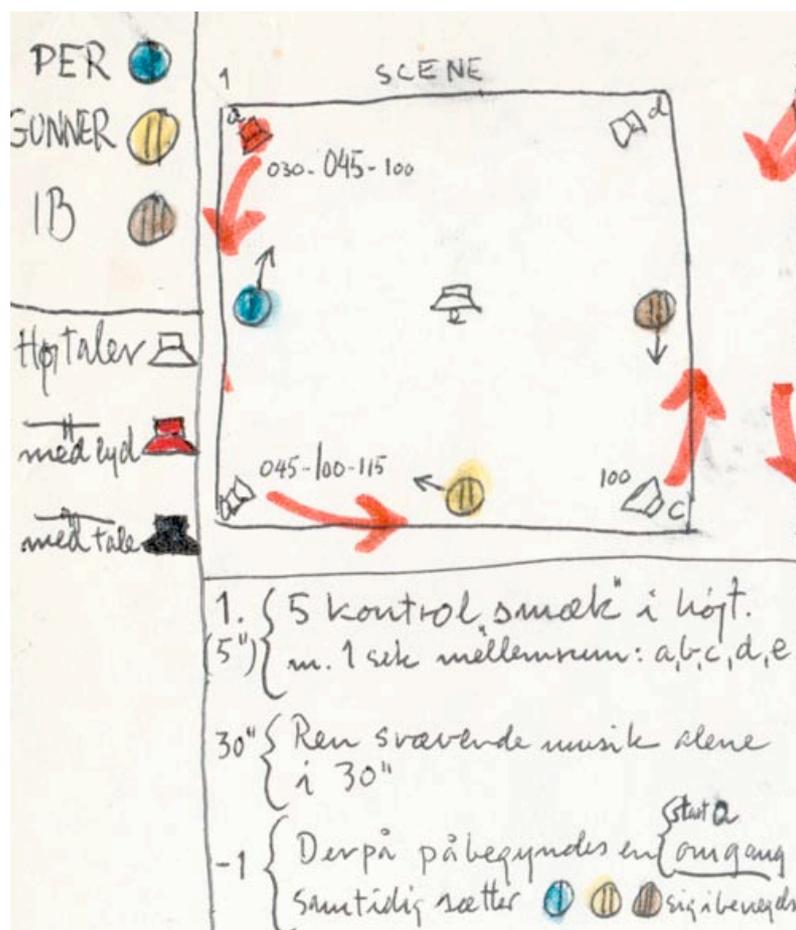


Figure 4. Sketch for stage movement, detail. MFSK archive code: B1-025.

Timing becomes important to everything that *Show-Bix* is doing. It is important as a marking out of the time spent and used in the pieces, which become intervals rather than entities of ideas or meanings.

The pieces are staging their own sense of time. In *Surrounding* the audience is surrounded for a while, in exactly the interval of time it takes for *Show-Bix* to show the alphabet twice at a certain speed. The basic elements of language and communication surround them just like the action and the sound is doing. Nothing is fixed – *Omringing / Surrounding* is also actually ‘en ringning’, i.e. the process or activity of “ringing”, a world of materials made of words, images and sounds including the ringing of assorted bells (i.e. cowbells and school bells) by the performers. They are shepherds and are being herded at the same time.

