

# I. TRANSCODING — FROM ‘HIGHBROW ART’ TO PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

K-Pop artist PSY and gender theorist Judith Butler, contemporary art music and pop culture – how can these possibly be considered together? The artistic research project *TransCoding – From ‘Highbrow Art’ to Participatory Culture* has attempted to find an answer. *TransCoding* engaged with the topic of participatory culture by using social media in the context of artistic practice. My team and I encouraged participation and shared discourse in the new arts by actively involving an online audience in the making of a multimedia artwork. We hoped thus to make ‘highbrow’ art, that is, contemporary classical music and multimedia art, more accessible to a broader public.

Our main target group was an internet-literate young audience, mostly drawn from popular culture, who might not necessarily be considered the typical audience for classical contemporary multimedia performances. The blog at <https://what-ifblog.net> served as the central social media and content base, and also as a contact point for our community. Community members were directly involved in the genesis of *TransCoding*’s artworks via their creative contributions. *TransCoding* facilitated interactions between the participating members and the professional artist(s) through calls for entries channelled via the project’s social media hub.

In *TransCoding*, artistic research went beyond the investigation of the artistic process, and expanded into new contexts. By offering participatory culture via web 2.0 as part of our arts project, my team and I invited contributors to speak out, and to share a discourse about and exert influence on two major arts projects. We employed principles of participatory culture in the communication and creative process, thus redefining the (commonly hierarchic) relationship between artist and community as one of permeability and mutual influence. We applied findings and theories from media sociology and cultural science to

an artistic process; we investigated their applicability and meaning in the arts, and their impact on the resulting artworks itself, on the community we had gathered, and on the role of the artist.

## The Context

From February 2014 to February 2017, my team and I built and maintained a network of various social media channels around a main hub, the WordPress site *what-ifblog.net*. Here we presented our topics – multimedia art and contemporary art music, community participation and the creation of our show – under the categories ‘Art we love,’ ‘You, Us and the Project,’ and ‘Making of,’ respectively. In a fourth category we chose ‘Identity’ as our main topic for the content of the artwork and the blog (Fig. 1.1).



Fig. 1.1: The artistic topic of *TransCoding* was identity. In one of our first calls for entry we asked the community members about their ‘spring identity’. Image © Barbara Lüneburg

*TransCoding* was for women and men, professional artists and home producers. The concept of identity offered a framework for the project that is universally

relevant and unites our otherwise diverse community members. All were invited to participate in the community through any (feasible) means of expression: music of all genres, poetry, prose, drawings, photos, videos, interviews, links or ideas. Our main target group was comprised of digital natives who were technically savvy, aged between twenty and thirty-five, and were interested in expressing themselves creatively while coming from popular culture. However, participants outside of the target group were equally welcome to join the community (Fig. 1.2).



Fig. 1.2: Our community on the main hub <http://what-ifblog.net>. Within the first two years of *TransCoding* a network of almost 1200 people developed across our social media channels. Image © Barbara Lüneburg

The blog was our main contact point with our community, and afforded them the opportunity to participate in our project. Via calls for entries we encouraged our visitors to contribute images, sounds and texts that I incorporated in the artworks. Through our social media channels we invited them to interact and exert influence on the creation of the evolving artwork, and additionally

presented situations and material for community members to create their own artwork (whether or not it was closely related to *TransCoding*). We raised interest in participation in art as a way to express one’s identity and achieve personal empowerment, and we fostered a sense of community through belonging to a peer group participating in an arts project.

We gave our community members authority to shape our work and offered them a platform to meet and make their interest clear. As we invited contributors to exercise influence over the joint artwork, we looked at change as viewed through the power relationship between artist and community.

### **The Inspiration**

Where did the idea for *TransCoding* come from? At least three major influences inspired the project. Many readers will remember *Gangnam Style*, the viral 2012 YouTube hit by the Korean pop artist PSY (<http://bit.ly/2ud4afx>). Only a few days after the release of *Gangnam Style* on YouTube, fans from all over the world had created covers and parodies, and launched remixes that replaced PSY’s Korean theme with their own life and identity. The young digital social media public, it seemed, was obsessed with *Gangnam Style*. Of course, in the background of this huge success, the South Korean label company behind his song, YG entertainment, had invested in it with a well-structured, well-prepared and fastidiously executed campaign. (Drum 2012) They were able to tap into an incredible potential for creativity and for communication among people from different cultures and countries on social media. Although it was clear that as a team working in new (classical) music we would never be able to campaign for our purposes in the same way as a pop label operating on an international scale, the phenomenon of *Gangnam Style* became one of my inspirations for the use of social media in *TransCoding*.

At the same time, I taught seminars on film music, audio branding and media theory at media universities in Germany and Austria. My students were tech-oriented young people whose creative background was popular culture. Their thinking and creative activity was quite different from mine with my artistic practice originating in classical and contemporary art music. In seminars we explored with interest our different worlds and had critical discussions on Luigi Nono and K-Pop, Henry Purcell and social media, or audiovisual installations and electronic avant-garde pop music. I loved the music they made from what I offered them and I realised that I could actually lure people into contemporary art music just by introducing them to it and sharing my knowledge, enthusiasm and passion for it. In their works an intriguing mix of popular music and contemporary art music emerged and my students started to adopt new artistic perspectives. I too began to think in

new ways. The reciprocal interaction between me and my students changed my approach not only to my own domain, but also to the field they came from, popular culture. We mutually influenced each other's artistic practice. Those students were my model when I thought about the target audience for *TransCoding – From 'Highbrow Art' to Participatory Culture*.

Last but not least, I was inspired by philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler. One day in spring 2013, I was doing research for a performance set-up for the artworks of *TransCoding*. When I was randomly sifting through YouTube videos, I found a short interview with Judith Butler in which she talked about the notion of gender performativity. She explained what it means if we say 'gender is performative':

"for something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman. ... We act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or something that is simply true about us, a fact about us, but actually it's a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time, so to say gender is performative is to say that nobody really is a gender from the start. ... It's my view that gender is culturally formed, but it is also a domain of agency or freedom." (Butler, Judith Butler: Your Behavior Creates Your Gender 2011)

If we refused to perform the gender script that is handed to us by society, we could instead perform a different, self-chosen script; ideally, we would decide on our gender (on a daily basis) and pick the life that suits us best.

This notion of free choice sparked the idea of creating a multimedia show with a series of short movements of three to four minutes – similar to the format of a pop show – traversing a whole palette of musical possibilities: from classical music to pop music, from pop music to the new music avant-garde, or perhaps from new music to metal. Each song would feature a different story and a different kind of identity. I had found my topic for *TransCoding* and concomitantly for the future multimedia show *Slices of Life* that became one of the participative artworks developed within the project.

## The Community

'Identity' seemed to me ideal for *TransCoding*, since it was necessary to find a subject that people coming from 130 different countries (according to the 2017 WordPress statistics) would care about enough to start communicating and interacting with us online; we needed something that would touch them emotionally, and that was connected to their individual life, something that triggered their wishes or visions. We didn't treat 'identity' as a scholarly

paradigm to be investigated but rather as a means to spark off the phantasy of our diverse community members and to unite individuals from different cultural backgrounds in art. Each community member, whether male or female, religious or atheistic, from East, West, North or South, young or old, could contribute from their life, culture and social context. Each song, each story, each image and each sound in the context of our project would stand for differently ‘performed’ identities.

“What if?

a participatory arts project about identity

a question • a creative endeavour • a research project • a community

We are an international team of artists, musicians and programmers building an online/offline community through which we are exploring the concept of identity.

We are looking for your input while developing two different artworks, both dealing with our topic:

- An audiovisual installation that features texts, recordings, music and images from the community and from us.
- A multimedia show for violin, electronics and video that merges community contributions with our approach to art.

In the section ‘You, Us and the Project’ you will gain insight into our thoughts and we hope for your comments and inspiration.

**Contribute: How can you participate?**

If you like to make music, if you take pictures wherever you go, if you love to write or design, if you are a camera freak or an all-night creative programmer, or if you are just interested in personal freedom of choice, then **What if?** is for you.

Send us ideas, links, photos, music, films, texts, interviews that pick up on our topic: commercials you love, ads you hate, quotes that inspire you and links to art works you have found or you have maybe made yourself. We would love to hear from you.

These are some of our current questions to get you inspired:

**What if** we could live our lives regardless of the expectations of society, family, friends or colleagues?

**What if** our body, our gender wasn’t our limit?

**What if** we took the freedom to be who we want to be, and how can we express this in our art?

**What if?** is limited. It will exist for three years. We started on 1st of February 2014 and will finish the project in 2017. During that time, we will continuously work on the blog. We will throw ideas at you and wait for your comments and replies.” (Lüneburg, What-ifblog.net | About 2014)

## The TransCoding Team

*TransCoding* was carried out by an international team from Germany, Austria and Canada supported by the Austrian Science Fund FWF (PEEK AR 259-G21) and located at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Graz (Austria). Our research was transdisciplinary and drew on the fields of artistic research, sociology and social media expertise. The project began in February 2014 and lasted three years in total. During the first year we worked in a team of four artists and a social media strategist with shared responsibilities in the creation of the artwork. After a year we continued in a smaller team for reasons particular to the project and based on the topic ‘authority for the community versus sole creative sovereignty for the artist’ (investigated in more detail in chapter 9 ‘A Potential for Change’).

