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Watch Me Watch You Watch Me

Instrumentalizing the Audience's Gaze in the Age of Selfies

(A Meta-Selfie)

Selfies

In today's image-driven screen society, we are not only experiencing reality more and more through the window of our smart devices – sometimes, as in the *Pokémon Go* game, even with a superimposed layer of virtuality to create an augmented reality – but we also increasingly, and literally, place ourselves inside the frame of the reality we depict.

This idea is obviously not a new one – think for example of Velazquez's painting Las Meninas from 1656 (see image on right page). The Spanish master added himself to his portrait of the Infante and the Spanish court, paintbrushes and palette in his hands, as if caught in the act of painting the picture, a "selfie" avant-la-lettre.

Almost four centuries later, with the advent of the camera-equipped smartphone, and turbocharged by the viral possibilities of online social media, the selfie has become ubiquitous and has changed how we perceive and interact with the world around us. The famous photo taken during Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign in 2016, with Clinton standing on a little podium, waving at her fans, who have their backs turned to her to take a selfie with her, is but one of many recent, telling examples.[1]

Just as in *Las Meninas*, today's selfies seem to suggest spontaneity and a kind of intimacy: "This is me having fun at the Donaueschingen Festival!" Often, however, they are carefully framed and constructed and not as innocent as they seem, as the story of English Internet celebrity Junaid Ahmed makes clear. Ahmed, who was 23 years old in 2018 and had 50,000 followers on *Instagram* at that point, takes approximately 200 photos of himself each day. In an interview with the BBC, he said,

> "Years ago, I never used to look like this. I used to be quite natural. But I just think with the obsession with social media ... I want to upgrade myself now. I've had my teeth veneered, chin filler, cheek filler, jawline filler, lip filler, botox under the eyes and on the head, tattooed eyebrows and fat freezing."[2]

Diego Velazquez: „Las Meninas", 1656, Museo del Prado, Madrid

Junaid Ahmed is not the only person who has remodeled his physical appearance through invasive surgery to "improve" his selfies; there is a whole medical industry thriving on what is called "selfie dysmorphia".[3] The reality-enhancing, digital face filters included in many of today's photo apps are often taken as a model for the desired surgery, creating a feedback loop between one's digitally enhanced image and one's actual physical presence.

Others have offered a feminist perspective on the selfie culture. As art critic and novelist John Berger already pointed out in 1972, "Every image embodies a way of seeing".[4] In a society dominated by the male gaze, this means, more often than not, that the images we see embody a male perspective. This is where Mary McGill, a scholar in Gender and Feminist Theory, feels the emancipatory power of selfies lies:

> "In the current age, it is this notion of control that seems to me to be an integral part of the selfie's appeal to women. For so long the object of the gaze or invisibilized by it, without the means to represent themselves publicly on their own terms or to preserve their reflection, digital technologies allow women the means to represent themselves as they wish to be seen."[5]

It is clear that the phenomenon of the selfie opens up many different perspectives, touches on many different topics, and is the subject of many a doctoral dissertation. It is also no surprise that it has made its way into the art world. In 2017, Nigel Hurst, CEO of the Saatchi Gallery, curated the exhibition "From Selfie to Self-Expression", and proclaimed,

> "Selfies are easily the most expansionist form of visual communication that any of us have experienced for generations, which makes them noteworthy in their own right. We can't ignore them as a cultural institution."[6]

Selfies can be found in many identities and guises in visual, performative, installative, or sound art, and most often in hybrids of these. They are worth a bigger canvas than these pages can offer, and touch on many related issues. In what follows, however, the selfie will serve as a starting point, a lens to look at sound-based and live-performed artworks in which the audience and its gaze is instrumentalized through technological, audio-visual means in order to complicate the traditional, one-directional relationship between audience and performer. In each paragraph of this essay, in analogous manner to visual selfies, I will juxtapose one of my own compositions with works by other composers who utilize related approaches, themes, or ideas.

"Selfie Is Less About Me, It's More About Us."