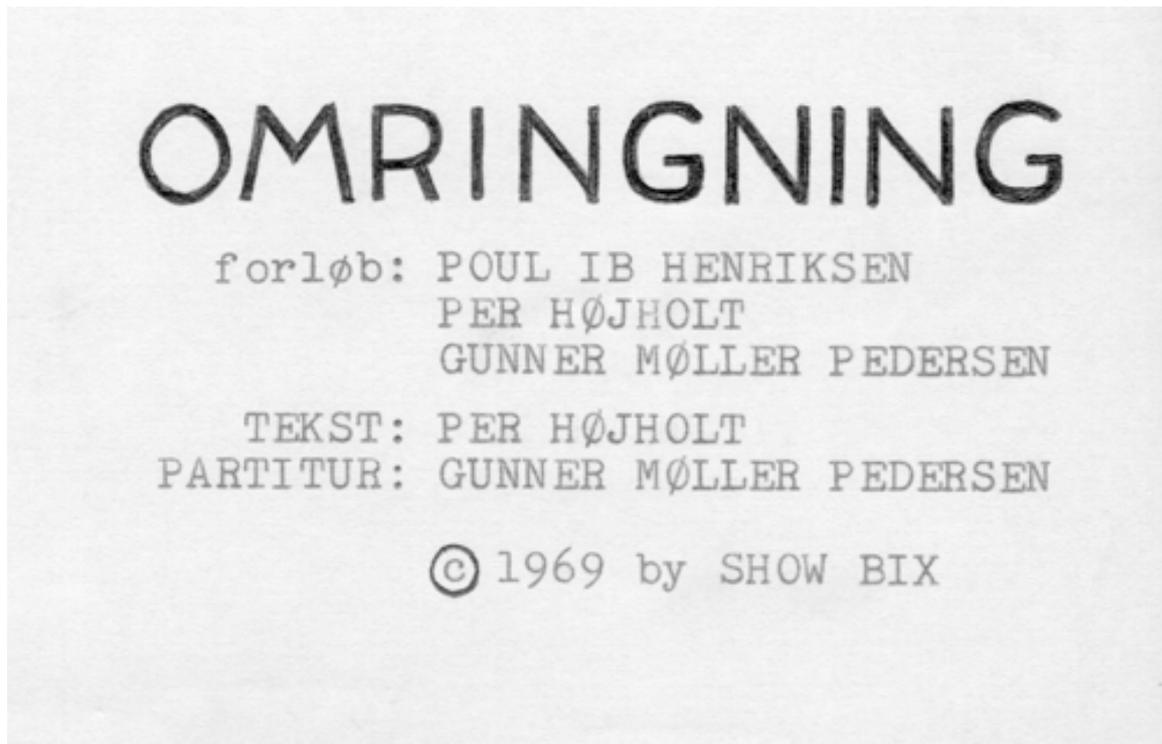


Figure 5. Front of the original score for *Surrounding*.

Very early in the process of making *Surrounding*, the need for a basic structure became apparent. A method from which the timing could be staged – and work like a composition on several levels. For that very reason, they decided to produce a score for the piece. Here the element of timing becomes visible by the time schedule in the left margin of the score. The right margin indicates the action and text to be read (se figur 4 og 5).¹⁹

Every preparation is being done with the greatest care for details. Nothing is left to coincidence; everything is discussed again and again. This results in the making of a second score that focuses on the sound-structure of *Surrounding* and the different layers of voices.²⁰

¹⁹ *Show-Bix*. Sketch for score, MFSK archive code: B1-024.

²⁰ Sketch for sound-score by Gunner Møller Pedersen, MFSK archive code: B1-028.

0 1 2 3 a b c d e

0 6 Start smæk i kanalerne med 1 sek. mellemrum: a b c d e i nænterækkefølge, og på det 5. uk ét i alle kanaler samtidig.

5 "ORGANISM" på a b c d e

10 Lysbillederne af alfabetet begynder at køre rundt på væggene. Begge dele bliver ved til stykket er forbi.

15 publikum

20 udgangspositionerne

25

30 I, II, III begynder at gå, langsomt, (med uret)

35 sv. kr. sv. kr. sv. kr.

40 sv. kr. sv. kr. sv. kr.

45 sv. kr. sv. kr. sv. kr.

50 sv. kr. sv. kr. sv. kr.

55 sv. kr. sv. kr. sv. kr.

100 o.s.v.

105

110

115

120

125

130

135

140

145

150

155

200

RINGEINSTRUMENTER:

↑ Metalbrørsuro, Glasuro, Perlemorsuro

♫ Små klokker, Kamelklokker, Tumlingspillede

⊙ Bælde, små bælde, Metalkæde

I, II og III Baser ringeinstrumenterne rundt således at de springer en station over hver gang inden de skifter instrument (2/3 omgang). For hvert kraftigt instrument skal hver især tage 2 svage instrumenter jfr. eksemplet. Kun 1 instr. ad gangen!