From the second year on, our team consisted of two main operators. I headed up the project in the capacity of conceptual leader, social media content producer and strategic mastermind behind the communication with the community, as well as lead artist, performer and researcher. My co-worker, Clio Montrey, who was in charge of the everyday communication with the community, constantly fed various social medias channels we had installed around our main hub, the WordPress blog *what-ifblog.net*. We were given occasional support by a visual artist, software programmers and a dramaturge. We were later joined by Kai Ginkel, a researcher who reflected on the project from a sociologist’s point of view, whose perspective was primarily shaped by his ongoing work in sociological ethnography. His prior research was concerned with a sociological understanding of sound, using the field of noise music as a case study and reflecting his own artistic involvement in that particular field in the process. Consequently, his work in *TransCoding* is related to artistic research while being rooted in sociological thinking.

## The Research Questions

The name of the artistic research project *TransCoding – From ‘Highbrow Art’ to Participatory Culture* implies that we converted an art form commonly seen as intellectual or at least rarefied in taste into a representation of art that is derived from audience participation and thus accepted and embraced from the start. In order to get people to participate who under normal circumstances would be very unlikely to connect with the kind of contemporary ‘highbrow’ art we represented, we applied a popular communication tool, social media. The overriding research question was: how can we achieve the involvement of an audience not previously available in the creation of a classical contemporary artwork, and what would be the artistic and cultural social result?

Alongside this main question, a series of secondary questions emerged from the specific setting. This will be tackled in different parts of the book: questions dealing with the building of a community via web 2.0, with the assignment of authority in the creative process, and with aesthetics and crossover art based on the exchange between community and artist. We initially asked ourselves which method would allow us, using social media, to establish a community that would pick up on the topic of new media art and crossover culture, and would want to be actively involved in the creation of an artwork.

At the same time, we deliberated whether we would be able to establish a crossover between high art and popular art by offering creative and intellectual incentives to participate in our project, while on the other hand listening back to and channelling the community’s own creative voices. We asked about the interchange between the global community and the research team and what it entailed with regard to the project and to the artworks. Would we – through it – be able to create an artwork that made contemporary art more permeable and accessible for the audience? When we subsequently investigated whether the interaction with the community had led to a fruitful interactive exchange between the contributors and the artist, while adding authority to the community, we also asked how in consequence it changed the role and self-concept of the artist.

However, due to the widespread global and virtual setting of the project there was one initial question we did not have the means to answer: whether an initially unavailable audience would be willing to become an available audience in a real concert setting through participation in our artworks via social media.

## **Summary of the Individual Chapters**

Part I of the monograph (‘TransCoding – From ‘Highbrow Art’ to Participatory Culture’) consists of a general introduction to *TransCoding* in chapter 1; chapter 2 describes the research field and gives an overview of participatory art in the field of contemporary (classical) music and the project-specific methodology. Part I is rounded off in chapter 3 by an interview of the *TransCoding* team that offers an overview of the project from the perspective of the cultural scientist Torsten Flüh. In his questions, he touches on the (crossover) aesthetics of *TransCoding*, the challenges of a digital society, social media in the arts and the creative process behind the project.

Part II (‘From Lonely Genius to Community Participation – Whose Voice Matters?’) is concerned with theories and concepts related to participative art and the theoretical framework for our social media and content strategies. In chapter 4, I define participatory culture via web 2.0 in the context of our project. In chapter 5, I look into the social media content strategies that furthered and

unlocked the creativity of the community for mutual benefit. In chapter 6, I recount the production of the artwork and the problems that arose out of the participatory character. Chapter 7 discusses the motivation for participation that let people contribute to the artwork of *TransCoding*. In chapter 8, which is dedicated to the community of *TransCoding*, I document selected community contributions and reflect on them. Chapter 9 ('A Potential for Change') deals with the impact of the community on the role and the self-concept of the artist.

Part III ('Artistic Research – New Insights Through Arts Practice?') offers a comparison of discourses in the fields of ethnographic sociology and artistic research. We deploy here the philosophical paradigm of Foucauldian discourse analysis. I discuss with the sociologist Kai Ginkel, co-author of the chapter, the similarities and differences in the methodologies of artistic research and ethnography. We compare the overall production of knowledge, point out similarities and differences, and search for the values, taboos and power strategies behind methods and approaches (chapter 10). We present and analyse the case study *I am a Priest*, a movement from the artwork *Slices of Life*, from the perspective of each field. Here, we investigated how a method has bearing on the 'truth' that is being sought and how it is accordingly depicted (chapter 11). Finally, we evaluate whether both disciplines might possibly inform each other in terms of methodological innovation and enhancement (chapter 12).

I conclude in chapter 13 ('Conclusion') by discussing the viability for future arts practice of the model of *TransCoding*, i.e. engaging the audience via online participation in a contemporary artwork. In doing this, I take into account the collaborative aspects of the task, their social and psychological connotations and their artistic consequences. I critically assess the practicability of social media for the interaction between artist and community and address the topic of crossover art. I reflect on my personal artistic work in the project, how it influenced my self-concept of being an artist and why artistic research was conducive to achieving the project's research objectives and methodology.

Chapter 14 (accessible via the annotated website: [www.transcoding.info](http://www.transcoding.info)) offers an online documentation of the artworks of *TransCoding*, *Slices of Life* for violin, soundtrack and video and the audiovisual installation *Read me*. I created both these artworks in exchange with and including contributions from the *TransCoding* community. The website also includes interview snippets and additional artworks that came into existence within the framework of the project, all of which are discussed throughout the monograph.

## 2. THE RESEARCH FIELD

*Note: this chapter is adapted from an article submitted to the Finnish online journal on artistic research RUUKKU: Lüneburg, From ‚Highbrow Art‘ to Participatory Culture – A Potential for Change 2017.*

Our methodology was based on qualitative research. We conducted a concurrently artistic and ethnographic research study in which the fieldwork took place primarily but not exclusively in the virtual realm of web 2.0, on our social media platforms, with a focus on our central online hub, *what-ifblog.net*. As the lead artist, I myself especially acted within the field of participatory art. What follows is a short overview of the methodologies of artistic and ethnographic research applied in this project, and of participatory art within the domain of classical contemporary music.

### **Artistic Research – The Central Artworks and the Influence of the Community**

With *TransCoding* I embraced not only the final artworks but also the process of producing art as part of my investigation: the gathering of inspiration, the communication process and artistic exploration. As artistic practices are always embedded in context and not detached from society or time, I put an emphasis on the work with the community and on the situation jointly created on our social media platforms. The outcome of the interrelation between community and artist flowed into the body of the art and the reflection on it. I viewed the arts practice and research as performative, meaning that both the artwork and the creative process modified how I and possibly our participating community understood and reflected the world; thus the shared arts practice did something to us, it ‘performed’ us and we performed through it coming from a material to an immaterial level in our artistic and perhaps even personal identity.

What are the artworks I am referring to? The entirety of *TransCoding*’s social media channels around the main hub *what-ifblog.net* was a composite work produced jointly by our community and the project team. It formed one of the central artworks. Here the interaction between all stakeholders stood in the foreground. Participation was open to everybody, with limited and only very occasional curation by the *TransCoding* team. The different online channels served as the means of access to the project for our worldwide community, as communication platforms and as communal online exhibition spaces for mini artworks by all stakeholders. It served also as an artistic documentary of the interaction between the team and its community. We considered it a common contextual art artefact that revealed the connections between *TransCoding*’s art works and the conditions of their production.

A further central artwork was the multimedia show *Slices of Life* for violin, soundtrack and video. It was created by me as the lead artist, and it incorporates community contributions for which we called via calls for entry. (The reader will find a detailed description of the participation mode along with a presentation of selected community contributions in Part II ‘From Lonely Genius to Community Creation – Whose Voice Matters?’).

With the third main artwork, the interactive audiovisual installation *Read me*, I provided a technological setting and a conceptual frame that could be filled with the personalised content of individual community members. Here the development of the artistic content could be entirely authored by a single community member.

Additional satellite artworks were produced in workshops around *TransCoding* in which non-professional participants shaped their own work around the topic of identity. Participants had a say in the development of an overall performance or personal artwork, while I as *TransCoding*’s lead artist offered an optional initial conceptual framework and assisted with professional advice in the realisation of the artwork.

## The Researcher Selves

Our operating mode, based on communication through social media, has required us to engage on an almost daily level with members of our community to establish trust, acceptance and the feeling of authenticity. It was therefore of crucial importance that the social media manager Montrey and I were constantly present on the various social media platforms. So we concurrently immersed ourselves and actively participated in the field that we investigated. As for our position in the field, I follow the definition of sociologist Shula Reinharz (1997, p. 5, cited in Sandiford 2015) who identifies a number of researcher selves for field-workers. My co-worker Montrey and I appear in three roles that are not always separable from each other: the role of the “brought self,” the “situational self” and the “research based self.” Research based selves relate “specifically to the research role (e.g. being an observer)”, brought selves “are more personal and provide a sense of individuality” and situationally created selves “may or not be related to the research project (e.g. being a temporary member of the studied group)”. (Sandiford 2015)

The role of the ‘brought self’ was evident when I, in my capacity as head of project, functioned as conceptualiser of the overall project; when my colleague Montrey and I set topic of the overall artwork, ‘identity,’ fed it, and shaped the way in which art an identity were introduced to our community; when we both formulated the calls for entry that invited the community to contribute to our artwork. (Figs. 1.3 and 1.4).