The pop star Adele once said, "I don't make music for eyes, I make music for ears",[7] and in 2016 she famously paused in the middle of a concert to ask her audience to stop filming with their smartphones and enjoy her in "real life".[8] However, a few months earlier, the same Adele had stopped a concert to do exactly the opposite, and take an on-stage selfie with a look-alike of hers.[9]

The choreographer, visual artist, and singer-songwriter Ivo Dimchev went a step further in his 2018 "Selfie Concert", which is described on his website as

Ivo Dimchev and his audience during his „Selfie Concert"

© Ivo Dimchev, screenshot from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VS2ukRgj9bA

an "interactive musical performance, [...] performed by the artist and the audience".[10] "Selfie is a choreography, Selfie is a sculpture, Selfie is a tragedy, Selfie is love. Selfie is less about me, it's more about us", he adds. And indeed, the audience is invited to approach Dimchev and make selfies with him while he sings bare-chested, seated with a tiny keyboard on his lap on which he accompanies himself.[11] The focus shifts from Dimchev to the audience members and how they relate to him, as we watch them, weirdly vulnerable, posing for the selfies they take with him. Concurrently, a no less interesting second narrative unfolds in which we see how over time, through the evolving dynamics of group behavior, the audience members become ever bolder and more intimate with him (see image above).

In my Mirror Box Extensions[12] (composed in 2014/15 for the Nadar Ensemble and premiered at the Donaueschingen Festival in 2015), the metaphor of the "mirror box" brought me to the selfie. A mirror box is a (still somewhat controversial) medical device used in trauma therapy for people who have lost a limb. By looking into the mirror in the box and seeing the image of the intact limb mirrored onto the absent one, the patient can alleviate phantom pains. This device offered me a potent metaphor for how we are increasingly living in a world
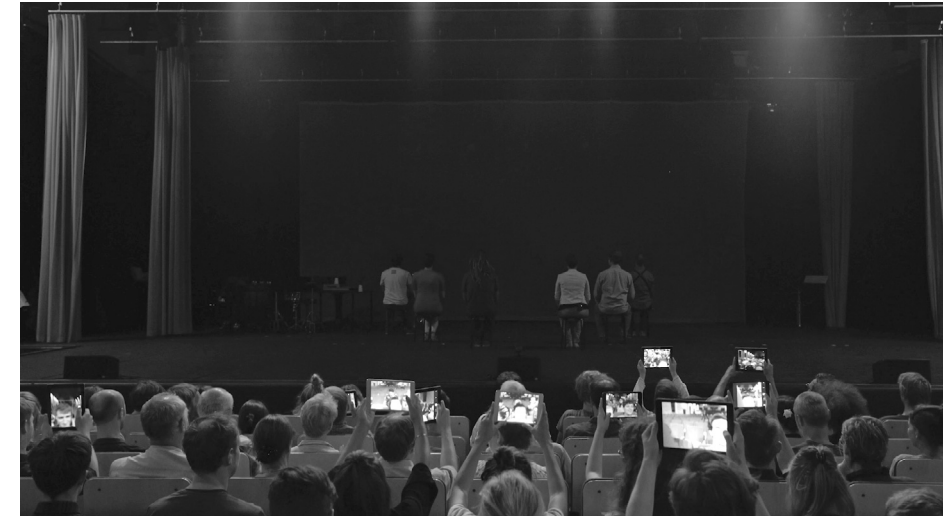
Stefan Prins: „Mirror Box Extensions", scene 4: tablet players in the audience playing back videos; performance by Nadar Ensemble

© Video: Stefan Prins, Kairos

Stefan Prins: „Mirror Box Extensions", scene 4, end: tablet players in selfie-mode; performance by Nadar Ensemble

© Video: Stefan Prins, Kairos

inhabited by duplicates of ourselves: avatars onto which we project real emotions.

Mirror Box Extensions expands the composition *Mirror Box* (Flesh+Prosthesis #3) for saxophone, percussion, piano and live-electronics in several dimensions, including scale (growing from 3 to 7 instruments, from 3 speakers to surround system, from 22 to 35 minutes' duration) and the types of media employed: I added video and scenographic elements, the latter in close collaboration with scenographer Marieke Berendsen. Throughout the first two-thirds of the composition, the musicians perform and move around the stage while it is constantly being transformed by means of four layers of mobile, semi-transparent screens onto which images of the performers are projected. As the work evolves, the physically present performers stop playing their instruments and their agency shifts towards their on-screen avatars, as the live performers gradually move the screens, with their projections, into different constellations on the stage. However, at this point the focus also slowly begins to shift from the stage to the audience, which from the beginning has been anonymously infiltrated by 30 "tablet performers". These performers have been asked to use their tablet devices during the first phase of the piece to occasionally and inconspicuously take photos of the performers on stage. In a second phase, synchronized with huge on-screen close-ups of the performing musicians, these tablet performers activate videos (with sound) that were loaded onto their devices in advance,

while holding the tablets in the air (see image on left side). These videos show the same musicians seen in the on-stage projections, but from a closer, more intimate perspective, zooming in on their hands as they play their instruments.

