

# Empathy Flow

Master Thesis

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## Introduction

The flow connection

By receiving critiques and engaging in discussions about my work with painting and silk screen printing, I came to realize the significance of mind-states in relation to my artistic practice. In the past, I was uncertain about the link between my work in art and my practice as a musician. It felt like I was operating in two separate worlds, and when I tried to explore both at the same time, I didn't feel like I was fully diving into either. It was an unsatisfactory experience that left me feeling like something was missing. Gradually over time, the pieces of this puzzle fall into place.

In the examination of a diverse set of artistic projects in relation to flow-theory, a realization emerges in the importance of collaboration: in the practice of music, flow is experienced in the fusion of collective action and consciousness. Painting was an unconscious pursuit of the flow-state, which I often achieved, but more often in the crafting of canvases, than in the presentation. Similarly, in craftsmanship, flow emerges from the clearly defined tasks and material feedback. In performance art flow is found to be largely dependant on audience. This thesis, and the resulting practical work, is a reflection on the concept of flow, as experienced through performance art, and the significance of improvisation in this context.

Where artistic practise and research might serve as a good focus point as both the creation and presentation of art requires community.

## Flow – The Psychology of Optimal Experience

In the field of *positive psychology*, **flow** is a term coined in the mid-1970s by researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He researched flow as the positive experience of an elevated state of mind which occurs when someone is completely immersed in a task. Normal experience of time and space is nullified. In his research, Csikszentmihalyi found very specific premises for achieving this condition (Fig. 1).

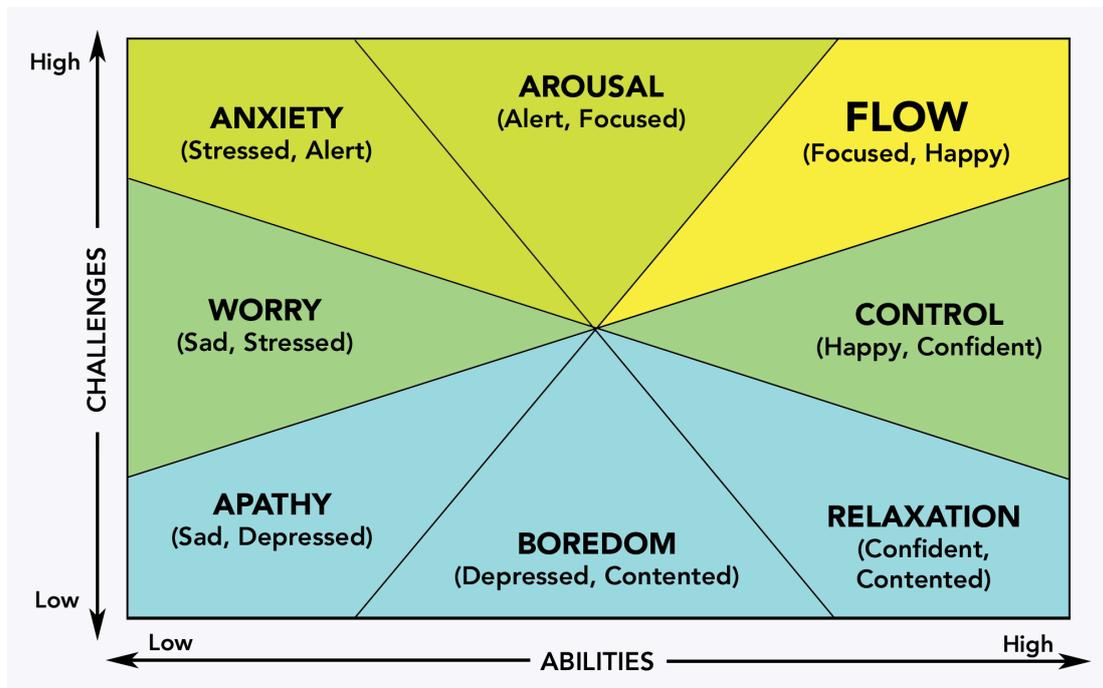


Fig 1: Csikszentmihalyi's flow-model.

Csikszentmihalyi's theory assumes that the mind is faced with one or more tasks at any given time, and shows how the relationship between the level of challenges and abilities associated with these tasks determines the state of mind, which he ranks on a scale from apathy as least satisfying, to flow as most satisfying. Flow takes place when a high level of challenge is met with the necessary high levels of skills to overcome these challenges. Furthermore, an attentive mind capable of continuously observing the level of goal achievement, is also required: attention to feedback from the material (experience) providing information.

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“Listening to music keeps anxiety away and when one really concentrates on it, it can create flow-experiences.” – Mihaly C.