Fig. 1.3: Brought self: Head of project Barbara Lüneburg in the capacity of conceptualiser of the project, communicator on the social media channels and lead artist. Image: Courtesy of Mihai Cucu



Fig. 1.4: Brought self: Social media strategist Clio Montrey in the capacity of blogger, communicator on the social media channels and networker. Image: Courtesy of Unison Shot

My personal 'brought self' was likewise relevant when I worked as composer, visual artist or performer within the project, fulfilling my role as lead artist and concurrently artistic researcher. I created the framework of the audiovisual installation *Read me* as well as the multimedia performance *Slices of Life* for violin, electronics and video. The material I used for both artworks was based, in part and to varying degrees, on contributions from our community. I curated the contributions that were included in the artwork while searching for an adequate framing, which allowed our members to identify with the project, and featured their contributions in an authentic and respectful manner. In both contexts, our personal selves and my individual self as artist were visible and provided a sense of authenticity, which we sustained through blog posts in the category 'Making of.' Under this heading our community could read what went on behind the scenes of *TransCoding*. Through these 'journal entries,' we shared our experiences, challenges and ideas while putting the collective artwork together.

The role of the 'situational self' appeared when Montrey and I took on the role of temporary members of the overall social media community, acting as bloggers participating in challenges on <https://dailypost.wordpress.com/>, as SoundCloud members who participated in 'February Album Writing Month' jointly with our community members (<http://fawm.org/>); or when we roamed Facebook or Twitter for inspiration. In short, we entered this mode when gathering, learning, sharing, acknowledging, and narrating along with our community without taking on a leading role with any kind of preconceived authority but rather 'to get the feel of what it is like to be a part of the community.' (Figs. 1.5 and 1.6).

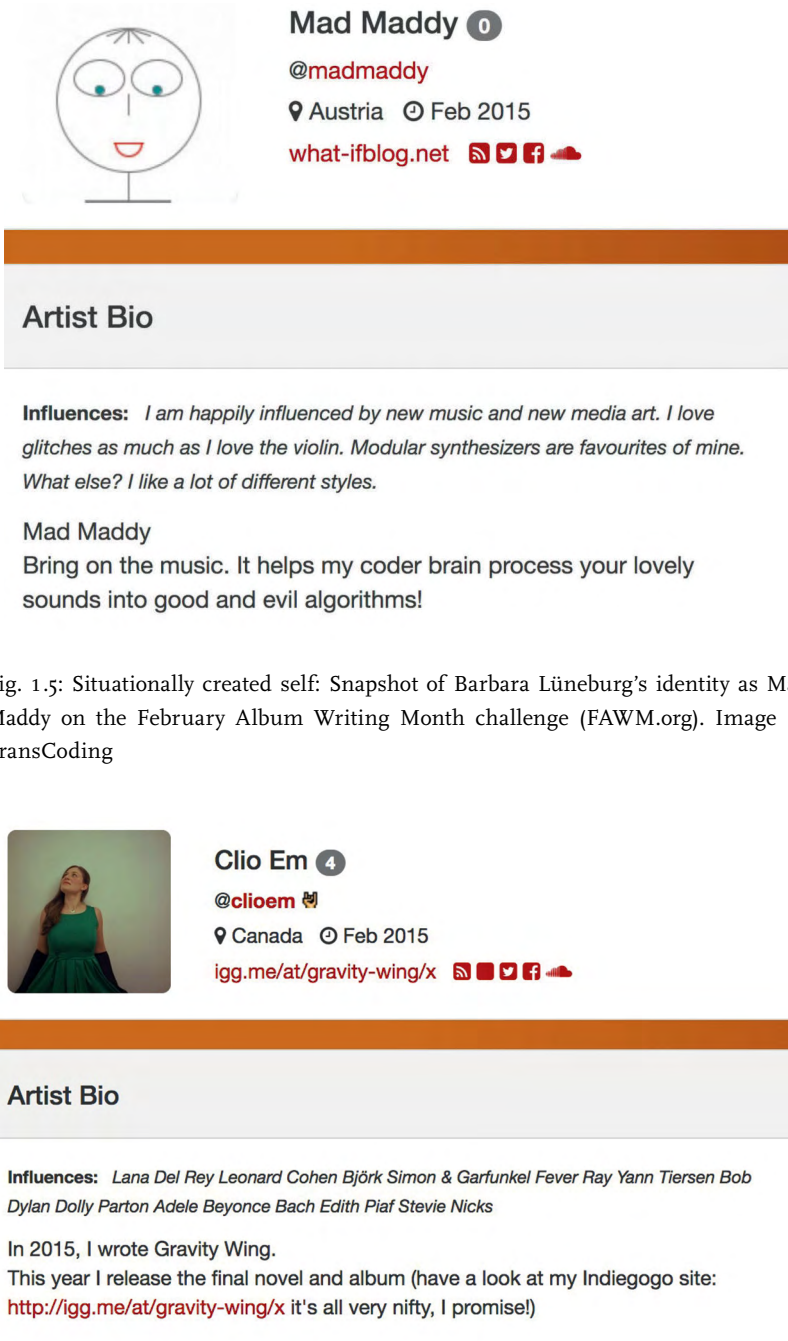


Fig. 1.5: Situationally created self: Snapshot of Barbara Lüneburg’s identity as Mad Maddy on the February Album Writing Month challenge (FAWM.org). Image © TransCoding

Fig. 1.6: Situationally created self: Snapshot of Clio Montrey’s identity as Clio Em on the February Album Writing Month challenge (FAWM.org). Image © TransCoding

In the role of the ‘research based self’, we conducted an overt study in the sense that it was known to our community that they were part of a research project. We observed, reflected, analysed and drew conclusions as to communication strategies, community motivation and the community’s influence on the artwork and on the artist(s). From an artistic standpoint, my personal research was focused on how I could incorporate the community’s contributions and influence in an authentic, respectful and yet artistically interesting way into the overall artwork. Furthermore, I traced how the interaction with the community changed myself and my art. I discussed the findings with the academic field and society in general in talks, workshops and papers. Sociologist and team member Kai Ginkel took on the role of the passive participant observer. He was present in the field but took part neither in the artistic activity nor in the communication process with the community. Instead, he compared the use of the methodology of artistic research in the project to methodologies of his field of practice, ethnographic sociology.

I was the only member of the team to take on the role of the ‘artist self’ (Fig. 1.7). As a performer I came from yet another context and peer group, namely that of the contemporary music scene. This scene differs slightly in each country according to cultural politics and historical background; it influenced me while composing and when offering the show to festival promoters.



Fig. 1.7: Artist self: Barbara Lüneburg performing *What if we had wings?*, the first composition developed in the framework of *TransCoding*, in Vienna at European Researchers’ Night 2014. Image © TransCoding

- 👁️ Link to the video documentation of *What if we had wings?*:  
<http://transcoding.info/english/book.html> – PART I CHAPTER 2

## **Participatory Art in the Field of Contemporary (Classical) Music**

Using the work of art historian Claire Bishop as a lens, I position *TransCoding* in the field of participatory art meaning “the involvement of many people (as opposed to the one-to-one relationship of interactivity)” in the sense of “a reconsideration of the ways in which art is produced, consumed and debated”. (Bishop 2012: 1 and 3) We didn’t conceptualise *TransCoding* as primarily politically motivated art (as socially engaged, educative or associated with the general political question of the rights and voice of the citizenship.) Instead we delivered the framework for an arts project and produced situations in which our community could be creative together with us or independently from us, express their voice and enter into discourse.

The artistic and aesthetic field in which our project is contextualised is classical contemporary, music-based multimedia art. In this project we are concerned with through-composed electro-acoustic (multimedia) music with a performer. Within this field only little participatory art can be found, usually in audio art or soundscape art, some of which are described here.

### *Stereopublic: crowdsourcing the quiet*

This soundscape project was devised, directed and composed by sound artist Jason Sweeney. He asked its participants to seek out quiet spaces in a city and share visual and audio impressions online. On request these recordings were turned into compositions:

“‘Stereopublic: crowdsourcing the quiet’ is a participatory art project that asks you to navigate your city for quiet spaces, share them with your social networks, take audio and visual snapshots, experience audio tours and request original compositions made using your recordings.” (Sweeney 2012)

The project had documentary features, the participants contributed information and material but did not participate as composers themselves.

### *Personal Soundscape Project*

The *Personal Soundscape Project* of the ORF festival *musikprotokoll* and ORF Kunstradio, both hosted by the Austrian public broadcast service (ORF), encouraged people to engage online with an audio art project.

“As part of an online art project initiated by musikprotokoll, for months, school-goers ... and audio recording enthusiasts were collecting sounds, listening in their everyday lives, exploring and recording their personal soundscapes: they have now processed, layered and arranged the sounds of their lives and translated them into art. The result is a kaleidoscope of ‘Personal Soundscapes’ and at the same time a young sound image of the province, which can be heard and modified online on the project website. ORF Kunstradio embarks on a journey through the mountains and valleys of these acoustic landscapes.”  
(ORF 2013-2015)

The project was concurrently participative and educative. Participants could either simply collect and contribute sounds or take it one step further, creating their own composition. Some of these works were then featured at the *musikprotokoll* festival.