In the final phase of the work, a stage-wide video of the audience itself is seen, recorded when they were seated shortly before the performance began. Through digital manipulation, this video is overlaid with another prerecorded video of the trombonist playing as he moves through the same, but empty, audience space. When the house lights then come up, the tablet performers activate their front cameras to make selfies with other members of the audience. The projection of the audience on stage from a moment ago is thus pulled into the audience itself and "exploded" into 30 fragments (see image above). This is the last step in a chain of consequences in which the musicians have increasingly lost their agency to their avatars, while the gaze of the audience has been gradually redirected to the tablets, which have pulled the action through the fourth wall and made the audience itself the subject and object of the action.

Through these constant transformations and different kinds of extensions and mediations, Mirror Box Extensions explores the changing ways in which we interact with physical reality and perceive our ever more mediated environment.

"Or How About Watching Yourself Enjoying Masterworks of Art?"

"Finally it's here! Don't miss this unique opportunity to experience yourself being you! See yourself walk, talk, and interact with everyday objects – or how about watching yourself enjoying masterworks of art? Only reality sets the limits! The Self Simulator – as real as it gets!"[13]

This could very well be a PR release for the latest smartphone model with a special reality-enhancing selfie camera. It is, however, a tongue-in-cheek teaser on Simon Steen-Andersen's website dedicated to his 2009 *Self Simulator*, an interactive audio-visual installation for one audience member/performer.

The "Self Simulator" is a self-built, camera-equipped selfie-stick avant-la-lettre, which is connected to the participant's body with a harness. The camera films the participant from behind as (s)he freely moves through a space which is curated by the composer, while seeing him/herself from this perspective through VR-goggles avant-la-lettre. In the gaming industry this "third person view" (TPV) is used in "third person shooter games", and is different from the so-called "first person view" (FPV), in which one experiences the game through the eyes of the avatar itself. Where these games try to make the virtual experience as "real" as possible, Steen-Andersen's *Self Simulator* aims to do the opposite:

"It turns the idea of virtual reality upside down, making reality virtual – also sound-wise – by adding artificially sounding reverberation. In doing so, the Self Simulator confronts us with ourselves through alienation and therefore aims to, among other things, make us reorientate and experiment with even the simplest of everyday actions."[14]

Like *Self Simulator*, *Piano Hero #1*, which I composed in 2011, takes its cue from a computer game, *Guitar Hero*. In this composition, which is the first part of a four-part, hour-long cycle, the pianist plays a MIDI keyboard, which triggers audio-visual samples of the pianist's avatar[15] as it taps, scratches, or hits the inside of a dismantled piano.[16] These samples are projected onto a screen and heard through loudspeakers placed beside or behind the pianist. As in the game *Guitar Hero*, the performer in *Piano Hero* controls his avatar by playing a simulacrum instrument – the MIDI keyboard in this case. At a crucial moment near the middle of the composition, the attention is directed towards this simulacrum when a webcam is activated, projecting live footage of the pianist, filmed from behind, as (s)he taps away on the MIDI keyboard. All other sounds are muted at this point, so that only the soft tapping of the pianist on the plastic keys is heard. As the video image switches to this third person perspective, the audience can vaguely be seen in the background, watching the pianist. This perspective inverts the performer-audience relation: the audience looses its anonymity, which now is bestowed onto the pianist, who is seen from behind, his/her

Stefan Prins: „Generation Kill" – game controller performer Elisa Medinilla looking into the webcam; performance by Nadar Ensemble

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head outside the filmed frame. This shift in perspective aims, among other things, to complexify the relationship between reality and virtuality, which until this point in the composition has been set up as a clear binary. It is the first step in a bigger chain of consequences that runs through all four parts of the *Piano Hero* cycle and culminates in *Piano Hero #4*, as will be explained later.