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Flow-theory provides understanding and a renewed sense of confidence in my practice, as well as an interesting perspective on the purpose of art: satisfaction in the experience of making art being more important than the produced outcome. In the concluding master's project, I am exploring whether it is possible to cultivate this perspective for the listener/viewer/observer, so that a social flow of empathy may emerge in the shared attention to the experience.

The following examination shows a transition happening in my practise. I am now embracing performance art, a previously unexplored form of presentation in a public gallery space, such as K-U-K. Through the study of flow as it appears in the following projects, elements are gathered and channelled into this work. These will vary in substance, ranging from objects of significance to conceptual constructs, and may or may not be brought forth as potential artifacts, avatars or frameworks that eventually becomes part of the presentation. In allowing this freedom to make decisions late in the process, the work and its subject of matter can be affected by the feeling of the moment, as opposed to something predetermined, analysed and safe tested. This level of uncertainty serves a purpose possibly naive but certainly nothing new (Dada/Fluxus). To let the social flow become an influence, and to make room for empathy flow has become the focus of my work.

## Projects

### Combos



*“Energetic and in-your-face since 2018. In a short period of time, they have made a strong impression on the Norwegian music scene, where they have received praise and high ratings from both national and international music press. Combos is a motley crew with their feet firmly planted in different camps, but who share some conflicting personality traits; dumb, smart, fashionable, humble, and dominant. As an audience, you will quickly notice the band's highly infectious energy and their "successful genre blending", which nods to punk, alternative rock, hardcore, and hip-hop.” – Combos organizer’s letter*

As musicians playing together in a group the experience of collective “flow states” is a natural part of the groups creative process.

The role of bass in Combos, is to be the glue between rhythm and harmonics, providing a foundation for the whole sonic experience. This, in combination with the rigid musical structure of repeated riffs provide a **clearly defined task**

Energy and sound

A song is a score, which can be performed according to energy and sound.

The figures, or basslines, in the musical scores of Combos provides a structured framework. In the live performances there is little, but some, room for improvisation with the notes played on the instrument. This small room for improvisation lies in the transition from one figure to another, which is an important aspect of the musical transport. The classic saying describes this well: It’s all in the details. To minimize uncertainty, these transitions are best included in the score, but there is still a good reason to keep some of them undefined, open to be affected by the feeling of the moment.

This has to do with the sensation of *groove*, which lies in how each note is played, more specifically how hard (and where) the string is plucked, if it is plucked upwards or downwards, and the dynamic variation in this - All of these factors affect the dynamic of the whole, which becomes the feedback for the continuous energy exchange. An exchange between the performer and the instrument, between the individual performer and the group of performers, and eventually between the group and the audience.

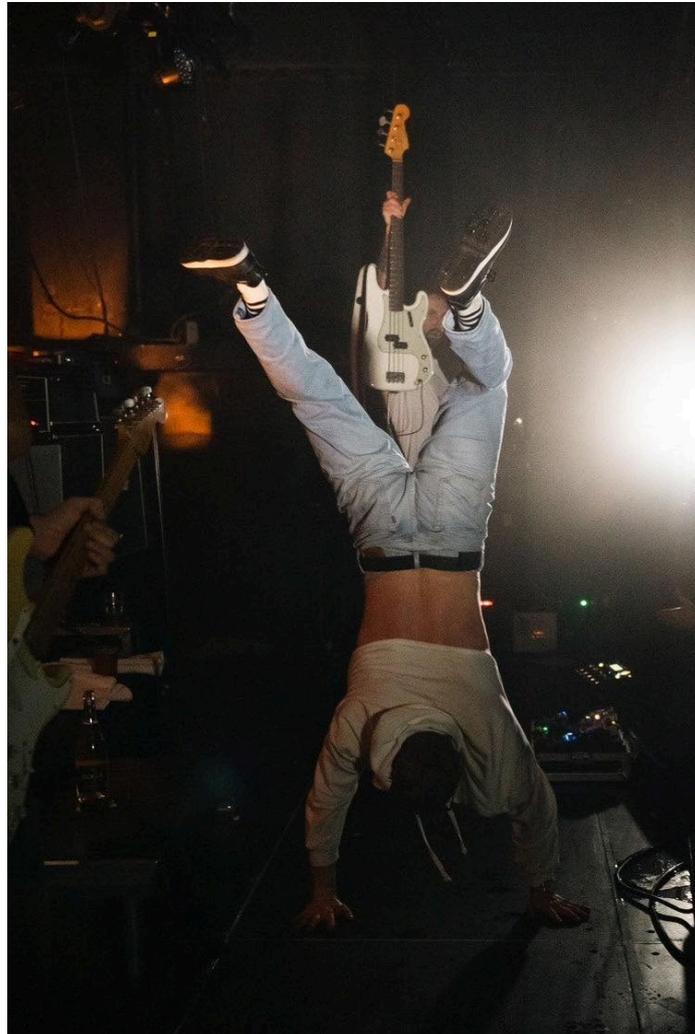
With a complex chain of connections like this there is already a lot of uncertainty, and the ability to respond to any situation with improvisation becomes crucial to maintain the energy.