#### *Walk that sound*

In *Walk that sound* by Serbian artist Luka Ivanovic, aka Lukatoyboy, the artist provides walkie-talkies to participants so that they can record conversations and environmental sounds coming from a nearby area. Lukatoyboy collects the material and from it creates a recording that is later broadcast via radio stations. The project has the character of a happening and at the same time of a documentary.

#### *Blind Tapes*

For his ongoing participatory project *Blind Tapes* Ivanovic invites four people to individually record ten minutes of playing their instrument, singing or talking on a 4-track cassette recorder. The recordings overlay each other. The people are unaware of the people who play before, or will play after them. Ivanovic later sells a mix-down of the recordings under the name *Blind Tape Quartets* mentioning the individual participants.

“A small, basic studio with a portable 4-track cassette recorder is provided for musicians (established, amateurs, first-time...) and/or singers (writers, spoken word artists...) to record a single channel, until a recorded ‘quartet’ is ready and blind-mixed. Each person is responsible for the of the overall, 4-track/channel recording - and will be provided with some directions in order to preserve the overall mix from being too busy.” (Ivanovic, *Blind Tape’s quartet biography* 2012)

#### *Disquiet Junto*

At *Disquiet Junto*, an “association for communal music/sound making” participants hosted by webzine publisher Marc Weidenbaum, USA, follow the given theme of the week and produce a song that is not part of an overall artwork. The only connection between the contributions is their being featured

on the *Disquiet Junto* SoundCloud and their individual engagement with the weekly topic.

“The Disquiet Junto is a group based on Soundcloud.com where musicians respond to weekly, fast-turnaround assignments to compose, record, and share new music. The idea is to use restraints as a springboard for creativity.” (Weidenbaum 1992-2017)

The community can meet in an online forum to discuss, reflect and exchange ideas (<http://disquiet.com/forums/categories/disquiet-junto>). The project encourages and gives incentives to compose, it offers a platform for exposure, discussion and reflection for the community, but it does not connect the participants through an overall artwork.

### *WIReless*

For his project *WIReless - Ein Social-Media-Klavier-Recital mit Martin Tchiba* [*WIReless – A Social-Media-Piano-Recital with Martin Tchiba*], pianist and composer Martin Tchiba connected participants online and through the event of a piano recital. For this concert he commissioned established composers to write short piano works for him and combined their works with miniatures by composers he assembled via social media. Additionally, he invited school classes and students from music schools to take part and contribute works one minute long. The artists were invited to interact with each other via Facebook or Twitter, and – if they wished – to relate to the work of their predecessors in the process. During the actual live concert, tweets by the audience were projected on a screen, to which the pianist reacted with improvisation. Additionally, spectators could trigger selected sound samples via their smartphones and thus influence the overall atmosphere. Although Martin Tchiba emphasises that he instigated a public opinion poll in which he invited the audience to vote for their favourite pieces, he also makes it clear that he had the final curatorial decision on every piece that was featured in his recital.

Tchiba states that in his project “the relation of the individual versus the collective and the democratic participation in decision-making in art was likewise reflected.” (Tchiba 2017) However, according to him half of the pieces performed were commissioned (other than collected via social media) by Martin Tchiba himself from professional composers he knew and trusted. The additional works by school classes were developed under his lead using his compositional framework, and his own improvisation formed another 11% of the overall programme. Furthermore, he had final curatorial authority over the rest of the programme, which was gathered via social media. Hence I would suggest that his model of participatory culture was what Nina Simon calls ‘contributory,’ where participants are “solicited to provide limited and specified objects, actions, or ideas to an institutionally controlled process.” (Simon 2010: 187)

In summary, I can state that within the field of participatory contemporary (art) music, I have not found a single work comparable to *TransCoding* in the way we encompassed participation, exchange between artist and community, the permeability of authority and the building of a community.

The following chapter provides an overview of the project on basis of an interview conducted by the cultural scientist Torsten Flüh with the *TransCoding* team. Flüh, a scholarly blogger himself, is interested in the challenges of *TransCoding*'s digital community, social media in the arts in general, the creative process behind the project, and in how the crossover aesthetics of the project transferred onto and influenced the final artwork.

### 3. THE TEAM INTERVIEWED BY TORSTEN FLÜH

Interviewer: Torsten Flüh (TF)

Interviewees: Kai Ginkel (KG), Barbara Lüneburg (BL)

Clio Montrey (CM)

#### Performance of *Slices of Life – The Shirt*

TF: Barbara, we met for the first time at the New Music Festival *Ultraschall* in January 2016 [on the occasion of Barbara Lüneburg’s solo recital on January 24, 2016]. Your multimedia performance has left a strong impression on me. Part of your recital was the composition *Slices of Life – The Shirt*, generated from *what-ifblog.net*. Please, tell us how it happened that this piece was included in your programme.

BL: When the promoter of *Ultraschall* approached me in 2015, he asked me to conceptualise a multimedia solo recital under the topic ‘politics,’ ‘ritual’ or ‘identity.’ At that time, I was already working with the *TransCoding* community on the multimedia show *Slices of Life* and I was searching for an opportunity to give the first section of it, *The Shirt*, a test run with my peer community.

*The Shirt* is the introductory sequence of *Slices of Life*. It tells the story of a person who is in search of his or her own identity; it could be a woman or it could be a man. She borrows other people’s clothes and wears them for some time because – I’m quoting the story – “She feels she doesn’t have any specific identity herself, and therefore she likes the idea of wearing other people’s clothes so that she could (in some way) step into their identity and discover what it might be like to be them.”

👁 Link to the video documentation of *The Shirt*:

<http://transcoding.info/english/book.html> – PART I CHAPTER 3

To me this was the perfect introduction to the topic of identity, somebody searching for his (or her) personality and defining him- or herself through other people’s clothes. I understand this ritual of putting on a different identity – that is defined simply by your choice of clothes – as a symbol of the freedom you have; that somehow you can choose and express who you want to be by regular, everyday actions. I loved the playfulness which stands behind this community story, and the underlying quest for identity. I see *The Shirt* as an entry point into what I wanted to depict in this show and also on the social media sites, and to me it perfectly fitted into the given topics of *Ultraschall*.

## The Aesthetics of *Slices of Life*

TF: In your research project, composition, blogging and gender studies overlap and are jointly expressed in the show *Slices of Life*. You work with a variety of media, for instance social media such as a WordPress blog, Facebook or Twitter, and artistic media such as text, image, film and sound. You interweave them in the investigation process and in the creative outcome. It constitutes a multiplicity of structures and inputs. Therefore, my next question would be this: how is this linked to your topic of identity and, furthermore, to the aesthetics you use?

BL: This is an intricate question. Let us perhaps start at the very beginning. ‘Identity’ as the general subject came up because I needed to find a topic that was relevant to all the people in my community. If I had spoken about art, architecture or poetry, it would have been relevant only for a certain spectrum of people, but not for all of them. Whereas at least at some point in each person’s life, the question of one’s identity is important for everybody. So the topic of identity was important to me for the purpose of building a community and building interest within this community.

Coming back to your question: Yes, I would say different sorts of media definitely influenced the aesthetic of the project. Take for instance social media: each type of social media we used asked for different treatment and practice. On Twitter you express yourself within the limit of 140 characters; it’s a micro-blog that “allow[s] users to exchange small elements of content such as short sentences, individual images, or video links” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2011: 106). Instagram is about visual sharing, you can upload photos and videos up to one minute long. It comes with filter and editing features to apply to both videos and photos. The social network Facebook supports people in creating a personal profile on which they can post photos, videos, and texts of micro to medium length, and connect and exchange with their friends. Often the posts are of a personal or at least semi-personal nature, serving the purpose of status updates. Then again on a blog such as *what-ifblog.net*, you can add more depth and length to your stories and content may range from professional to commercial or to personal. So yes, every platform we employed had its own characteristics and its own target group and each thus shaped in its own way the aesthetic of the contributions we received.

TF: Let’s focus in more detail on *Slices of Life* and its specific aesthetic. From what I saw at the festival *Ultraschall*, *The Shirt* is comprised of typed letters, animated text, sound and slightly blurred images. Who shaped these specific aesthetics? The community through their contributions? You as the artist who produced the final video? Or maybe a combination of both?

BL: The images I used in *The Shirt* came from community member Katarina Michelitsch, who contributed a film sequence of dancing hands. It was her way of communicating ‘identity’ in the context of emotion and bodily expression.



Fig. 1.8: Example of the imagery by Katarina Michelitsch that I used for the video in *Slices of Life – The Shirt*. Image © TransCoding



Fig. 1.9. Image of a man in an abandoned house used in *Slices of Life*. Used by kind permission of Sabina Ulubeanu.

However, each single ‘slice of life’ – here I am referring to the individual parts that in the end were combined to form the whole piece – each slice consists of a different kind of imagery. For example, I use spontaneous snapshots that were submitted or I visualise texts that were given to me by the community. In one ‘slice’ on human rights, I incorporate beautiful motifs of Romanian people by

photographer Sabina Ulubeanu. She is also a community member and gifted the photo series to the project. (Fig. 1.9)

Or take the sound world: I employ sounds which our members have produced under all sorts of conditions – sometimes only with their smartphone, sometimes under studio conditions. Many of the images or sound samples have in common that they show a not overly elaborate, but rather spontaneous aesthetic, like something that has been thrown onto the internet quickly and spontaneously. As a consequence, the often not perfectly produced community contributions influence the overall aesthetics of the artwork. I work with that and try to incorporate the material in an artistic approach that embraces its possible ‘imperfectness’ in a way that makes sense to all of us and to my concert audience.

