

**NEIL DAVIDSON
& ARILD VANGE**

This text is a transcription of a conversation between Arild Vange, a Norwegian poet and translator and Neil Davidson, a guitar player and composer. Arild's work is concerned with finding ways of incorporating listening into the formal process of making his poems and associated texts. He also works as a translator (from German into Norwegian) and has translated writing by Georg Trakl, Peter Waterhouse, Yoko Tawada, Franz Kafka, Thomas Kling and Anja Utler. Neil composes pieces that have little content but lots of form. He also improvises and writes. Their mutual interest in improvisation coincided with reading Emmanuel Levinas's books about the ethics of the encounter with the other. Arild's last published work, *annerledes enn*, included a CD of the two performing together.

In October 2010 Arild and Neil embarked on a tour of high schools in the Trondelag area of Norway. Their presentations consisted of an improvisation using text and sound and a conversation with the students about what they had just heard. Around that time they were also developing a theatre performance in collaboration with five other Norwegian artists. The conversations took place in Arild's house in Trondheim.

PART ONE

Neil Something that I keep coming back to thinking about was the white cat that we saw around the corner. Do you remember when we walked round the fjord? We stopped and there was a small white cat sitting up to the left and its ears were moving, and you said “it is communicating with its ears” and I added “and its whiteness”. This small totemic figure has become analogous of the whole venture, there’s a sort of pagan symbolism to this small white animal sitting watching us very intently with its ears moving around like radar antennae. Conventionally we would say that it receives information with its ears, but it was sending information. Its presence was very emphatic; it had found a very green patch of grass to sit in, in its whiteness, a stark contrast. So, what is this cat? We don’t know this cat, but it’s very busy. It’s doing things. And that’s fine. We go on and the cat goes on.

Arild Yes, we have been on the whole tour, performing for this cat. Because the students have been, you can’t see it so easily as with the cat, but they are also communicating with their ears, their ears were also working, and their faces were talking very much. We were speaking to their faces and they were responding.

Neil When we told them that you were watching, noticing how they were behaving, that I could hear them, that we were listening to them, that also drew attention to their being involved which made them react.

Arild Which was quite odd for them, they didn’t think about that, I think, that they are as important as we are. I think you have to get used to that idea.

Neil Yes, it takes some time and it takes different strategies for it to be accepted. And it’s not a question of them doing whatever they want, starting to bang the chairs, to join in, because to do whatever you want, isn’t really the point, in any situation: it raises the questions; how do you know what you want? How does what you do affect the others?

Arild Yes, and in a way then we are back to the cat. Because we were walking and there was a cat sitting there, somewhere. There was no intentional space at all. We stopped, looking at the cat. And that was in a way the performance, 'A' performance, of course. Because you now mentioned the white cat, I was thinking about the white reindeer that we saw earlier in the week, there is a connection through the whiteness. But the white reindeer is probably about as strange as we were in our performance, in relation to the students. A white cat is not so unusual. The white cat could be a more usual way of playing the guitar for instance or a more usual way of performing with poetry and music or guitar playing.

Neil Or if the cat came over and rubbed itself against our legs...

Arild Yes, that would be a pop song.

Neil Finger picking folk guitar...

Arild A nice, nice folk song.

Neil But it didn't do that, it was communicating otherwise, with its ears.

Arild One of the teachers in Røros mentioned the sentence, "This beach welcomes you every day with new waves." I saw these words in a Greek town on the wall, and I wrote it down. The teacher said, "You are very clever with sentences". That's funny because they are often not mine. I have not invented these sentences. So, it's not the artist as 'I', as a subject, as the great writer who invents very genius-like things. The basis of it all is the act of listening and taking in that which is already in the world, to take things that are present in the world into yourself or to take in that which you hear, or are listening to. If something hits you or makes an impact on you, you write it down. And then it starts a movement of words and it connects; because of the words in this sentence, they have their syllables, they have their sounds and rhythm so this rhythm starts, these rhythms and sounds, vowels and consonants, they are starting something.