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In other words, it is the cultivation of energy and the ability to maintain a continuous “flow” that is the most important work, and which will give the desired result: an energy exchange of extraordinary character, which gives the participants a kick from start to finish.

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Improvisation and enjoyment, and a fluid and “free” experience of creativity can further be explored in other aspects of the task: how one acts *on*, as well as *off* stage. Maybe on stage is the most interesting part.



*Performing with the body: movement on stage – the visual aspect of the performance – is fluid and chaotic – to keep the attention (keeps it interesting not only in the sonic experience).*

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"Combos impresses greatly with their slightly eclectic combination of people on stage, which testifies to the genre blending that makes the band one of the most interesting on the Norwegian music scene, and why they have been booked for Øya 2022, among other events." - Ellisiv Myrva, Universitas, 1.11.21 (Parkteatret)

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*Flow experiences on stage: A good example is the concert at the Øya festival in august 2022.*

This was a 60 minute show, but it felt like a moment went by. I can't remember one single second that I concentrated on anything particular, or worried about doing anything wrong. I was consumed by the feeling of having total control, over my instrument, as well as the attention of the entire crowd, which was around three to four thousand people. I also felt extremely confident and free to improvise and play around with the basslines, as well as with my body, which was dancing through the entire show. Self awareness disappeared completely.

*Sidebar:* In his book, Mihaly C. talks about the control paradox: This feeling of being in control is commonly reported by people describing their flow experiences. The paradoxical part is that one really is not in control, but rather feels the possibility of being in control.

Collaboration

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“Nothing begins with us. The more we pay attention, the more we begin to realize that all the work we ever do is a collaboration.” – Rick Rubin

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On- and offstage **collaboration**, requires **improvisation** and the ability to respond to the given situation.

This particular collaboration between different styles of flow and personas within the group requires communication, which includes improvisation, openness (to let the product transcend individual interpretation or intention), and the ability to take criticism and responsibility for your own mishaps. These are all important premises for collaborative *workflow*, which is not to be confused with the experience of flow as discussed in M.C.s book.

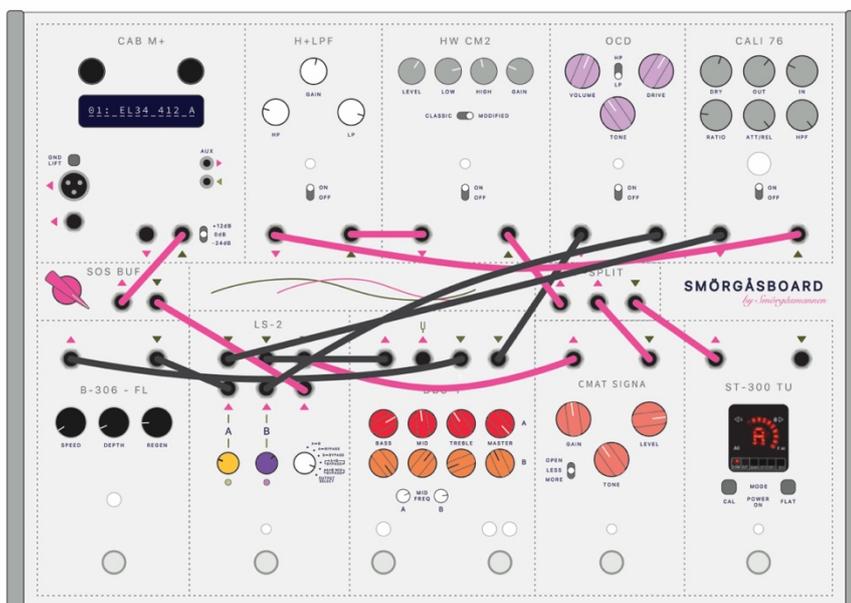
### Signal Chain



*The bass sound signal chain: Taking live sound in your own hands, as opposed to trusting the sound engineer, causes the necessity to “set the stage”, to build the pedal board and solve problems. This is where flow occurs in craftsmanship.*