SMELD, og umiddelbart derefter i I: I's stemme: først går de hen og kommer forbi og går videre til de kommer forbi igen og ikke kan komme længere så hen og ned og ned igen og hen igen et stykke til de er forbi og så

SMELD, og umiddelbart derefter i a: I's og III's stemmer: først går de hen og kommer forbi og går videre til de kommer forbi igen og ikke kan komme længere så hen og ned og ned igen og hen igen et stykke til de er forbi og så

SMELD, og umiddelbart derefter i a: I's, II's og III's stemmer: først går de hen og kommer forbi og går videre til de kommer forbi igen og ikke kan komme længere så hen og ned og ned igen og hen igen et stykke til de er forbi og så

SMELD, og umiddelbart derefter i c: I's og III's stemmer: først går de hen og kommer forbi og går videre til de kommer forbi igen og ikke kan komme længere så hen og ned og ned igen og hen igen et stykke til de er forbi og så

Figur 6. Page one from original score. MFSK archive tracking code: B1-022.

Surrounding in performance

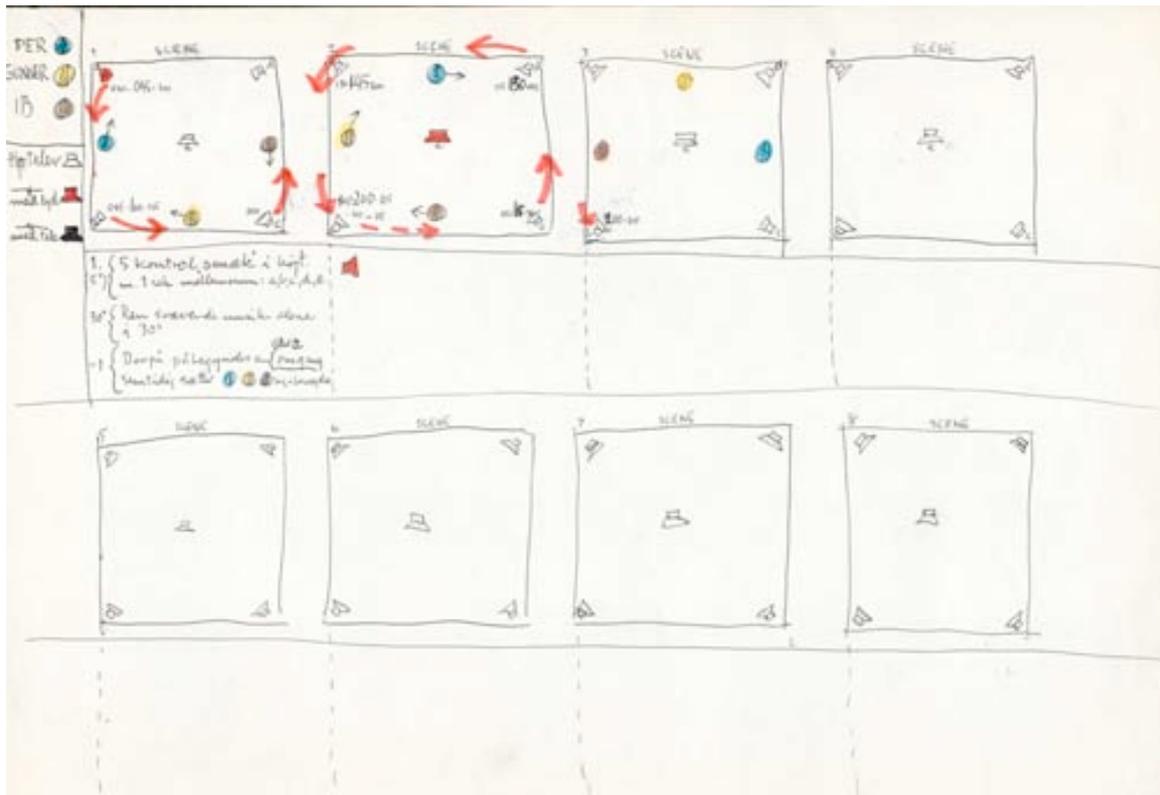


Figure 7. Outline for the scenic circulation, the movement of performers and the quinta phonic sound. MFSK archive tracking code: B1-025.