This was a challenge in the creative process, but an interesting and rewarding one. To give you an example: let’s assume I have a clear visual idea of how I would like to continue in this show and I need portraits of people as video material for the next ‘slice of life.’ In my mind I have a certain set-up of the person in the image, for instance a close-up with the face in the centre of the photo. Subsequently, I put out a call for entries and ask the community to send me portraits for the artwork. What then happens is that I usually get a kind of portrait that is completely different from what I was imagining. In an extreme case, I might barely be able to recognise the person portrayed in the image, because the photo is taken from very far away, or the background is completely cluttered. Then I would have to work with this material that you could call ‘imperfect’ – and I’m putting ‘imperfect’ in quotation marks because the images obviously have meaning and are ‘perfect’ to the individual community members, or they wouldn’t have bothered to send them.

CM: I agree. The exact process that our community members follow is not necessarily planned or formal. I think the informality has been a very interesting aspect. It challenges the authority of Barbara’s artistic creation.

BL: To add another thought: In a participatory project like this one, which happens on social media, it is not easy to get people to participate. You have to find something that really interests them and that’s doable in a relatively short amount of time, otherwise they won’t commit. You have to offer creative topics, which then linger in the back of the mind of our participants. And if by chance they come across an opportunity, they might think: ‘OK, this could be something for *TransCoding*; I’m going to take a photo or make a recording and send it to them,’ on the spur of the moment. However, I would like to mention that sometimes people sent us long, elaborate stories *and* music *and* pictures. When this happened, I guess we had found something they could really relate to; we had hit a nerve with our call.

TF: So you think the aesthetics correlate with or react to modes of speaking and writing in social media, in Facebook or Twitter communities? The aesthetic occurs from online practices?

BL: I would say the online practices and their specific conditions of expression certainly play a part in what *Slices of Life* has become aesthetically. However, the process and the artwork is much more multi-faceted. Take for instance the element of ‘story-telling,’ which is a prominent feature throughout the artwork. Story-telling comes from popular culture and film. In fact, *Slices of Life* is a *mélange*. You will also find traces of classical music, especially with the solo instrument, the classical violin. And because of my background, you get a substantial influence from new music. *Slices of Life*, the artwork, and *TransCoding*, the project itself, is a colourful mix, like the people involved. It is a crossover project. We come from many angles, and express our identities in different ways.

### **Diversity – Crossover**

TF: Let’s take one step back. What is the original link between social media and your project? Why did you choose to work via social media with your community?

BL: The social media idea originated from my work with media students in Darmstadt, Germany. In a seminar, we talked about PSY, the Korean pop musician who created the extremely popular song *Gangnam Style*.

KG: *Gangnam Style* was a pop phenomenon of large proportions. It was popular in a very ‘pure’ sense of the word, defying aesthetic ‘class thinking.’ I found it interesting that people ridiculed and admired it at the same time. This was probably one of the first novelty dances that spoke to a certain type of ‘internet humour’ often fostered across online media. It was accessible and a little bizarre, it was about body and dance, and about the music, and it lent itself really well to imitation and modification across different contexts. The way I see it, it helped that PSY did not look like your typical glamorous young pop star – quite the opposite. People could relate to that.

BL: I found it fascinating that people across cultural backgrounds would spend so much time with it, use PSY’s music, make remixes of it, come together in a group and invent new stories around it. My students loved the song and the hype around it. When we discussed it, the students asked me, “How does a

song get viral on social media?” and I said, “I don’t know,” and secretly thought ‘I would like to tap into this potential for a contemporary art project.’

Those students, who by the way use social media on a daily basis, were young people that came from popular culture, and as their teacher I was supposed to familiarise them with the new arts. I really liked what my students did, how they used my influence and my knowledge, and melted it into their art. It was inspiring for both sides. Working with these students, I realised that people coming from popular culture and others coming from contemporary arts could join to create a kind of art that is really unconventional and new. My students were the kind of creative people I was looking for in *TransCoding*. And I knew I could reach them via social media. So this is what I did. I used social media to get in touch with my target audience.

TF: Perhaps one more question about the *Ultraschall* performance. In my opinion, it was a real success. However, the audience I remember for *Ultraschall*, for the most part, comes from what one might call ‘highbrow’ culture. How does this correlate with pop culture?

BL: It’s funny that you mention it, because for a long time while working on the artwork for *TransCoding* I felt a kind of censorship in my head. I found myself thinking ‘This is probably fine for the online community but is it also valid for my peer group?’ The artwork produced with the community contributions felt almost too concrete, too narrative, certainly not abstract enough for the kind of new music scene I usually move in. Also, if you look at the form of the piece, each ‘slice’ of the show has a length of something between two and a half and six minutes. That’s the length of a pop song. These were all aesthetic choices of mine that were influenced by popular culture and by what I thought my community might respond to, not by new music and my usual peer group. And, there is a lot of story-telling in *Slices of Life*, a feature that perhaps relates more to popular culture than to ‘highbrow’ new music audiences.

However, judging from audience reactions, whenever I have performed *Slices of Life*, my chosen aesthetics have clearly been accepted by my peer group and others. I am very happy about that. My peers really seem to like the work. I guess even intellectuals do appreciate stories and pictures, after all.

## **Musical Education – A Necessary Requirement for Being Creative in This Project?**

TF: This leads us to another topic. On your project website [transcoding.info] you claim that you want to build bridges between popular culture and so-called ‘highbrow’ art. Theoretically, your community does not need any knowledge of

classical Western European music theory to participate in the creation of your show. They don't necessarily need to know how to play a musical instrument to be welcomed. To me it seems that you change the culture of composing from one of the individual, highly trained composing 'genius' to composing with a community. Would you please elaborate on that?

BL: Well, first of all, we call our project '*TransCoding – From "Highbrow Art" to participatory culture.*' What does that actually mean? For me it meant that I transcoded old cultural practices like playing the violin, composing for classical instruments or performing in the concert hall to practices such as communicating worldwide on the web, using and offering open source freeware in my compositional process, and interconnecting with an online community that could then participate in the creative process. Instead of cultivating the romantic idea of the 'lonely, genius composer,' who works separated from and uninfluenced by society, and lives solely for 'pure' and absolute art, the community and I exchange ideas, thoughts and sounds via blog posts, tweets and Facebook entries. Communication and exchange comes first, before any of us even starts creating art.

And since you mention training and education: When I wrote the music and made the video for *Slices of Life*, I did what many of our community members do as well. I used everyday tools like the digital audio software on my computer, recorded audio, filmed and took photos with my smartphone, and I searched the internet for sound material. For instance, when I first composed the electronic soundtrack on my computer I often worked with sounds that are available under the Creative Commons license on the World Wide Web. Alternatively, I used samples from the *TransCoding* SoundCloud channel either provided by our team or contributed by the community. Those sounds were available for all of us and quite a few members of the community utilised them for their own music on their own computer.

It is quite common now that people have digital audio software on their computer and use it as their home studio. You need no classical training for it, but you definitely need to have some experience with the software. In a way, you could probably say creativity has been democratised.

You bring up the violin, and that is an interesting point. As an instrument the violin felt weirdly 'old' to me while composing. Usually I composed everything else first, soundtrack, voice parts and so on, and only later would I come to the point where I thought, 'I have this creative mandate from my research proposal, I need to add the violin.' Then I would incorporate it, and the community was in fact not involved in this particular creative step. I was struggling with the connotations of the classical instrument. In the modern world of social media, it almost felt like a contradiction to use an instrument

with this kind of cultural ‘burden’ – or you could also say more positively – with this enormous ‘heritage.’

TF: Do you postulate that we should shift our understanding of composing from the isolated genius to collaboration via social media?

BL: No, I wouldn’t say so. Not in general nor through social media. However, what is important for me, coming from a background of performance practice, is my relationship with the audience. The audience is often an unknown factor. What are their visions, interests and expectations? This certainly was in the back of my mind when I thought, ‘Why not communicate directly with my audience through the process of co-creating?’ In our case we aimed for worldwide communication, which is the reason for using social media.

CM: I think that social media enables a different form of composing now, which is in addition to all the different kinds we have had before. Looking at popular composition forms today, we for instance find online challenges such as FAWM, the February Album Writing Month. This is an internet challenge, where mostly amateur and semi-professional artists try to write, record and release an entire album during the month of February.

BL: It has a huge attraction to many, mostly non-professional, music lovers and sometimes collaborations are born out of it. At FAWM people talk online with each other and mutually listen to and comment their tracks. It’s a tight-knit community. I participated twice in FAWM as a representative of *TransCoding*, and Clio Montrey took part as an individual artist. We wanted to get the feel of a community different from ours, and to make additional contacts for *what-ifblog.net*.

It would be interesting to hear what Kai says about this topic, because he used to be an active member of a collaborative SoundCloud group. Kai, why don’t you tell us about this experimental music group?

