

OMNI ANIMA

-holophonic transformation of indigenous Sami joik song into shared and embodied flesh

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Abstract

The collaborative OMNI ANIMA art project investigates how the traditional and indigenous expression of the Sami joik can be compiled, transformed, processed and shared through an interactive electronic sound installation. Based on indigenous art forms, the project impacts several areas both within culture and arts. One being joik as a tool to negotiate identity in a post-colonial perspective and a tool that has been essential in forming the idea of a sami nation, Sapmi, in Northern Scandinavia.

Keywords

Indigenous song, joik, embodied sound, somaesthetics, somatic sound, transformation of cultural heritage.

Introduction

The Sami joik (or yoik) is a distinctive way the Sami people of Northern Scandinavia use to sing. Originally the joik is understood as being endowed with magical powers and often associated with black magic and sorcery. [1] A specific element in joik, and a correspondence to Siberian shamanistic song traditions, is how the singer is not just singing a song, but becoming a vessel for the topic of the joik, often being elements of nature such as mountains, rivers, landscape and animals. In this way joik is representative of the attempt to build a two-way, primeval connection to nature. [2] [3] In a phenomenological perspective the joik aims at erasing the sensory borders of one's lifeworld and immersing both singer and audience into an embodied and deeply communicative experience. Performing joik implies that one becomes simultaneously the object and subject of the joik itself. [4]

These are intriguing elements of a tangible heritage (the sound of joik) dealing with the intangible and fantastic world of shamanistic spirituality (their idea world). The open question is if joik achieves that immersive, embodied space of communication and spiritual state that is highly romanticized around it. In the context of electronic and digital art an interesting question then emerges: how to rework, transform, open and extend the experiences of the joik singer to the audience? How to apply interactive technologies to transform the performance and experience of shamanistic song into a shared, lived and embodied



Figure 1. Haptic interaction with the electronically transformed and touch sensitive Sami drum.

experience? This presents not just a technological challenge, but also one of cultural heritage. Joik is originally an oral tradition [5] and transforming it through modern and technological interfaces could be perceived as a kind of cultural heresy, one effect being detaching and distracting the audience away from the intended and cultural experience of the Sami song.

The Project

The OMNI ANIMA project is an artistic collaboration around the joik performed by the Sami musician and throat singer Torgeir Vassvik. Inspired by the enchanted, mystical, even seductive sound of joik [2], the project investigates how the traditional and indigenous expression of the Sami joik can be compiled, transformed, processed and shared through interactive electronic media.

As described, joik'ing is about magic awaking. Based on traditional Sami joik, OMNI ANIMA seeks to create magical sound experiences in the cross-over between ancient shamanism and new technology. The ancient joik is transformed through interactive holophonic multichannel sound systems. Via a touch-sensitive spherical instrument, joik is composed into a three-dimensional world of sound in real time.

OMNI ANIMA seeks to put the audience in a state of trance like the noaiden, the Sami shaman, uses the joik to achieve. The traditional function of the trance is to send one's spirit on trips to other places and worlds. In a similarly inspired manner, the project's ambition is to create stimulating sound experiences that come alive in and through the audience. Hence, OMNI ANIMA's Latin title: 'Everything' (omni) and 'Spirit' (anima), that is, 'everything is spirited'.

The artistic ambition is to engage and convey to an audience what joik is meant to be: voices from another world. To achieve this, the joik is transformed and disseminated through the use of an interactive and encompassing multi-channel audio system. OMNI ANIMA uses electronic media to enhance the bodily experiences of the music and make the most of the joik's voice power. The project is thus aimed at a new and sensorial identification with the joik's magic.

From a cultural perspective, the project seeks to enhance the dissemination of original forms of joik. How can new technologies contribute to the magic experience of traditional forms of expression? Here the project works towards joik being experienced as an intimate, rich and rewarding physical experience in itself and for all.

Joik as Inner Voice

The musical part of the project is about joik as a genuine and valuable artistic expression. What distinguishes the joik from other traditional singing is that joik is about getting spiritually one with what you are joik'ing at the moment. You are to become the joik. Torgeir Vassvik practices an older form of joik where one strives to become one's inner animal. When practicing joik, you are not joik'ing about something or anyone, but you are joik'ing them. In his joik, Torgeir becomes the animal, the attribute or the soul he joiks.

OMNI ANIMA intends to recreate and strengthen such a trance-like experience. By placing listeners directly into a physically encompassing, interactive, multi-channel audio room (holophonics), the voice of the joik is communicated to the audience. Through holophonics the listeners themselves are dressed in the spirit of the animal.