An inversion of the perspective shift in *Piano Hero #1* can be found in *Generation Kill*, a composition from 2012, also written for the Nadar Ensemble and the Donaueschingen Festival. In this composition there are four instrumentalists sitting in a line, each one behind a semi-transparent screen. In front of these screens, four performers operating game controllers are seated with their backs to the audience. Via the game controllers, these performers manipulate custom-designed software (programmed in *Max* by Josiah Oberholtzer) with which audio-visual samples of the instrumentalists sitting behind the screens are played back and manipulated. These manipulated samples are then projected onto the screens, while the related sounds are heard from the speakers. Using the game controller, each performer can also activate two webcams, one filming the instrumentalist behind the screen and the other filming the "game controller performer". This second camera is activated in the second half of the composition, immediately after military footage is shown of US drones killing people presumed to be terrorists. The audience then suddenly sees the faces of the hitherto anonymous game controller performers, who have just gained lethal authority.

Not only are their faces at this point finally revealed, but they are also looking directly at the members of the audience, breaking the fourth wall and making them accomplices.

Watch Me Watch You Watch Me

In *W (Double U)*, a collaborative, interactive performance for two participants/performers, the gaze of the spectator/performer has been fully instrumentalized, the fourth wall broken down entirely. This performance was developed in 2010 by the Belgian experimental, high-tech, multidisciplinary company "CREW", which creates immersive artworks that "aim to visualize how technology is changing us" through so-called "scientific fiction".[17] *W (Double U)* is based on the group's then state-of-the-art "Headswap" dispositive.

> "In this performance, immersive technology is used for the live exchange of vision. Two spectators in different geographic locations are equipped with a head-mounted omni-directional camera and display. By means of this immersive equipment their fields of vision are swapped, enabling the participants to perceive the world through another person's point of view. Moreover, they can look and move around in each other's field of vision, and have to perform by sustaining and guiding each other via microphone and headset. They embody, as it were, the visual field of the other, somewhere else."[18]

A similar approach, though with a different focus, can be found in Alexander Schubert's participative installation *Unity Switch* (2019)[19]. Four performers sit at four tables in four different rooms. On the opposite side of each table, facing the performer, sits a participating audience member. All eight are wearing headphones and a VR headset on which is mounted a camera filming in the first-person view. The "Unity Switch" that lends its name to this installation is a large software-matrix that functions like CREW's "Headswap", albeit with eight interchangeable FPVs and sound perspectives. Over a 25-minute time span, the participants are subjected to constant re-routings of the audio-visual data streams, as well as to voice commands from the performers, all this on top of an underlying stable pulse that helps to synchronize the actions of the eight participants. In addition to these live re-routings of the FPV from one performer to another, Schubert inserts prerecorded footage, pushing the alienation arising from these digital re-embodiments even further. Referring to the selfie culture, there is also a moment when the performers take a photo of their partner/audience member, but while doing so, the audience member's view changes three times: from their own perspective to the perspective of the performer taking the picture (turning it into an out-of-body selfie), to someone else taking a photo, and then finally to someone else being photographed.
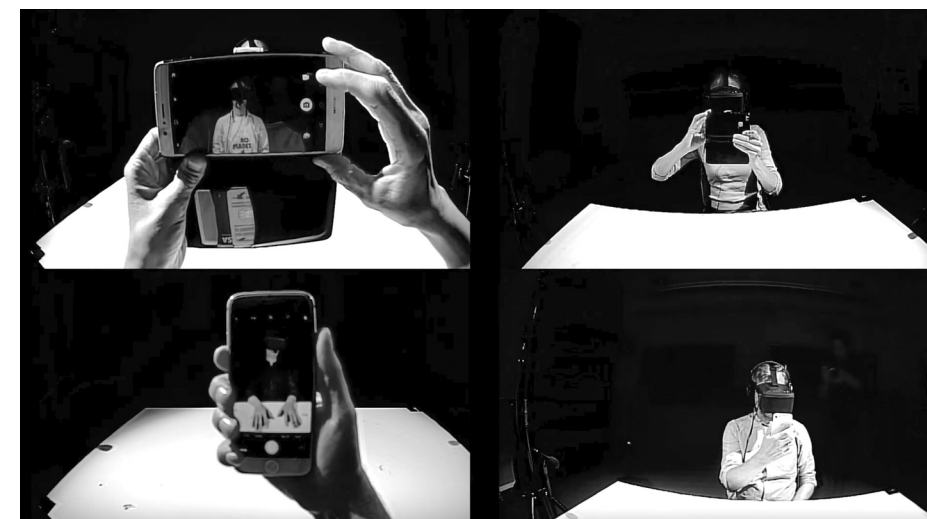
Alexander Schubert: „Unity Switch", performance by Defunensemble