The rest is dependent on that, these connections. It has to be connected. It's like building a building. It must fit together. Meaning, you might say, comes after you have connected the different sounds, different syllables and words. Then you will have a building and the building will have meaning. Because of course you can finish the building, you can stay there, you don't have to be outside in the night, and perhaps you have a sleeping room and like that. But the poem is not saying that 'this is the sleeping room', and 'this is the kitchen', 'here you can have some food if you like'. That's often what boring poems do, I think. Because a traditional poem is often describing where the kitchen is in the house and where the cellar is. There is no sauna for instance. In my poems you have to find that out for yourself, listening to the whole, in a way. I think the acoustic part of it is more important because it goes deeper, or is more important than the level of feeling and thinking. The acoustic part is building the most important parts of the house I think. In a way I don't like metaphors, but it was only a way to... because when you are playing with stones and I am saying words and they are sounding, that's it. There is not an intentional message of any sort such as: "isn't it nice with the sea, the sun..."

Neil But those things are also implied; you can sit and look at the fjord, that might be the message or the poetics. But it's not necessary to describe the fjord.

Arild You said one day that with the fjord here you have a space to think into. So when I get up every day I have this space to think in, in the view. That's very interesting.

Neil And people have said that that's what our performance gives them, a space to think in.

Arild You were saying to the students about the performance that "this will be funny" and in a way that's a kind of improvisation. We hadn't 'rehearsed' that, we hadn't discussed that that would be a good thing to say. You improvised this thought. Perhaps it's easier to say something like that because we've built up a kind of frame

through our five days of performing. I suppose my question is: Is this frame very important for improvising? Or doesn't it matter at all? When we are playing we have a certain frame?

Neil Yes. I think the frame, if we can call it that, is determined by formal things such as where we are sitting, who we are talking to, forms of address, forms of listening, the formal relation between the audience and the performers; all of these can be played with and experimented with. The word 'improvisation' is troublesome because it's deceptively simple. Improvisation is how we relate to the world when something unexpected happens, we find a way to deal with it or we try and do things differently. The idea of play is important, how people deal with formal constraints. The Commedia dell'arte tradition of improvising works within very strict roles, there are a set number of characters with set relations, and the performance is realised through very fine balancing with these established roles. And on one level what we do isn't that different with you having a set series of poems to read from and I have an instrument with its established dimensions and some objects beyond the guitar, which have specific properties. A stone has a certain weight and size and there's a limit to how far that can be taken out of itself, not very far really. But by posing new relationships it gives rise to something else, such as when I propose a sound in relation to your poem, and you read it in relation to a sound that hasn't had that combination before. These relationships are only possible because we have those things there, because you're there and I'm there, the book is there. All of that problematizes the idea of 'free' improvisation. But we are free to do these things within this formal constraint. It's not a question of absolutes or essential essences of things but about negotiation in a broad sense; not agreement but the movement of negotiation.

Arild The encounter is form.

Neil Absolutely.

Arild And that's the start of it in a way. And this form is plastic.

Neil And it's repeatable. I can go and play with someone I don't know, like with Michael Duch for example when we played in your garden a few years ago, although it's different because his way of presenting himself and his sounds and his relation to form and so on is different. It's more or less the encounter that is the premise that we can assume is there from which the activity can be expanded on. It comes from that. But we've been talking about these things and we've avoided the aesthetic question of 'what do we want to happen?' 'What do we want it to sound like?' I tend to avoid talking about that. But maybe we could come around it by asking, is there something particular about the way you write that makes your poems suitable for this kind of activity?