To get the proper sound, the signal must go through at least one level of overdrive, which adds harmonics while giving the sound a warm and crunchy character. The only problem is how this effect typically takes away a lot of the fundamental bass frequencies in the process, especially in overdrive units intended for guitar, as opposed to bass specific overdrive units. After

trying a vast amount of different overdrives, I have settled on the OCD, more specifically the OCD V.1 of which this one has had a mod from the fabricants to resemble. To avoid loosing the bass frequencies, as well as to tighten up the sound, I have split the signal before the overdrive (Lehle P-Split underneath the board), and sent the two signals into two separate chains, where one of them is treated as the “character” (the ocd), and the other is the fundament, which is further compressed in the Cali78 compressor. The fundament is also going through overdrive (Majestic), EQ (Dual Bass Station) and another overdrive (Signa Drive), which is *stacked* (put after eachother). After compression, the signal is merged with the character-signal, which also comes through the analog flanger pedal (Big Joe), so that the flanger only affects the character signal and not the foundation-signal. After the merging the signal which is now one single signal which can be adjusted on the merger-pedal (Boss Line Selector), the signal goes through the filter (High+Low Pass Filter) where any unwanted sub-frequencies or treble can be chipped away before it finally reaches the amp and cabinet simulation (Torpedo Cab M+), where I have installed self made impulse responses (IRs), from the speaker cabinets I would normally use, which are at the rehearsal space (Aguilar 2x12 + Ampeg 410). From there the sound is ready for any scenario and can be collected by the sound engineer with an XLR cable from the cab simulator.

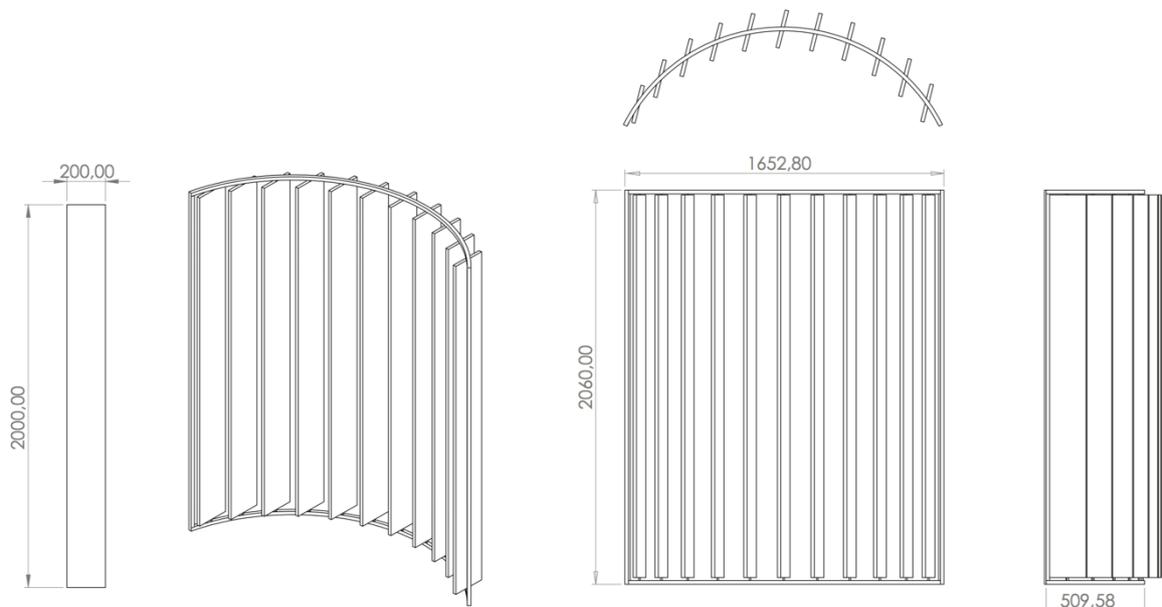


Signal chain exploration: possibilities for routing the signal (potential rehousing project)

## Room Divider

Collaboration in product design.

An emphasis was made on the discussion around creative processes, and how they may differ across disciplines. The room divider was the main project, where the only other was an introduction exercise, Shelf: an individual exercise that was to be solved in three weeks. Here began a collaboration with Nemo Anderson, an exchange student from the Netherlands, who also had been excited to work with metal in his shelf design, the preceding exercise in this interdisciplinary elective course.



Fusion of action and consciousness

In the process of designing and prototyping the room divider a reference to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's book can be made: in how it mentions the fusion of consciousness and action, which is a typical experience of flow. Towards the end of the project period, after having made the decisions that clearly defined the task we were facing, this happened through collaborative flow in constructing the actual room divider in a few days. This required communication and improvisation, which happened effortlessly. In the woodworking and welding it seemed as if our brains had become one brain, and then divided itself back in two.