A slide projector is central to the physical outline of *Surrounding* in performance. During the performance, this projector slowly rotates horizontally, projecting the alphabet on the walls and doors behind the audience who are placed on chairs in the middle of the room. Thus, the performers, the action and the recorded sound (one speaker in each corner, one above the slide projector) are surrounding the audience. The original slides still exist – two complete alphabets, enough to fill the time it took to perform *Surrounding*.²¹

For the actual performance, the performers each had their copy of the score, which was always packed in a suitcase standing ready for the pop group to move out, at any time. One of the copies (Gunner Møller Pedersen's) still exists.²² The entire piece was performed using this score, every time. The use of headlamps was not only an aesthetic idea, but a practical solution for the performers to be able to read the score in a rather dark room.

One interesting thing that you notice in the score is that the text by Højholt has been cut up in pieces, as it were, to be fitted into the timed sections:

²¹ Morten Søndergaard, interview with Poul Ib Henriksen, January 2004.

²² Copy of final score, MFSK archive code: B1-029.

First they go then they pass by and move on until they pass by again and go again for a while...²³

The text becomes a (sound) image of itself – it becomes its own object, so to speak; it is about the time it takes for the words to pass through the sentences, about the time it takes for the letters to pass through the words, and it is about the stage the language – letters, words, sentences – enters before it becomes meaning. Concretely: The alphabet passes around the audience and the performers and the sounds from the speakers are doing the same thing. The audience really is surrounded by a language of contingency.

A language of contingency

The audience is sitting so that there is a free passage along the walls. In the corners there are four speakers; a fifth is placed above the heads of the audience. A slide projector is circulating in the middle of the room and the images jump from wall to wall. Three persons are moving along the walls in the dark, wearing head-lamps. They carry instruments with which they are ringing in the same direction as the slide projections of the letters from the alphabet are moving around the audience until the ringing is taken over by the tape-recorder, which uses the speakers to send the ringing moving in a circle around the audience in the opposite direction. The sound slides into an unending circular movement that can be varied as much as is wanted – sometimes it is collected into actual attitudes / meanings. All the time, the word “they”, not “we”, is used to make the audience able to identify with the text. The performers are merely functionaries.²⁴

The cited passage is from a book by Steffen Hejlskov Larsen, *Systemdigtningen – modernismens tredje fase (System poetry – the third Phase of Modernism, 1971)*. This is the only existing description of *Surrounding*, as well as of *Show-Bix*. The book, being written at the time of *Show-Bix*, could be seen as a source, a witnessing, of *Show-Bix* – but not without reservations. Hejlskov Larsen seems to believe that *Show-Bix* consists of only one piece, *Surrounding*. And he does not seem to know, either, that *Show-Bix* is in fact a group and not the work of Per Højholt only. But apart from these factual mistakes and even misinterpretations

²³ Først kommer de hen og kommer forbi og går videre til de kommer forbi igen og ikke kan komme længere så hen og ned og ned igen og hen igen et stykke til de er forbi og så. *Ibidem*.

²⁴ Steffen Hejlskov Larsen, *Systemdigtningen – Modernismens tredje fase*, Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1971, p.144. My translations.

(like when Surrounding is being seen as one of the best examples of system poetic works from the time, which it clearly is not), *Systemdigtningen* is a unique source for the single reason that it mentions *Show-Bix* in its own context. It tells us something about what interested the critics and members of the avant-garde of the time as well.