Arild I think so. I am inspired by this way of playing in my writing. Especially with this last book, *annerledes enn*, I have been trying to write the poems in a kind of improvised way, I am trying to improvise. They are very dialogical. But that was not intended. The poems were written in two phases. First I had an idea of ... no in the start I didn't have an idea. I had nothing. I was sitting in different places, in cafes and like that, writing. My idea was to write very simple things about the things I saw on the table, in a café or in the street; more or less what the city was saying to me. And I only wanted to write these things down not to describe them. For instance I would not write down 'ashtray'. I would write 'Marlboro' if that was written on an ashtray. And I wrote down all these names and languages that I saw or heard, and I got many associations from them. I wrote everything down. I tried to open up to take the city in, or what I saw and heard of the city. And after a while I had a great deal of material from Berlin and Trondheim, Bergen and other cities, and after a while I realized I was writing about a kind of encounter with cities. And also that I was trying to describe the life of the cities and the chaotic associations and all the things happening at the same time, I was trying to reproduce that in my poems. But because I had so many other things to do, I think it took me perhaps two years to really concentrate on this material. When I started on it I worked quite a lot and then it stopped. I didn't manage to come further, and then I thought – they are not finished but I don't know what to

do with them. So I sent them to my editor. It took quite some time before I got an answer. But during that time I realised what to do. It started when I was in Mytilene in Greece. I had some books with me, we were there for three weeks and I started to write the first day and wrote every day, sitting some hours all over the place. But at the same time I read some Sappho poems, I read essays from Giorgos Seferis, the Nobel Prize winner who translated Eliot. And as I was writing my own texts I put in some Sappho. I translated some German translations of Sappho into Norwegian and there were some very interesting sentences from Seferis, so I put them into the text as well. But I didn't have a plan with this. I only did it because they were talking to me, so to say. So when I had this pause while the manuscript was with my editor I suddenly got the idea. I remember I was going to a meeting at the translation association and I had some time to spend in my hotel room. And I had a book of essays from Inger Christensen with me and there were some sentences from Inger Christensen that made a very strong impact on me. So I put them into some of these chaotic long poems and I was sitting there in this bed trying to listen to the poems, to what was happening. And it was very fascinating because the poems were changing. I had to take out some sentences and to change some other sentences. It was mainly an act of listening. When I went to Glasgow to your festival with the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra I did the same thing. I was sitting in a café reading something and also on the plane back with the brochure I got from you and did the same thing, with the last poem, the Berlin poem. This act of listening and taking what I hear into my own poems or responding to what I had read is comparable to improvising with you. Through this dialogical way of writing and listening I think that the poems are open, they are not fixed. There are many possibilities in each poem, how to write, how to read them and also the interaction between the poems because they are written in a kind of improvised way. They are also very suitable for improvising with. But all of this was not intended. I did not know that my poems were like this. I realised it the first time when *annerledes enn* was released and I had a concert with Michael Duch and Kyrre Laastad. As they started to play and I started to read from the beginning of the book I came to somewhere in the middle of the

first poem and I thought, I can't continue in the poem. What comes in the next sentences does not respond with what they are doing now so I had to think, what do I do? This happened very fast. I started to look through the book to find something which could respond to their playing. And I thought, I have found something; and I did that through the whole concert. I think we played half an hour. And for me it was an extremely nice experience because I realised that I can put the words together every time in new ways.

Neil You mentioned Sappho, and that has a resonance with this, in that you are dealing with fragments, and I'm also dealing with fragments because I deliberately stop a sequence of events and start something new to break up its continuity so that it doesn't sound like one unified object in the sense that if I played a Bach piece on the guitar the relation between the piece and the guitar starts to produce the illusion of a whole. But our fragments happen in the room with the audience. The Sappho fragments are fragments for us, not for Sappho. They are that way because of what has happened to the document, bits of papyrus or tablets or whatever they were written on but we've adopted some aspects of that archaeological form, working with relics, things that we've found: you've been finding bits of text in the city and I'm picking up stones on the beach in Frøya or outside your house and in Lisbon. We're avoiding the old self-expression thing of having something inside of me which I want to get out, expressing, for example a song which has occurred to me that I want to play. The sounds I'm making are the antithesis of that; causing problems in the instrument, or on the instrument, those things are in my control but I'm also deliberately setting out to make things not in my control. It's about setting things up that are outside of expression and the decisions to make the sounds in this way are related to you and to others, what you've said, how loud you speak, how long you speak, what else is happening in the room. Yesterday we played louder and I made slightly more overt things happen because the situation seemed to demand something quite positive, very affirmative. So perhaps we can say that your poems are not so much an expression of you the artist, but that they function as a kind of filter, as a sort of form-antennae for picking things up? But it's not

just a question of being passive either...