Room Divider: Collaborative work (w/ Nemo Anderson)

Dicipline / surrender

The room divider was finished just a few days preceding the exhibition “11” at Knust, Nyhavna (nov 2022). Here the room divider was brought into the show as a sculptural element. This improvised move gave this exhibition a new dimension, and further contributed largely to the experienced outcome. This experience shed light on some of the main problems of my

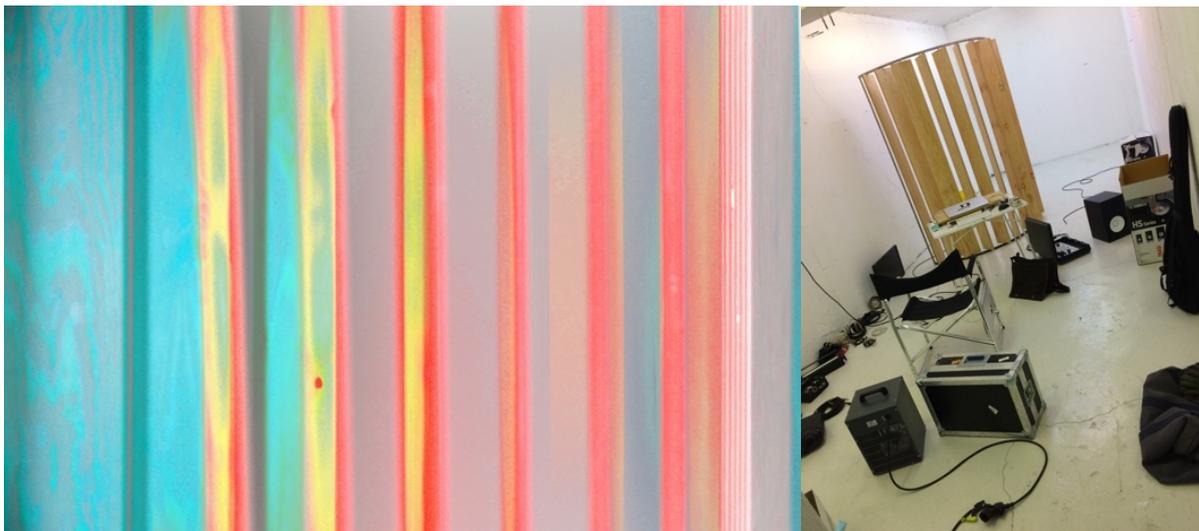
practice, such as a tendency to complicate things, and postponing important decisions. It also shed light on one of my strengths: an ability to surrender to the situation and let it develop without attachment.

We thoroughly examined the possibility of a room divider which divided sound in addition to light. In that, we looked into theory of acoustics and sound isolation (Lynda – Music Studio Setup and Acoustics).

## 11

### Combining elements

The room divider, a set of wooden blades mounted inside a semi-circle, became the sculptural element in this exhibition at Nyhavna in november 2022. Initially about exploring sound within this space, the exhibition “11” became an experiment of working with sound in tandem with an object. Sound reactive light was projected onto these manually rotating blades/slits and created an interactive play with shadow and light in the room.



The initial plan for the 11 project was to make an installation that in itself could be interesting, but in working with sound, and having this space at disposal, with a significant group of people attending the opening, this was an opportunity to experiment with performing solo with bass guitar, interacting with the sound reactive visuals. The performance became the most engaging part of the work. The feedback from the audience was that they felt hypnotized.



### Embracing performance in the sphere of art

The sonic element of this installation was made on the spot to suit the space – A cold industrial warehouse building from the 1940s. A recording of slow synth pads, accompanied by a slow rhythmic pattern of deep, reverberated kick drums, resembling a mixture of 80s film music and war sounds suited the atmosphere well. To fit the bass into this mood, I tried striking it with a bow, borrowed from the gallerist, who had his studio in the same building. This was a new approach to the instrument which I have since then continued to explore and improved, acquiring a proper bass bow, and some time-based effects units, more specifically a Suhr Discovery Delay and a Chase Bliss CXM 1978 reverb (a modern iteration of the classic Lexicon 224, a studio reverb unit which dominated the 1980s, as one of the first good digital reverb units).



Chase Bliss CXM 1978 and Suhr Discovery Delay



From right to left: 1964 Fender Precision Bass, 1981 Tokai Hard Puncher, 2006 Fender Jazz Bass

Striking the bass with a bow through these effects units (*after* the pedal board signal chain) results in a deeply unsettling and distorted *drone* which is now being explored as a

potential element in the Empathy Flow Performance project where this may be accompanied by installation of visual elements, possibly interacting with the sound, so that an immersive environment occurs. This technique with the bow generates a strong connection to the instrument, in the way the strings continuously vibrate and how this can go on and on. Additionally, this soft, pad-like timbre, could possibly stimulate my curiosity in the exploration of musical genres, specifically ambient music, possibly intended for meditation or yoga.

### Strings and Mudras

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“Listening is a creative process” – Andreas Bergsland

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Along with yoga, here comes dance into play as well. Fellow yoga teacher and practitioner of traditional Indian dance, Irena, joins in the sound studio, where the drone and a mudra dance merge in an unexpected energy exchange, conjuring up a nerve that can only arise in this moment. The visual aspect of this experiment, which can resemble a shamanic channeling ritual, is here experienced within the mind of my colleague as she is performing - images and scenes that have unfolded before her inner/third eye, and her interpretations of them. This serves as a great example of how listening can lead to flow in its simple and clear task, and in the immediate feedback that sound provides.