It does not hide the fact, however, that apart from a short description about the film *Et kvarter* in the film catalogue of the Danish Film Institute from 1982, everything is quiet around *Show-Bix* after *Systemdigtningen*.²⁵ No one – and this includes both humanistic and artistic research - finds, mentions or focuses upon this transdisciplinary experiment, which I claim becomes an important beginning of a decisive change in the artistic project of Per Højholt.²⁶ Nevertheless, *Show-Bix* is vital to not only his development of a media conscious practice but also to the paradigmatic change of his own artistic project which from then on should be viewed as strategies and practices of media consciousness.²⁷

Since the only existing reception of *Show-Bix* is to be found in *Systemdigtningen*, I would like to take a closer look at the book by Hejlskov Larsen. He analyses and interprets the textual experiments of the period into a new (poetic) paradigm: 'system poetry'. As the subtitle of the book suggests, system poetry should be construed as the third phase of modernism – a series of literary experiments, the first phase of which was conducted by the French poet Apollinaire, the American poet Gertrude Stein, the dada-movement and the surrealists among many others. The second phase took on names such as, Concretism, System Painting, Pop art, Happenings, and Electronic Music, as well as New Simplicity. System poetry brings the earlier experiences and experiments of modernism as well as the avant-garde, and from all artistic genres, together in new constellations.²⁸ According to Hejlskov Larsen, modernism is the "norm in the rest of the world, and every new experiment has been done in its name".²⁹

It is suggested by Hejlskov Larsen that, "System Poetry is closely related to Pop art, Minimal art, Op-art and other similar movements within painting and

²⁵ Right up until the aforementioned exhibition in 2004 and my own dissertation.

²⁶ Not even by Per Højholt himself, it seems. In 2003, when I asked Per Højholt why he had never mentioned *Show-Bix*, his short answer was: "No one ever asked!"

²⁷ Morten Søndergaard: "Per Højholts mediekunstneriske praksis" in: Jacob Kreutzfeldt, Karsten Meyhoff og Morten Søndergaard, red: *Mellem ørerne – PERformer Højholt. Mediekunst 1967 ->*, Informations Forlag, 2004.

²⁸ Larsen 1971), p.12.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

sculpture”³⁰, and he makes the observation that many of the System Poets work in sculpture, painting, film, happenings and performance etc. There is no doubt that all these artists and genres, including the third phase of Modernism, did have an influence on Højholt. But maybe not quite the way Hejlskov Larsen could imagine in 1971. Even today, 35 years later, it should be evident that *Show-Bix* is something completely different than poetry and indeed Modernism – third phase or not!

To several of the artists and performers that is mentioned in the book, the description is rather accurate – this is indeed the case with, for instance, Per Kirkeby (who is the exponent of Pop art in Denmark at this time) and Jørgen Leth, as well as the poets Peter Laugesen and Hans-Jørgen Nielsen whose systematic use of extra-literary methods in their poetic practice was belonging to a ‘third phase of modernism’. But in the case of Højholt matters are different, which in my opinion the example of *Show-Bix* clearly shows. It is possible, then, to suggest that Højholt – because of his transdisciplinary collaboration in *Show-Bix* – is puncturing the first, second and third phase of Modernism in the periphery of an avant-garde, that he does not fully share goals with. He attempts to achieve a clear break with the division of genres and artforms as well as to seek out a non-elitist audience. He finds mass media interesting as a form of contingency – as well as a means of communicating art to a broader audience. Højholt also clearly wants to break with the (literary) environments in Denmark which typically consists of the same 20–30 people reading and criticizing each other; that is, Højholt was trying to produce works of art that can be accessed by more than a few ‘experts’, critics or artists.