Arild No it's not passive. Because I think that's also a kind of responding. It's as you said, for you to pick up stones or whatever, using them, when you are using them you are responding with something in you. So the audience is experiencing you responding, and it's the same with me. I am responding so I am expressing something of myself in a way but it's not intentional that I want to, it has to do with trust because I believe that when I pick up things, as you say, sentences or what the city is telling me or what somebody is saying, my response is this expression of my self, so there is a trust, a trust that in the act of responding you will unfold your own content, if you want, or not. That was also very interesting in the performance in Frøya where one of the listeners said after the concert that our form opened his content.

Neil Did he mean contentment or his content?

Arild No his, as you say, his 'inner world', yes. So we are in a way our form. We are playing these sentences or these stones for him. We are stones.

PART TWO

Arild In English you have two meanings of ‘I/eye’, we are perhaps not using the eye in the visible meaning and not looking at each other. We only know that we are both in the room. I’m not looking at you when I am reading, I am only looking, when I don’t know the texts by heart I am looking in the book, or I am looking at the audience. And you are very concentrated on playing. But also, the ‘I’ as ‘I am’ is also in a way only responding through the ear, so you could say that “I hear” “I am not, I hear”.

Neil Did you say “hear I am?”

Arild Yes hear I am. Are we saying hear I am? Perhaps?

Neil Hear you are.

Arild Hear you are yes. But, perhaps, the one who is starting, you start or I start. We don’t know who is starting, and that’s also that we are ears.

Neil Yes.

Arild And then somebody starts with the saying, a sound and then if you start, are you saying “here I am” or are you addressing it to me? Hear are you. What is the question? Is there a question when you start? You don’t have to question perhaps...

Neil It’s both, it’s like instituting something or establishing the frame when the first sound happens. The first sound institutes the listening in a way or the listening comes first but it confirms; yes here we are. And sometimes the first sound is like a test to see what is possible or not possible. Maybe there’s a comparison with making the first mark on a blank page, you just have to do it. You can’t be worried about whether it’s the right sound or the wrong sound or the right gesture; once you’ve committed to it and you’re there then things start to happen. The line appears, the weight

suddenly changes; now you have black ink on the page. There's a positive/negative, there's a difference and from that suddenly everything starts unfurling: the weight of the sound in relation to the voice and the resonance of the room, everything starts to inform the next movement and the next gesture. All of that's possible, the listening act gathers that and sets it in a space. And in a sense when we've talked about the performance feeling droppable, it's held and supported and sustained by this continued attentiveness and listening, it's the weight of all these relationships and tensions and pulsions and motivations that are always adjusting until the end of the performance.

Arild So it is a kind of conversation and the first question or the first statement is perhaps "hear I am" because the one who says "here I am" interrupts the being of the other in a way. I am interrupted so our answer has always been until now "ok".

Neil Yes.

Arild And then I continue to say something so I'm interrupting you in a way and you are interrupting, so we are interrupting each other in a way. But interrupting is also not the case; perhaps, interrupting is the condition of being able to open up for something else than two 'I's sitting there.

Neil But it's an interruption that allows for the other to continue. It's not "stop so I can speak"...

Arild No it's an interruption of the 'I'.

Neil Yes, so the coherence of the subject is disrupted by the activity or the presence of the other and this is reflected in what we say as well in that the content is never stable. You don't have a comprehensive poetic product to issue forth with.

Arild No, not at all.

Neil We've sought to work with materials that reflect this interruption

of coherence or disruption of coherence where openness to the other produces this. We understand this as being what happens when we are performing, playing together. From the outside if you listen to what we've made, if you listen to a recording or hear us performing then the aesthetic product (if you decide to view it as that), what you can apprehend when you're listening or watching, might seem counter to this because it's very emphatic. There's a lot of conviction or weight or purpose in how we are doing what we're doing, which is perhaps strange, because we're not sure, to a large extent. And also you can read, your voice is secure, you won't get it wrong.