© Alexander Schubert, screenshot from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-fVup4POWs

Although fundamentally different in format as well as technological and performative setup, there are many links to be found between *Unity Switch* and *Piano Hero #4* (2016)[20], the fourth part of the *Piano Hero* cycle. Both works deal with agency and control, the relationships between digital and physical embodiment, and the interplay between different realities. Both works instrumentalize the audience's gaze through similar strategies, using audio as well as live and non-live video.

Written for MIDI keyboard, piano resonances, live-electronics and video, *Piano Hero #4* begins with a repetition of the previously described TPV/webcam moment from *Piano Hero #1*. However, unlike *Piano Hero #1*, the pianist's actions are not filmed live, but are prerecorded, with the pianist synchronizing his live gestures to the recorded material, aided by a click track. Soon, though, the camera perspective moves toward the pianist and transforms from TPV to FPV: the audience suddenly seems to be looking through the eyes of the pianist as (s)he continues to play at the keyboard. In the course of *Piano Hero #4*, several more perspective changes occur, going from a close-up of the hands and arms of Frederik Croene (the virtual pianist in *Piano Hero #1*) tapping away on the inside of a piano, to a "behind-the-scenes" perspective of the recording session in which he improvised inside the piano, and a second "behind-the-scenes" perspective from the filming of the FPV videos with the same pianist who is now performing the live part. In both of these "behind-the-scenes" perspectives, I

Stefan Prins: „Piano Hero #4" – the "watch me watch you watch me"-moment; performance by Stephane Ginsburgh, Muziekcentrum de Bijloke, 2017

© Stefan Prins

am also in the picture, seen supervising the recordings. In the next shift in perspective, the "virtual camera" pulls away from the pianist as if the pianist's body had split in two ("out-of-body-view"), then moves around the keyboard and stops halfway, gazing at the pianist from the side. When the pianist then directs his/her gaze to the virtual camera and looks straight into the lens, sideways, his/her projection is looking dire ctly at the audience. The audience members' gaze and bodies have thus collapsed into the singular gaze and body of the virtual camera/out-of-body-pianist. Next, the pianist turns his/her gaze toward the audience and a hidden live camera is activated that films the audience frontally, as if they were looking through the eyes of the pianist, again suggesting a FPV. The audience is watching a projection of itself, while watching the pianist, who is watching the audience ("watch-me-watch-you-watch-me view") (see image above).

 This situation is reminiscent of both Schubert's *Unity Switch* and Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, with the "performers" (the pianist and the painter) looking at their respective "audiences" (the concert audience and the King and Queen, who

also see themselves reflected in the mirror at the back). This change in perspective is the penultimate step in the chain of consequences that started in *Piano Hero #1* with the "webcam moment" and the audience seeing itself for the first time, vaguely, in the background.

 In a final perspectival transformation, the camera switches back to the TPV, following both the live and prerecorded/virtual pianists as they stand up from the keyboard and walk backstage, through a curtain, as if taking a cue from the mysterious man who stands in a doorway in the background of *Las Meninas*. As the camera follows the pianist walking through the curtain, we see a wide, open field, with a crisp blue sky and bright sunlight. Again, the perspective has changed to FPV, and we see a pair of hands – mine – before the camera moves up as the pianist gazes at the horizon and starts walking toward the sun while the video fades to black.

Slightly Outside the Frame

In the above paragraphs I have focused on sound-based artworks in which attempts were made to instrumentalize the audience and its gaze through technological, audio-visual means. The point of departure was the selfie and the focus was on works in which the traditional, one-directional relationship between audience and performer was complexified or entirely broken up. This rather confined framing excluded many sound-based artworks in which the selfie (or clear references to it) plays an important role, but which do not challenge the traditional audience-performer relationship, do not use the contemporary technological apparatus related to the selfie, and/or are not performed live. Natacha Diels' compositions *35 Degrees* and *Elpis*, for example, combine selfies of the performers taken before the concert as well as cut-out magazine close-ups of female models into an animated video to which the live-performing musicians relate in sound and performance. These two works seem to point toward the previously mentioned feminist perspective on the selfie culture. Jennifer Walshe also extensively uses and reflects upon self-imagery in her performances and compositions (such as her 1984 *It's OK, A History of the Voice: part 1, EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT*), as does Oscar Escudero in his *Custom* series.