### Painting and VJing

#### Fluidity

As a bassist I put an emphasis on *energy* and *sound* as opposed to the pursuit of clever and original songwriting. This can be compared to the approach in painting as an exploration of the material (color, texture, balance, canvas, etc.), as opposed to being about the figurative, or recreation of photorealistic motifs. In understanding the motivation to paint as being about the experience of painting and not about the motive, my work in painting could be seen as what it really was: performance art, where the energy brought into the work was the premise for achieving satisfaction.



Monoprints

The paintings were usually abstract without a defined message, and my subjective experience of being satisfied with the quality was largely affected by the feelings associated with the work. The audience was not important.

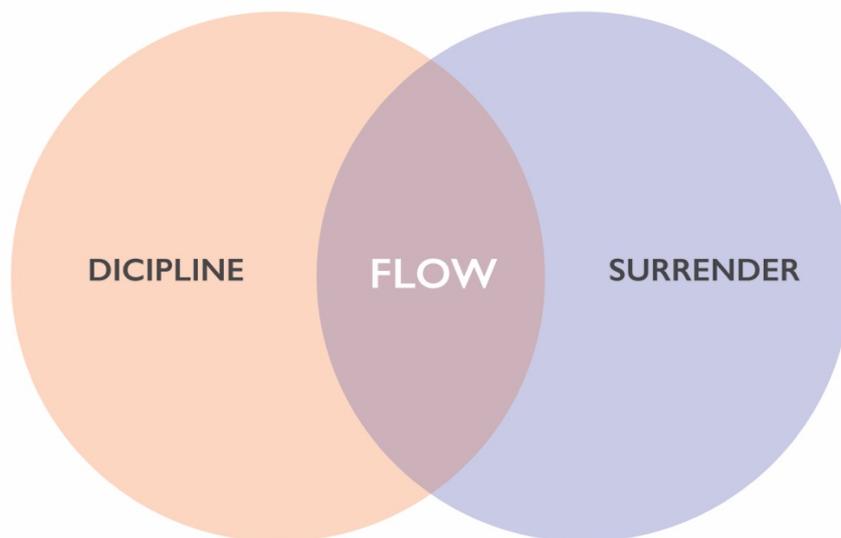
Seeing improvisation as essential for my painting practise can explain some of the choices made related to that work, and where I will now approach it differently the next time painting. Painting live? I tried it and rejected it, even though it was an important step to my perspective on performance. Previous perspective has been influenced by a more subjective spiritual approach compared to the scientific perspective of flow theory.

Improvisation (Responding to the situation)

The connection between the music practice and the painting practice is obviously found in the shared pursuit and achievement of flow states. A less obvious connection is the role of improvisation.

There is an interesting interconnection between improvisation and flow states. A connection in premises for successful achievement, as well as in how one can facilitate the other:

Successful improvisation requires understanding and technical skills related to the situation and the task, a well-trained intuition, presence and attention. In musical performance, where one makes use of the whole self, as opposed to just the intellect, a good and stable link between the body and mind is also crucial. Improvisation can in most contexts stimulate creativity and free one from *self-awareness*, allowing a person to *surrender* into a flow state.



Flow appears in the intersection of discipline and surrender

Both musically and socially. Improvisation is one of the most important elements.

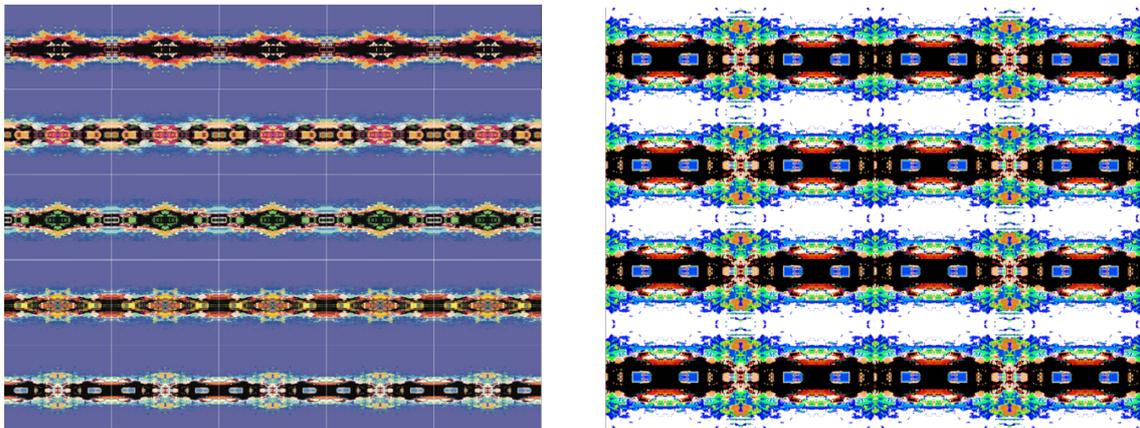
Another connection which is not as obvious, and can be true for a majority of artists theoretically through **flow-theory**, conceptually in **improvisation**, practically in **platform**