KG: Yes, that was before I joined the *TransCoding* project. When I was doing my own sociological research on noise and experimental music, I was a member of an open collaborative group called *Disquiet Junto*, which was run by an American media person named Marc Weidenbaum and used SoundCloud as their common platform. Every week Weidenbaum would give people some compositional instructions. He would for instance propose, ‘Please compose a piece of music using only this feature,’ or ‘Use only two tracks and one track should include a particular sound component.’ The group members constantly developed creative work off these instructions that came from this one person sitting somewhere in San Francisco. For a certain period of time I think he

really succeeded in holding together an online community. I would guess he offered people an opportunity to develop ideas that they wouldn't have had if they hadn't joined the community. This might possibly be the core of his project.

CM: I find it important to see these networks as a means of communication. It doesn't negate the fact that we can still compose in any traditional form.

### **How to Stimulate Creativity**

TF: In the 1960s Robert H. McKim, a Stanford engineer, constructed a machine to further the creative potential of people, the so-called Imaginarium. He wanted to stimulate non-linear, visual thinking. The machine had the shape of a dome that one could walk in. It was in fact a multimedia environment equipped with audiovisual features and an air conditioning system that injected scents into the air at regular intervals. People were supposed to enter it to seclude them from the world outside. They became immersed in a rich audio landscape and were shown abstract, colourful films and sounds. They were even encouraged to eat food while inside the Imaginarium. The scientists wanted to make sure that each of the five senses was stimulated. After each test phase the test person had to talk about their experience and provide a narration about what they had perceived. The system was supposed to further creativity and alternative thinking. Incidentally, these were the beginnings of the world-renowned design department at Stanford. Did you construct anything similar with *TransCoding*, namely a system to further creativity via social media?

BL: I don't think we constructed anything like a mechanical system or a machine with *TransCoding*. Our project was about direct communication between human beings.

KG: I agree with Barbara that there was an emphasis on communication. From my perspective, *TransCoding* went way beyond merely stimulating creativity. The Imaginarium, as I understand you, was about unlocking peoples' creativity in general, whereas the creative actions we asked for in *TransCoding* were more goal-oriented. In *TransCoding* communication had to go back and forth, whereas the Imaginarium was a project in which people were prompted to reflect on their experiences within the machine. There is no talking back and forth with a machine, no interaction.

## The Creative Processes Behind *TransCoding*

TF: How did the creative process work in the *TransCoding* community?

BL: I would say it worked in different ways. Our project blog, *what-ifblog.net*, had a special kind of dynamic. First of all, we had to feed our community with blog posts on a regular basis to keep them interested and engaged. What then really stuck out were the ‘calls for entries’ – calls for photos, sounds or stories. This is where our community very actively produced contributions, in the form of creative material or small artworks, and shared them among the other members of the community and with us. We on the other hand communicated ideas, incentives or sounds of our own on the blog, on Facebook or SoundCloud, and thus returned the community’s investment in us. Everybody could use all the contributions on the basis of a Creative Commons agreement. It was a reciprocal process. We regarded most of our material as open source and people could use it for their own works. At the same time our community members used those calls for entries as incentive for their own creative work. Many of the contributions we got through those call for entries have ended up woven into the artwork *Slices of Life*.

Logically, these calls for entries only worked if we found a topic that would interest our community. We had to hit a ‘sweet spot,’ so our members could identify with it. If they then decided to get active and participate creatively, we would feature their contributions on our main blog, *what-ifblog.net*, on our community blog on Tumblr, on Facebook or on SoundCloud, and we would tweet about it.

The first steps in the creative process were all about the community: we had to think about our community, capture their interest, feature their contributions. Only in a second step did I think about the associated artwork *Slices of Life*. Only when the material was there could I start working on the actual artwork. And again the community was in the foreground, since I knew I had to respectfully incorporate the community material and had to be authentic to the creator. However, since the material was never the way I had imagined it before in my mind, I constantly needed to adjust my creative work. So from my perspective, the creative process was all very complicated and constantly took surprising turns.

TF: How did you discuss this within the team?

BL: This happened mainly between Clio and myself.

CM: Usually what happened was that Barbara had an initial impetus and idea for a call for entries in mind and would say, “this is the type of material I am looking for and this is the call that might work for it.”

BL: When we designed these calls, they went back and forth between Clio and me. We discussed in detail how we would formulate and express each of them.

CM: My role then tended to be to find creative ways of implementing it online, to develop a distribution plan mainly via Facebook and Twitter, contact people and get them to participate. If we were successful, people would respond with contributions they sent to us. And that material then – I guess it was up to Barbara to decide which parts of it were working for her artwork, and what she would be doing with it.

BL: To give you an example: we had this one call when I needed portraits of people; preferably portraits in which the face was a close-up positioned in the centre of the image. Also, I needed the background to be neutral, not cluttered. The challenge was how to ask for portraits that would come as close as possible to my ideal model. As a solution a former co-worker of ours who was also a teacher at a media school suggested that we offer the community some specific guidelines. These would come in the form of a pixel count, measurements and a frame as to where to centre the person. Since in his experience his students responded better to creative tasks if they had an exact framework, he designed the following schematics to put it in the header of our blog post.

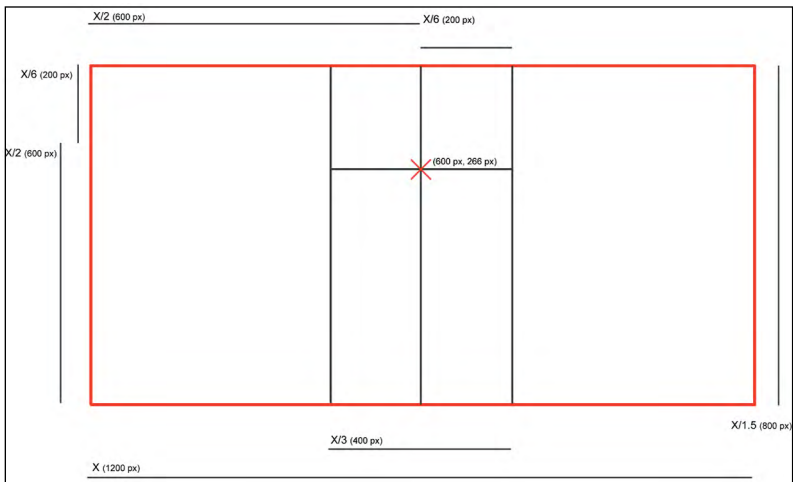


Fig. 1.10: Schematic for the blogpost *Call for Entries | Frames of Life*.

Image © TransCoding

CM: When he suggested this, Barbara and I looked at each other and we thought, ‘That will never work, but let’s try!’

BL: So we had this blog post with an image – all lines and numbers – and nobody ever reacted to it. It had no relevance to them. Then I got this idea for a new headline: ‘Powerful Woman.’ It’s striking, it triggers your fantasy, it is an important and relevant idea for our community. They know why they should invest time and energy to contribute. And when we asked for images of powerful women, we immediately got a lot of portraits. And that’s how we implicated it: We used the new title along with this beautiful photo as a header, which Clio had found (Fig. 1.11). It was a striking image of a vivid and proud looking woman who seemed to have a lot of fun.



Fig. 1.11: Portrait of a woman from a ‘Swing event’ in Vienna 2015. Used by kind permission of Alex Dietrich.

CM: The photo is from Alex Dietrich. He’s actually quite a well known photographer in Vienna. He was taking these beautiful portraits at a swing-dancing event I attended, and that one in particular really struck me. So I asked him if we could use that as an example on the blog to illustrate what we meant with our idea of portraits of powerful women.

BL: The photo looked joyous, and powerful. However, perhaps the best thing about it was that the face of the person portrayed was half hidden. Therefore, the photo lent itself to projections. Our readers could identify with the charismatic radiance of this person. The image in combination with the new headline was ‘catchy.’

CL: By contrast, in the previous call, our co-worker had given participants parameters, such as measurements and placement in the frame. This approach didn’t seem to work, but with Alex’s photograph, showing worked much better than giving abstract parameters. I think that was a big part of why the ‘Powerful Woman’ call was so effective; it was very much illustrating all the aspects without having to tell anything.

BL: Also behind the motto ‘Powerful Woman’ stood an idea, the idea of female empowerment. I assume many women sent in their photo because they could identify with this idea or they wanted to make a statement with their photo.

We received for instance a contribution by a Jordanian, Suad Bushnaq, depicting a Muslim traffic policewoman. On the image there is a lot of everything: traffic, a bridge, trees, photographed through a dirty front windshield. The actual woman takes at the most five percent of the image. You can hardly differentiate her from her environment. This is a typical example of a photo that maybe is not a ‘perfect’ and artistically worked through image, but for Suad Bushnaq it is a symbol of a female power.

In the end, I couldn’t use this particular photo for *Slices of Life* since the background was too cluttered and the actual motif hardly recognisable. However, we featured it on various of our social media channels.



Fig. 1.12: Suad Bushnaq’s contribution to the call *Powerful Woman*.

We had to relate to the real life of our community members with our calls. We had to find topics that mattered to them. Our calls couldn't be too technical or our community wouldn't respond. We tried to reach our members via captivating headlines, interesting stories, pictures or interesting sounds. I would say this is an important part of how sharing creative processes with the community worked in our case.