Media consciousness becomes a way to distance himself from the patterns of the Danish avant-garde that are defining new genres by letting old genres cross into each other, one of which is the happening. Højholt wanted to do something completely new, and he was at this point not sure if that would involve a new genre. According to Hejlskov Larsen, “the happening as a genre has been to experimental stage for the Systemic Poetry”. Furthermore, it is:

characteristic for the genre crossings in the period that an epic formation of the happening is sketched out in *a poem*. The form of the happening lies somewhere in between the traditional genres and becomes the starting point for a renewal of all of them – a parallel which makes it possible to regard them as texts whether it is

³⁰ *Op.cit.*, p.33.

something with the resemblance of a poem, a short-story, or a novel.³¹

In fact, Hejlskov Larsen points out that the happening as a genre is contingent,³² and that this is becoming something of a problem that the artists towards the end of the 60s try to solve by distancing themselves from this genre. He presents *Show-Bix* and *Surrounding* as the best examples of that change, which, on the one hand, is exercising systemic practice, while on the other present an alternative to the happening:

Just as central in the period [...] is Per Højholt's *Show-Bix*, not only because it sheds light on many layers of his literary achievements but also because its aesthetics on several levels is identical with that of System Poetry in general.³³

It is evident that Hejlskov Larsen does not know, or consider the fact, that *Show-Bix* is a group and the result of a collective working process (he claims that it is "Per Højholt's *Show-Bix*") which is an important point to miss. From that follows the conscious contestation of the individual artist-as-the creative-subject as well as the very conscious dissolving of genres which perhaps was not clear in 1970.

Show-Bix is not working to rid art of contingency when they insist on making what they call "anti-happenings". They are not an attempt to make art more accessible either – this would be a wrong approach to *Show-Bix*. *Show-Bix* makes it their important business to develop a working tool, the score that underlines the contingent and fugitive form – time, the timing and the interval. The score is not a preservation or even an attempt of conservation, it is not the work of art itself – it is the exactly opposite. It is the form of contingency.

Hejlskov Larsen misses the spot, what else could he do at the time, when he believes that the use alone of what he terms as 'contained' artforms such as film and sound recordings is an attempt to overcome the contingency, because that is clearly not the case with *Show-Bix*. The pieces are structured around the experience and consciousness of time and they are as contingent or fugitive – unstable – as many other hybrid artforms of its day around the world.

³¹ *Op.cit.*, pp. 154–55.

³² *Op.cit.*, p. 40.

³³ *Op.cit.*, p.155.

When *Show-Bix* declares that their pieces are “a kind of anti-happenings” their point is to use the contingency of performed and mediated situations to create a situation from where something completely new could actually happen. It is a destruction of genres and artforms, as we know them. The material and documentation that my research has uncovered clearly shows that *Surrounding* is the first – and perhaps even best – example of how *Show-Bix* is experimenting with a form that takes contingency seriously and uses the instability of mediated situations as a material.

They try to create a situation where the control of form and media becomes the frame of mind for the audience to become conscious of art and possibilities of change. This is the idea behind calling it a ‘show’ – it is a recognizable form, a stage that through different strategies opens up a field of possibilities.

A performative and mediated form is established in *Surrounding* where audiences do not need to break a secret code to be part of what is happening. In spite of its free form, the happening often intensifies the sense of a distance between those ‘inside’ and those ‘outside’ an artistic or academic circle. This is the real point with the experiment of *Show-Bix*: It addresses an uninitiated audience. *Show-Bix* is not a poetic practice but a media conscious practice that punctures the platforms of modernism and commercial media, which means that the cognitive spaces and patterns that have been constructed around these platforms are dissolved and emptied of meaning and values.

In a book from 1983, Vilém Flusser describes this new type of artistic practitioner as an ‘operator’ which assumes that ”the structure of culture – and therefore existence itself – is undergoing fundamental changes”:

This is a new kind of function in which human beings are neither the constant nor the variable but in which human beings and apparatus merge into a unity. It is therefore appropriate to call photographers functionaries.³⁴

Show-Bix is such an apparatus – it is a media conscious practice performed in all media and cultural materials at hand. And Højholt becomes one of the first functionaries of media consciousness in Denmark, surrounding the audience with words, images and sound.

³⁴ Vilém Flusser: *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Wiltshire: Reaktion Books, 2000 [1983], p. 27.