Arild But I think that's coming from the interruption of the 'I', the security.

Neil The insecurity of the performance?

Arild Yes and the insecurity of the performance is giving it its strength, its substance.

Neil Yes it's not negative, for example to say insecure usually means failing in a subjective sense. But what we're saying is it's an achievement in a subjective sense.

Arild Perhaps because we are failing ourselves.

Neil Yes, in the mythology of the coherent self.

Arild Yes.

Neil But in a sense we're also achieving each other, achieving is a horrible word, we're, there's more going on because we're giving up certain coherences to produce more than the sum of the two 'I's. Something that we're not in control of, it's an excess of our production, and it both makes sense to try and use the language of economy in this because it doesn't work and also to resist using the language of economy because it seems inappropriate but it's not quantifiable, you can't count how many it is or reckon its value partly

because it's not the individual 'I's that are producing something, it's not your solitary poetry and my solitary guitar added together.

Arild The matter of the auditory is very interesting because we are back to the start when we met and I discovered this kind of music, because I was much occupied with Emmanuel Levinas and this kernel sentence "putting the other one first". And when I was listening to you playing at that time six years ago, also playing with others I thought I heard suddenly every sound so it was in a way putting the sound first. Every sound was very important. Much more important I thought than in any other kind of music I had heard. I think that was the point that made me think that, as I was writing *Fjordarbeid* at the same time, a cycle about childhood, that I could not write like I did any more, because every sound has or needs another space, a space for itself. It has to have this space for itself to be able to connect with other sounds, with other words. And that's also a kind of conversation between the words. So a poem is a kind of third occurring. I think when we are playing there are connections arising or occurring the whole time or there are bindings. That's also what is hiding all of it, it's fragile but that's because the sounds are speaking with each other. And the sounds don't have to like each other but they take the other sounds seriously.

Neil Yes.

Arild They are playing in a serious way, these sounds, and combining themselves.

Neil Yes, because they're so different they're not harmonious.

Arild So perhaps one might change the word composition to the word con-position. I have understood your way of composing in that way, that you have a kind of frame and inside of that frame a lot of things happen that are not intentional, that you have not fixed, so there are occurring a lot of connections inside of this frame in the composition. Because you are not composing in a way, you are

opening up a space for connection.

Neil Yes.

Arild Between the musicians and between the sounds. And also in our case, we are not composing but connecting. And it is a composition then.

Neil I was reading something by a French thinker called Bruno Latour. He was arguing for compositionism as opposed to criticism. Instead of taking things apart to analyse them one might put them together to analyse them. He's interested in networks. If you were to take the idea of analysis through the process of adding things, putting things together, comparing things, looking at how they are different then this dimension of questioning and proposing possibilities by placing sounds and words next to each other; there's an analytical sense emerging. We're also trying to resist using the word criticism where there's a critical dimension, asking instead if it's ok, what is this? What are these sounds? What do these objects do when we start to put them in relation with each other? For example the stone and the guitar ... they don't normally belong together but in this relation we can ask what is a stone; we could break it open or we could grind it down to dust then ask, what is it now? Is it something else? Whereas another way to ask what it is, is to put it on the guitar and it does something, its behaviour is peculiar to it so it reveals something else about itself and in turn the guitar, and so this adding things together sense of composition gives a new analytical angle or rather it poses new questions and possibilities; ways of doing things otherwise.

Arild So the most important things then are the relations between the sounds, not each sound. But you have to focus to get these relations; you have to focus on each sound?

Neil The danger here would be to think of this as like John Cage saying 'let the sounds be themselves', because we're not doing that. We're retaining a very rich relation between for example me and the

sounds and you and the words you make. We're not trying to deny that there's a historical or biographical big fat saturated relationship between us and our materials. But, because we propose them in relation to each other, as we said earlier, the coherence of the subject is thrown into question when we propose these questions of things. So the sound for me is very important in order to give it, to put it in relation to something, to be compositional if we want to use that term.