## Building a platform

On a practical level, the connection between painting and music has been found in VJing<sup>1</sup>, explored extensively in clubbing environments, and in preparatory work in that. Musical understanding, stage confidence, “artistic vision” and computer skills are some of the required skills in this challenge, which has repeatedly led to flow experiences. The key to make this work successful has been the development of a solid platform as a basis for improvisation.

In customising the interface in the software and the mapping of the controller this is developed specifically to provide a platform for a fluid performance, where there is room for improvisation to such an extent that the setup can be handed over to anyone interested in trying.

Working with video feedback loops, graphics generators, an endless amount of different video effects, where all of these parameters can be controlled by a variety of control signals (sound, sensors, buttons, faders, etc.) always lead to awe of infinite potential.



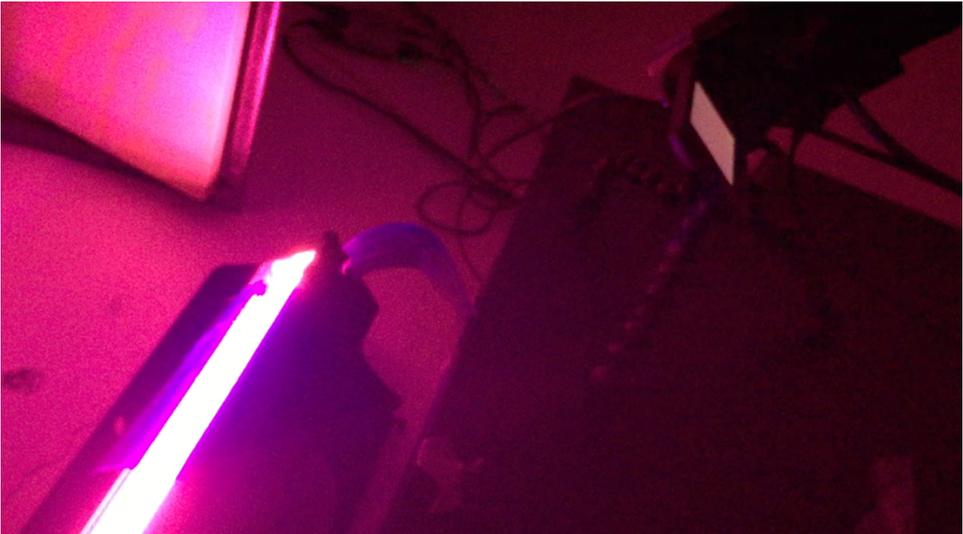
*Playing around with graphics generators and tile effects*

Elements from this practise was incorporated into project 11, though a different, analog method of working with sound reactive light emerged from improvisation; connecting a video camera to both a screen and a projector (hdmi-splitter), and placing the camera directly on top

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<sup>1</sup> VJing, short for video jockeying, is live performance with visuals in tandem with music. This contemporary artform emerged in the 1960s, and at the time “*Liquid Light*” was the practice back then, before sophisticated projectors became commercially available. My approach to VJing has been through digital, as opposed to analog, such as in liquid light”, where oil is mixed with pigments on top of classroom-type projectors, resulting in a visual typically associated with 1970s psychedelic rock music.

of one of the speakers, which were playing back the deep kick drum and thus making a piece of blue plastic foil vibrate right in front of the camera. The camera then registered this movement, while also zooming in on the strobe light installed in the same place, reacting to the sound. The result: An “analog” sound reactive visual, not dependent on any connected computer, and therefore a great solution for this type of installation in a gallery environment, where a laptop such as the one I would use, should not be left lying around, or be continuously processing video for weeks.



## Current and future work

By looking at the various projects mentioned here, I have learned a lot about the role of flow in my work, as well as how the different premises for flow manifest themselves in different activities/methods of working, and at different stages of the process.