### **Social Media – Self-Promotion or Participation?**

TF: Let's touch on a different topic. Artists often use social media for self-promoting, as a relevant and important tool for being seen and heard in the market. I think that by doing this, artists massively change values, visibility and the discourse about high art. Your approach to social media is different. You use social media as a tool in the process of creation, which essentially differs from self-promoting. As I understand you, social media seems to be integral to the composing process. Could you describe this a bit more?

BL: Indeed, I see the marketing possibilities that social media offer, but we worked differently with social media. To us they served as a platform enabling us to communicate, to share, to spread content, to interact and to make new contacts. We needed to reach the people on a personal level outside of the music business to build trust and to get them to participate creatively. We refrained from using social media as a means to brand our 'product' or as a personal marketing tool. Clio, as the social media manager, what would you like to add?

CM: If you put something up online and create some noise around it, in the present climate social media tend to be more effective because I think there is this culture of wanting to see and be seen. And Facebook or Twitter effectively feeds into that need. Therefore, I found that using social media was the best way to really make sure people participated in our project. It also worked because on social media you often interact based on some sort of personal connection. Sometimes this connection is virtual only, or small or fleeting, other times it derives from a pre-existing friendship or acquaintance.

KG: We found it necessary to provide an environment where people felt comfortable, where their skills and ideas were appreciated, not merely used or even exploited. From my point of view, a big part of all the work that went into *TransCoding* was to build and maintain that environment.

BL: I would like to mention that I don't consider *Slices of Life* the only artwork within the framework of *TransCoding*. To me, all the social media platforms

affiliated with *TransCoding* – for instance the Twitter channel and the Facebook site and of course the main blog itself – make up a participatory artwork which is shaped not only through my co-worker Clio Montrey and myself, but also through the people who got involved. They reacted to posts, commented, shared content, guest-blogged and contributed with their own creative work. The content and appearance of the whole project was formed and designed through this communication, this exchange and interaction with the community. So, the artistic result of the project is more than a 30-minute show called *Slices of Life*. It is also the participatory art across various social media channels and the audiovisual installation *Read me*.

### **The Digital Society**

TF: Theoretically social media empowers people – at least to a certain degree. Virtually everyone with access to the Internet can set up a blog, a Facebook or a Twitter profile to express their opinion. People cast their aesthetic, political or social vote via ‘Like’ buttons. At the same time, those buttons can be activated by bots or robots, which in my opinion is a dilemma in political practices. We experience in society, and in the artistic and political space, the effects of the digital empowerment of people and then again its cancellation by bots. Did any of this happen in your project and do you consider composing with social media a political activity?

BL: Luckily, bots were at no time part of the culture of *TransCoding*. I like to assume we avoided such a situation because we always acted according to the Three Rs of Micro-Blogging “Relevance, Respect; and Return” as marketing and communication scholars Kaplan and Haenlein call it. (Kaplan and Haenlein 2011: 110)

What does that mean? Firstly, our blog posts had to be of ‘Relevance’ for our target group, which means we had to listen to our community before we posted, tweeted or facebooked. It was quite obvious, when we didn’t reach them, when a blog post or a call for entry had no relevance for our members. Secondly, we showed ‘Respect’ to our community members. We were honest in our communication, and people knew they dealt with real human beings. We were transparent about the project and the goals of it, and we consciously used polite, warm and personal language. As for ‘Return,’ we exhibited every contribution we got on at least one of our social media channels. Several submitters were showcased in portraits or featured via their own guest blogs on *what-ifblog.net*. Additionally, we highlighted their contributions on our community gallery on Tumblr or on SoundCloud. And when their material was included in the artwork *Slices of Life*, it was clearly attributed to them. So if they invested in our

project they got something in return. People entrusted me with their material, and believed that I would find a way to combine their material with my artistic ideas in an aesthetically pleasing and respectful way.

As to your second question, whether I understood composing with social media as a political activity: In my opinion a political aspect lies in the exchange between artist and community and in the permeability of the process. Who has the 'creative authority'? In our project it really goes in both directions. I let people influence my creative process and conversely I hope to empower people in their creativity. The community reacts to my incentives and in the process I am listening and reacting to them. With the audiovisual installation *Read me* I truly shared the authority over the artwork. People used my software and hardware as a frame which they filled with their own music, text and images. I would say this is the political aspect: We all influenced each other, the community changed my idea of being an artist, we shared authority and I learned from them as they possibly learned from me.

TF: Seen from the perspective of a 'digital society,' would you say that *TransCoding* is about founding and constructing an internet community with equal rights and access to decision-making? Was access to and participation in the social media channels of *TransCoding* open to everybody?

BL: This is a topic that necessarily comes up in connection with participatory art. Who is allowed to join in and participate? In theory everybody was, but in reality it depended on people's access to a computer and to the internet and their media competence. China for example didn't appear in our list of countries that visited our blog in a long time and then only sparsely, since in China there are heavy restrictions on social media and internet censorship is strict.

An important point is also that equal rights and equal access could only be granted within the given structures of our interaction, which was shaped by utilising templates of WordPress, Facebook, Twitter, etc. Although these social media sites are very popular among our target group, which is one of the reasons we chose them as communication platforms, they come with constraints. For instance, one needs to be a member of a social media site to be able to participate at all. So members of our community who follow us on Facebook might not necessarily be able to comment on our WordPress site, unless they are or become members of WordPress. Social media templates offer communicational paths such as 'liking,' 'commenting,' 'sharing,' but again they do so with restrictions. Some examples: one cannot include a video in a comment in WordPress; one cannot symbolically 'dislike' a post on Facebook, unless one explicitly 'dislikes' it verbally in a comment. Also, we as owners of a Facebook page and WordPress site were dependent on their algorithms for distribution. Some of our posts may not have been seen, because we didn't use

words that triggered the right algorithm. Social media platforms impose this kind of limitation.

TF: How did you organise the administration rights for the blog, for the incoming information and for the contributions?

BL: It depended on the platform. In WordPress, for example, I had the fullest administrator rights so I could invite collaborators or guest authors. If somebody was interested in writing a guest post blog, I would give them rights as author.

TF: So that was more by your invitation?

BL: Yes. However, everybody could comment on WordPress and we had an open invitation on the blog to people who would like to write a blog post on our topic of identity [<https://what-ifblog.net/your-contribution/>]. As for the contributions themselves, we only rarely used our administrative power to say we won't 'allow' or feature this contribution. As far as I remember this happened only twice, when people put something on our SoundCloud group for their own promotional purposes and it had nothing to do with our call at all.

CM: There were a couple of instances where people posted things that just clearly didn't belong. Once for example our community was asked to contribute music based on a drone, using sound samples that we had uploaded. Someone sent a rap track that had absolutely nothing to do with the call and we didn't allow the track on our timeline. In such scenarios there were times where a contribution had to be 'censored,' but mostly people had the genuine intention of participating and seemed to be putting their best effort forward to contribute.

## **Conduct and Behaviour**

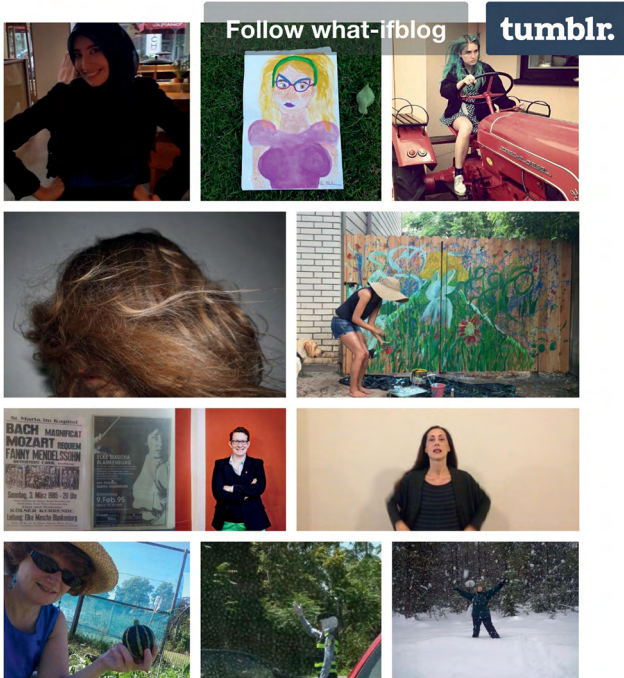
TF: Would you please explain – since that's an important point – what kind of rules you developed?

BL: We didn't.

TF: You didn't? But aren't rules unavoidable? Take for instance current political and legal discussions about hate speech on social media. Here the question is: do we need more legislation acts or do we leave it to the users to become more creative in developing strategies against, for instance, bot-generated hate speech? Or the public discussion about copyrights on texts, videos and pictures. Claims on strengthening copyright laws are juxtaposed by movements such as

the global Creative Commons network. Was either an issue or of importance for *TransCoding*?

BL: As I said before, bots were never an issue for *TransCoding*. People were always very respectful in our community, so we didn't have to set a rule of conduct or code of behaviour. Still, there were rules we set for ourselves. We wanted to always treat our members and their contributions respectfully, and so we valued and commented on each contribution. We tried to quickly thank and respond to contributors, because we knew it is easy to like something, relatively easy to comment, but it's quite a big step to get creative and upload a contribution to a call. Therefore, one of our rules was to openly celebrate each contribution, and to feature them on our main platform *what-ifblog.net* and on our Tumblr community gallery.