Timing the strategy – a commando raid into nothingness

The experiments conducted in *Show-Bix* should be seen as a part of an artistic practice that Per Højholt later, in 1972, termed “a commando raid into nothingness”. The media conscious practice is not only about the immediacy of communication that media creates. It is even more about the change in the relation between man and world, reality and art – and the extension of art into new spaces like the mediated, performative and social spaces. In the time after 1967, Per Højholt’s artistic production, also his more poetic work is part of a media conscious strategy – founded in a search for new domains of art after the dissolution of genres:

The road towards hybrid art forms do not move through unselfish and optimistic collaborations, but finds that which art has always put up as a condition for a work of art: The striving of a temperament. The work of art is a result of some kind of dominance [...] But even with this as a precondition, no hybrid artwork could become valid communication as long as it relates to the norms that the criteria of a genre create [...] The creation of hybrid art forms preconditions the dissolution of genres.³⁵

According to Højholt, a consciousness of media is essential,³⁶ and one of the things that the hybrid art practice produces is the possibility for a new artistic language to break with old aesthetic “norms”:

Being an artist is characterised by [...] the ability to create the conditions for a use of language, utilizing these conditions and destroy them with and by his/her work of art. Art is practice, suddenly something can be accomplished, and when everything is accomplished, then art is abolished [...] That will be the moment in time when it is no longer possible to have a practice; which means that the norms will not be accessible anymore. This will be the hour of truth and the moment where similarities will kill us all.³⁷

Højholt sees a danger with any kind of aesthetics, because it cannot be used in a ‘pure’ form. According to Højholt, aesthetics as a method involves its user and is

³⁵ Per Højholt: *Cézannes metode / The method of Cézanne*, 1967, p. 24.

³⁶ Per Højholt: *Intethedens grimasser / The Grimaces of Nothingness*, 1972, p. 34

³⁷ *Op.cit.*, p. 91.

coloured by him/her and by the society from which it has emerged as well as by the experience of the society that the user of the aesthetics has, consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, the user has to explore the validity of the method in the same process as it is used, criticising it and try to break it down, even though it may seem as the most adequate solution at the time.³⁸

One important criteria of any media conscious practice, then, is that it targets an audience which is part of the general public and the social spaces of a democratic culture:

[The purpose is] to draw the public into a production of meaning from premises that it has not chosen, whereby giving the public a possibility to... experience the existence as a poised, problematic, responsible, and continuous production of meaning.³⁹

Art practice is always part of an aesthetic strategy, which aims at neutralizing the prejudices of an audience. In fact, aesthetics is strategy – but not one that is decided from the prejudices and wishes of the receiver.⁴⁰

Therefore, it is necessary to operate with a ‘strategy of aesthetic strategies’, which means that media conscious practice is actively exploring the relation between art and reality instead of representing it:

When a strategy of strategies can be maintained [...] it is because the relation between language and reality has changed [...]: Whereas language was utilized to describe reality it is now used in an exploration of reality.⁴¹

What is being produced by the media conscious practice is a strategy that explores the real time relations between art, media and performance. Time and timing is the matrix of Per Højholt’s exploration of reality, as well as of his own practice as an artist. It is an emptying of the conventional ideas of aesthetics, of any referential function of art to reality. This, Per Højholt calls a “commando raid into nothingness”:

³⁸ *Op.cit.*, p. 36.

³⁹ *Op.cit.*, p. 37.

⁴⁰ *Op.cit.*, p. 48.

⁴¹ *Op.cit.*, p. 49.

Instead of making the text in to a mask of nothingness, it could be made into a grimace; which means that you follow the mask with words, so to speak. Instead of making texts that are emptying themselves into nothingness [...] I want to follow up on the process of emptying with words. It is a kind of commando raid into nothingness; or out in to the society, as some would choose to call it.⁴²

Existing in the periphery, on the very edge of, the avant-garde of his day, Per Højholt's media conscious practice is a commando raid into nothingness and society. It is a transdisciplinary platform being founded, with new norms and formalisms coming into being. But it is also a new way of grasping the "role" of art in society, as something creating and investigating real human relations rather than representing them. And for that reason alone, understanding the post-1967 project of Per Højholt is perhaps even more important today than it was in his own time.

⁴² *Op.cit.*, p. 52.

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