Holophonics and embodied sound

Holophonics is a general term for the perception of sound in very realistic ways [6], often inducing auditory illusions as if the listener is at the source of the music or being embodied inside it. [7] Several holophonic, surround sound systems and solutions have been built and presented in recent years. [8] Comparative and relevant sound systems to Omni Anima range from NOTAM's new lab project on holophonic sound [9], to the SPIRAL lab at University of Huddersfield [10], to the AlloSphere Research project [11], to Natasha Barret's work on immersive spatial sound installations [12]. In the context of electronic media art projects such as Solve et Coagula utilize interactive, embodied and somatic sound. [13]



Figure 2. The Sami drum as the interactive centerpiece of the installation.

Joik as Somatic Sound

Omni Anima takes a phenomenological approach to art by investigating how the world of our experience is constituted for us. Phenomenology is here understood according to Heidegger's notion of intentionality as a form of being-in-the-world [14], underlining how embodied action shape our perception. This phenomenological approach to the body's fundamental importance sets the living corps right at the core for both understanding and experiencing sensory immersive experiences.

Such a sensory approach to sound is also related to the evolving field of Somaesthetics. [15] This is representative of an interdisciplinary research approach devoted to the critical study and ameliorative cultivation of the experience and use of the living body (or Soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-stylization. This focus on the Soma as an epicentre of action is a fundamental, but often neglected somatic dimension of experience- and interaction design.

The Installation

Both practitioners and listeners are placed in an enclosed, multi-channel and holophonic sound room consisting of 12 speakers distributed around the audience, controlled by a custom built, Max MSP sound controller system. Through a touch-sensitive drum, the practitioner influence the direction and intensity of the joik. The joik heard is based on pre-recorded and -composed audio material. This pre-recorded joik can at the same time be divided into multiple and multi-dimensional voices rotating around the space and the audience. The installation attempts giving the sound a material like quality and physical presence that can be interactively tweaked by listeners to provide an intense sensation of physical sound. The purpose of this is to give everyone a part of the joik's inspiring ritual. The technology represents a translation of the joik into new forms of presentation and introduces new rituals for the affective and physical experience. Technically, the project is a continued development of the Norwegian sound lab Notam's previous work on ambisonics and holophony. [16] [9]

This interactive element enhances the direct, bodily and dynamic impact of the sound. This type of physical sound requires multiple speakers. The 12 speakers making up the experiential sound space of OMNI ANIMA envelopes users in a sound cloud with defined directions and volumes. The sound surrounds everyone present as a physical and spatial experience. Through interactive and bodily sound, the project creates a sensual and experiential space of joik within each participant.

Transformation of indigenous artefacts into electronic instruments

The Sami drum is central to performing joik. Omni Anima transforms the drum by fitting it with new, electronic and proximity sensitive sensors in gold. (Figure 1.) Electronically refitted the drum resumes and extends its role as an interactive, magical musical instrument. The capacitive resistance technology behind the project gives the drum a sensitive skin that detects not only how the surface of the drum is hit, but further how far or near users are to it even without touching. (Figure 2 & 3) For example, the volume of the installation is adjusted by measuring the hand's or fingers distance to the drum skin. The type of sensors used senses the user's proximity accurately from 0 to 30 cm distance, enabling the triggering and application of new types of rhythms and tonalities.

The project so contributes to new and holophonic ways to both compose and experience joik. Holophony in combination with interactive voice / audio source control makes it literally possible to dress the concert room with embodied sound experiences.

Outlook - Joik as a Cultural Weapon

Based on indigenous art forms, OMNI ANIMA impacts several areas both within culture and arts. One being joik as a tool to negotiate identity in a post-colonial perspective and –not to forget– a tool that has been essential in



Figure 3. Simultaneous multiple-user interaction with the interactive drum.

forming the idea of a sami nation, Sapmi, in Northern Scandinavia. [17] It is out of the scope of this paper to further a critical assessment of the highly interesting, but problematic issue of using cultural weapons such as joik in the forming of nations. The purpose of this presentation is limited to point to how traditional, indigenous artistic expressions such as joik can be transformed, processed and embodied into the flesh through interactive electronic media and audience participation.

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Author Biography

Stahl Stenslie: artist, curator and researcher specializing in experimental art, embodied experiences and disruptive technologies.

His artworks challenge our ordinary ways of perceiving the world. His practice asks the questions we tend to avoid or where the answers lie in the shadows of existence. Artistic keywords are somaesthetics, unstable media, transgression and the numinous. The technological focus in his works is on the art of the recently possible - such as panhaptic communication on Smartphones, somatic sound and holophonic soundspaces, and open source, disruptive design for emerging technologies.

He has been exhibiting and lecturing at major international events (ISEA, DEAF, Ars Electronica, SIGGRAPH). He has moderated various symposiums like Ars Electronica (Next Sex), ArcArt and Oslo Lux.

He co-founded *The Journal of Somaesthetics* <https://journals.aau.dk/index.php/JOS> and is the editor in chief of *EE – Experimental Emerging Art* magazine www.eejournal.no

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