## Powerful Woman | #WhatIfMM | Gallery

Fig. 1.13: Gallery of contributions to the *Call for Entries – Powerful Woman* featured on the community blog. Image © TransCoding

As for copyright issues, the whole project was based on the idea of Creative Commons, something we made clear on our social media channels, and contributors knew their contributions might be used in the overall artwork. By contributing they declared their consent.

## **Social Media and Identity**

TF: Internet communities are ruled by more or less obvious frameworks that social media offer. They shape the content and form of participations. Your participants had to fit into these frames. Take for instance Twitter. From a cultural studies perspective, we would say Twitter offers two options of expressing identity: via 140 signs and via hashtags. You could call this a restrictive framework. Tweeting can easily be taken over by bots and those bots could even artificially generate communities. Does that mean social media rules and even generates our identities?

KG: Well, let's have a look at the Chicago School of sociology: they claim that identity is something established in interactions – in a reciprocal process – between people and in everyday exchanges. Of course, today social media is a big part of these interactions. Does that mean that social media ‘create’ our identities? That is an interesting question. I would say that our identities are certainly shaped by both, our use of social media and also by the effects that social media has on our everyday practices. The ‘Like’ button certainly changed the way we think or feel about content. Twitter makes us come up with little aphorisms that we tend to judge as important or less important depending on the number of retweets. Interactions on public transport are now heavily influenced by the way people look at their phones. The list goes on. However, you refer to the role of technology, namely the algorithms versus the personal input of people. As far as I am aware, sociology has yet to find a clear answer to what the distinctive role of algorithmic processes is regarding all this.

TF: Another question that would interest me. Did people change their identities throughout the project?

BL: This is almost impossible for us to tell, because our members came from all over the world, such as Armenia, the Philippines, Canada, the US, and we had almost no chance to meet any of them personally.

CM: I would be hesitant to say whether community members changed their identities through the project, because in my opinion everyone's personal identity is an evolving entity anyway. From what I noticed in our project,

though, people seemed quite consistent to their own identity. One of my favourite examples of this is Gloria Guns, who is a human rights lawyer. She was a friend of mine before joining the project and still is. She did a number of different kinds of contributions, ranging from guest blog posts to sound contributions, because she also writes music. She even has one of the *Read me* installations. All of these different contributions seem to reflect the same essence of identity. What is very interesting about Gloria specifically is that each time, she contributed fresh, different things, but they all came together to ring very much true and genuine with regard to her own personal and professional identity; and that was across the range of her different contributions. So, although I think personal identities can evolve and change, the participants that I personally observed and had some sort of background information on seemed very true to a consistent identity.

## Numbers and Facts

TF: How many people were involved in *TransCoding* as a project? Was it a big or a rather small number?

BL: It depends on your perspective. If you compare the number of people to the number a popular food blog might attract, then it is a small number. However, for contemporary music it's quite a big number. We had more than 1,200 followers across our social media platforms. We reached people from approximately 130 countries. In *Slices of Life* alone we have contributions from Cuba, Canada, France, England, Ireland, USA, Germany, Romania, Bulgaria, New Zealand, Austria, Poland, Russia, the Philippines, Croatia and Armenia. It's spread across four continents. In 2015 – I looked these numbers up – we had 10,000 views on the blog alone. That's not too bad, especially for a niche blog. Moreover, if you compare it to how many people I would have reached in the new music scene through live concerts within the same time span, it is definitely a good number of people.

TF: Perhaps this question to Clio Montrey, the social media manager in the project: Which problems occurred to you?

CM: The real challenges were engaging people across or rather contrary to the technical algorithms of social media sites. It quickly became apparent that Facebook pages, for instance, would be a challenge. Facebook has specific algorithms and considers pages to be commercial; they want you to pay money to boost your post. Since we had decided to run the social media non-

commercially, without promoting any posts, we needed to use creative methods to make sure that people saw our call for entries.

I would get the word out by sharing our Facebook posts to various groups, sometimes my own page, and making Facebook events, so I could spread the word as effectively as possible and make it feel as personal as possible. I'd send out messages to my contacts that a new call was up and they could participate. Sometimes I would spot a beautiful photo that someone had up on their personal Facebook site and maybe they weren't aware of our call. So I would message the person and say 'hey, did you see our event? Here's the event page, I think your photo would be a perfect fit,' and then they would send it. There was a lot of personal follow-up involved.

In general, Barbara and I both agreed that it would be a good idea to make the interaction more personal, so really that was about nurturing a sense of the community and cultivating openness and creativity. We talked a lot about authenticity during the project. And because we wanted an authentic voice from our community members, we needed to express ourselves authentically too. So, this was what we were aiming for: to be as authentic as possible, and to make sure that everything had direct relevance to our community and to what we wanted to do with the project.

BL: One of the problems I found was that social media are very time-consuming. If someone were to ask me today if a project like this opens up a new way of composing or if it makes your art well known to the world, I would say 'possibly, but make sure that you really have the time and the drive to do it.' Our community members are real people, not virtual Facebook friends. They don't want to have you in their life just for five minutes. They don't want to be immediately dismissed when they have 'served' your purpose of supporting your composition or research. They want to be seen as real people. It's not anonymous, it's rather personal. This kind of communication needs time and dedication, which was why I asked Clio Montrey to join the team after doing the social media on my own for six months. I realised I couldn't do the arts and the research and the blogging all by myself, and I needed some support in that. The nice side effect of *TransCoding* is that we now know people from all over the world who we would never have met if we hadn't done this project.

### **Participative Art Versus Lonely Genius**

TF: This leads me to a question about your personal creative process. You are saying that social media are very time-consuming, and I would imagine you would rather need this time for being creative. Also, with social media you constantly hear voices of other people, and they might stand in contrast to what

you want, or even be controversial in themselves. However, I would think you needed to concentrate on your own creative voice. So isn't your work with social media the opposite of what an artist needs? What does it do to you and your creative work? Do you feel like you are the artist you want to be, or do you feel like the 'servant' of your community whose task is merely to 'transform' their input? What would you say about that? What makes you creative in this project? Your 'own' voice or the input of others?

CM: I would say that *TransCoding* hinges critically on using social media. So, since this was my role in the project, I considered the social media not as something that was taking away from my creativity: Instead I was using my creative strategies to help build the project. I'm very proud of the fact that I was able to bring in so many participants. I was able to encourage creative entries from other people and bring their voices into the project. On these voices now rests quite a big part of the artwork. So I think the answer to your question is that it depends on one's personal mentality and on what role you have in this specific project, how you feel about working with social media.

BL: As a composer one could ask questions such as: Why should I collaborate with an online community? How many people can come together and still create a good artwork? Why would I work with people who aren't even professional artists? Isn't my own original creative voice more valid? What about the quality of the contributions? Are they 'good' enough to be included and who decides? These are all important questions that could come up in this context, and there is no easy answer.

However, I am not only a composer. I worked for years as a performer. The relationship with my audience is something that is very important to me. Therefore, the creative process was certainly demanding, but also very interesting. Working with different voices, with contributions that didn't match my expectations but pointed to a new direction in my creative process, was challenging, inspiring, and in my opinion absolutely valid.

TF: There is a long history of writing groups among professionals as well as lay people. Sometimes these groups are politically motivated, sometimes their members look for feedback and inspiration from their peers, or they simply wish to improve their writing skills. If we compare your project to writing groups, what are the differences and similarities?

BL: Well, first of all our communication was not face to face, it happened via virtual channels. This is different from meeting personally and exchanging views as is usually the case with writing groups. Also, our purpose was a different one. None of the reasons you state for forming a writing group applies

to us. Our project was not in the first place about learning. We invited people into jointly creating a participative artwork. It was not about critical feedback, but rather about offering a platform, and encouragement to be creative, and an opportunity for exchange across cultural domains. Of course, it was also about sharing our passion for contemporary art.

### **Artistic Research – Ethnographic Sociology**

TF: A question to Kai: You are a sociologist, a researcher and a music journalist. What would you call the most striking outcome regarding your part in the project? What was the most important point for you?

KG: I think the most important point for myself was to get acquainted with the field of artistic research. I was especially interested in the question of how the methodological repertoire of ethnographic sociology could benefit from a dialogue with artistic research and how the two different disciplines might learn from one another. We found many similarities, but also fundamental differences between both domains.

In ethnographic sociology, for instance, many scholars share the opinion that if you immerse yourself in a research field, you should do it with caution and to a limited degree. Accordingly, when applying participant observation as a methodological tool we join our research field, we participate, we write field notes, do interviews, and then we return to our writing desk. We leave behind the world in which we participated in order to reflect, analyse and evaluate. This is different from artistic research. Here artistic researchers are at the same time professional artists, and they continue their careers in the arts, which in turn is the field they are investigating. I found it intriguing to reflect on how the two disciplines can learn from one another in order to expand their methodological palette.

BL: As artistic researchers, we do our work within our peer group, which can be ethically and artistically challenging. Moreover, we need to make sure to reflect as objectively as possible. We also might want to be daring in our art, and maybe widen the boundaries of the field; this can be tricky, because you never know what’s going to happen if you do so, and how people (including our peer group) will react, but so far it has been a rewarding experience.

TF: Thank you very much.