 The idea of the selfie is also implicitly present in many recent compositions where concepts of self-portrait (of the composer and/or the performers), self-exposure, or self-therapy are key. Natacha Diels frequently uses selfies and images of herself and the musicians for whom she develops non-live video works (*Self Portrait*, *The Colors Don't Match*, *A Square is not a Bee*). Similarly, Johannes Kreidler often features himself alongside the performers in his audio-visual, fixed media works (*Film 1, Film 2, Film 3*), as does François Sarhan (*Situation 7 & 12* and *Ephémère Enchaîné*, with ensemble). In her Public Privacy series, Brigitta Muntendorf taps into the selfie culture using videos she found online in which

people filmed themselves playing musical instruments in private circumstances.

Martin Schüttler's "*My Mother was a piano teacher […]*" is a musical portrait of the six members of the Ictus Ensemble, for whom he composed the work. Their biographical information is literally and textually integrated into the fabric of the piece itself, with the musicians being filmed as they perform live in isolated rooms backstage. Alexander Schubert's non-live video work *Acceptance* deals with the trauma and self-therapy of both the composer himself and Carola Schaal, the performer for and with whom this work was developed, featuring extensive imagery of both individuals.

In no way or form do the artworks I included or referred to in this essay constitute an exhaustive list. The selection is strongly limited by my personal knowledge of the contemporary art scene and by its underlying mechanisms of reception and promotion. In my selection, however, I have tried to zoom in on works that exhibit very different approaches and technological solutions, and to relate them to works from my own artistic catalogue. One can confidently assume that this list will continue to grow in an increasingly technologized world mediated and governed by screens, security cameras, and other surveillance mechanisms.

[1] https://time.com/4508252/hillary-clinton-epic-selfie/ (last accessed on 9/10/2019).

[2] https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-43197018#_ga=2.135750835.36682941.1555931475-1093713342.1555931475 (last accessed on 9/10/2019).

[3] https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/jan/23/faking-it-how-selfie-dysmorphia-is-driving-people-to-seek-surgery (last accessed on 9/10/2019).

[4] John Berger: *Ways of Seeing*, London, 1972/2008, p. 10.

[5] https://maifeminism.com/how-the-light-gets-in-notes-on-the-female-gaze-and-selfie-culture/ (last accessed on 9/10/2019).

[6] https://time.com/4718143/selfie-exhibition-saatchi-gallery-london/ (last accessed on 9/10/2019).

[7] https://www.grammy.com/grammys/artists/adele (last accessed on 26/9/2019).

[8] https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/may/31/adele-tells-fan-to-stop-filming-gig-and-enjoy-it-in-real-life (last accessed on 26/9/2019).

[9] https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-northamptonshire-35932808 (last accessed on 26/9/2019).

[10] http://ivodimchev.com/selfie.htm (last accessed on 26/9/2019).

[11] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VS2ukRgj9bA (last accessed on 26/9/2019).

[12] Stefan Prins: *Augmented*, DVD + CD, Kairos 0015044KAI, Vienna, 2019.

[13] http://www.simonsteenandersen.dk/SelfSimulator.htm (last accessed on 9/10/2019).

[14] http://www.simonsteenandersen.dk/SelfSimulator.htm (last accessed on 9/10/2019).

[15] Performed by Belgian pianist Frederik Croene.

[16] Stefan Prins: *Augmented*, DVD + CD, Kairos 0015044KAI, Vienna, 2019.

[17] http://www.crewonline.org/art/home (last accessed on 9/10/2019).

[18] http://www.crewonline.org/art/keywords (last accessed on 9/10/2019); for a short video introduction on "Headswap": https://vimeopro.com/empac/empac-video-archive/video/70510532 (last accessed on 9/10/2019).

[19] http://alexanderschubert.net/works/Unity_Switch.php (last accessed on 9/10/2019)

[20] Stefan Prins: *Augmented*, DVD + CD, Kairos 0015044KAI, Vienna, 2019.