Flow, as described by Mihaly C., where the normal experience of time and space disappears and the experience has been positive, has arisen in the following ways:

### *In performance*

Musical collaboration with an audience

Musical collaboration in the rehearsal room (when the score is fresh)

VJing

Engaging in solo instrumental performance, with and without an audience

### *In improvisation*

In painting

In all the performances mentioned above

In creative processes

In pressured situations

### *In craftsmanship*

Room Divider, most clearly at the end of the process (in the physical work)

Head Shelf (in the physical work)

In the production of canvas (for painting)

In painting

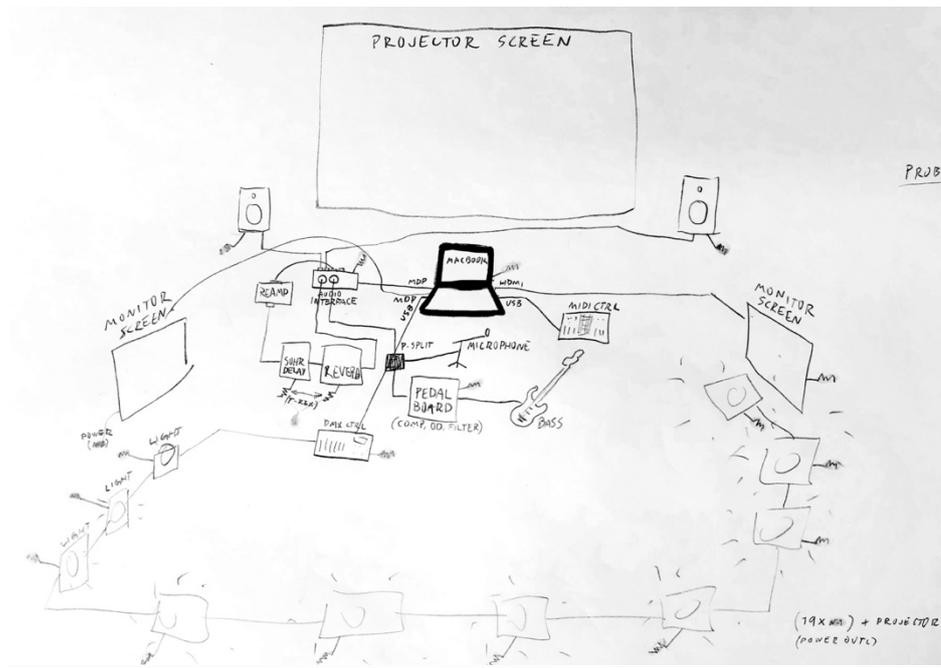
In the work of building a pedalboard (platform for potential improvisation)

In the development of the VJ setup/platform

These findings are interesting in that they confirm different aspects of the flow theory. More specifically that an important premise for achieving flow states is immediate feedback, and a clearly defined task.

Theoretical understanding related to a work often comes with distance. With new understanding comes a different approach to the work. The decided framework of presentation is performance, perhaps musical, supported by an installation, where I take the essence of what I have learned from this research to explore something I haven't yet tried.

### Setting the stage



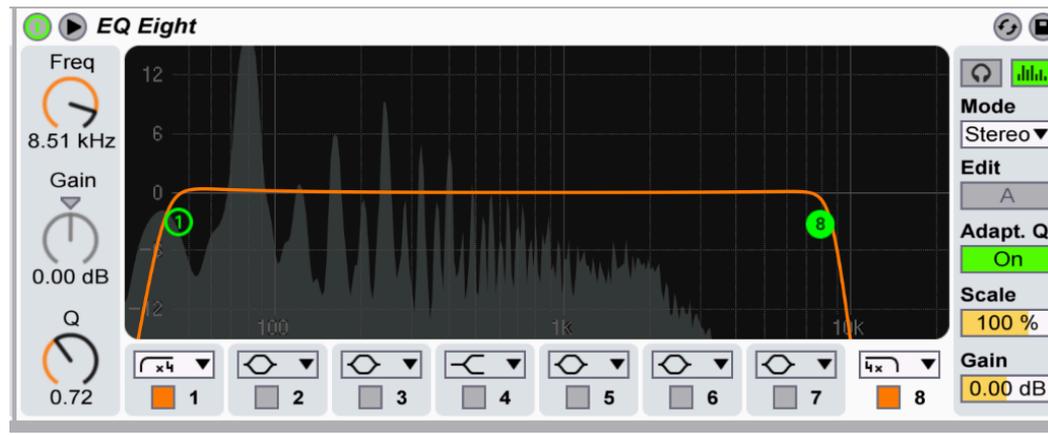
As part of this will be improvisational, not only during the actual performance, but also in the execution of designing the platform, the above sketch is not necessarily accurate to how it will be. I have decided that there will be three performances, one each Friday during the exhibition. Sound reactive visuals provide material feedback in the moment of performance and contribute to the state of flow

When I am not performing, some avatars, or artifacts, from the work will be exhibited.

I.e. a set of videos made during the state of flow, or just the sound and video recordings of each performance (and perhaps a timed sound, larger interval flow?)

### Harmonics

Playing on the bass with a bow has led to a renewed interest in music theory, more specifically *harmonics* —the range of overtones produced simultaneously while a note is played.



Harmonics, equal temperament and mathematics – can this be utilized in composing meditation music with the bass?

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