Arild But that seems to be another way of transforming this 'I' or this 'ego' movement or ego striving, because if I have understood Cage or some of his thinking he wanted to overcome the ego through composing by chance.

Neil Yes, by using chance operations trying to take his taste out of the equation.

Arild He thought improvising would mean that the improvisers would only produce their own clichés. But we are in any case transforming that ego that he wanted to transform or overcome with his composition by chance by means of this concept of putting the other one first, responding on the other. Because the 'I' is focussed on responding the main movement is towards what the other person is doing. So we have in a way also overcome this ego.

Neil Yes, it's a different formulation, there are points at which the two attitudes overlap and points at which they are divergent, this relationship that we're talking about, between two performers listening to each other has been available for a very long time, it's not something that is ours to discover or anything like that, it's present in conversation, it's fairly fundamental in many ways. I think Cage was, at least some of the time, trying to avoid that relation as well. Maybe he was trying to be more radical and remove that for whatever his reasons are. I don't know. I think we're possibly dealing with similar questions, for example harmony produces a hierarchy between noise and pitch and we're dealing with that by ignoring or trying to avoid that hierarchy. In some ways it's easier because there's a voice and a guitar, we need to try to find ways to make sure

the voice isn't more important than the guitar and the guitar isn't more important than the voice, and that is dealt with in the form that we use. If I was playing with a musician who was always playing melodically then that could produce a hierarchy between the melody and the noise because the ears generally tune in to the melody because we're in a listening culture that normally puts melody at the forefront of musical practices. And while there is harmony and melody in some Cage pieces it's not because that's the priority. Sometimes chance has given rise to that thing happening in the music. He had different attitudes to improvisation at different times in his life, and I think what he was dismissive of were routines, norms, clichés. I make sounds that are more or less repeatable. And they are drawn from a tradition of sorts, from other people improvising, doing different sonic things. And your words are drawn from different poetic traditions. That's not the issue. The cliché is a question of repetition. A cliché has to be repeatable otherwise it's not a cliché. A lot of what Cage said became a cliché because he kept repeating it, saying the same things again and again. And that's fine. He had something to talk about, and he thought it was still important. But when we put the relationship first rather than the content there's a forgetting of content-related-to-the-I in the sense of trying to deal with the openness of the listening relation. In order to support that and to do justice to that listening relationship you in a sense forget the importance of the sounds (and the clichés). I've found that I'm trying to find sounds that are as unburdened by cultural references as possible. Of course there will be cultural references but I just want them to be able to move. Inevitably a reference will appear; people will perceive them and interpret the sounds in a particular way. They might say "that sounds like such and such an improviser", or "that sounds like some film music" or that it evokes something. That's not a problem but it's not my intention. I'm trying to forget that stuff to be open to the relationship. And I suppose a potential for this practice is to draw attention to social forms. What might be the biggest failure or the biggest cliché is that we don't succeed in drawing attention to the social forms. In some of the conversations after the performances in schools we've managed to convey some of these issues to people and heard them asking us questions about

these things and there's been a sense that there's been an understanding of what's at stake with this stuff. But then, it's very difficult to get a sense that it extends beyond our performance. It's not that we're going evangelically to say "this is how it should be".

Arild No.

Neil But on the other hand a bad scenario would be to think "we're the artists, we show you this stuff" and then we go away and that's the end of it. I suppose the expectation is, normally, that some school students see some culture and are supposedly enlightened by it then they go on with their lives. Certainly the kind of things we've talked about afterwards in the schools have been about saying "this is about more than just the sounds you hear", about more than the performance; music is always about more than just music, poetry is about more than just poetry.

Arild Yes.

Neil It's about drawing attention to the activity of being in an aesthetic practice in a social scenario.

This pamphlet has been published as part of the exhibition *Thinking Ourselves into Existence*, curated by Psykick Dancehall and Jon Marshall, at the CCA, Glasgow, February 2011.

Thinking Ourselves into Existence is the third in a series of four projects in CCA's Vanguard initiative. Vanguard is a curatorial development programme that aims to support early career curators to realise ambitious programming within Scotland.



