Natural Artefacts - *The Crux*

The first edition of the Swedish improv group Natural Artefacts played regularly for 15 years. After a break, when saxophone player Ove Johansson passed away in 2015, the original members Susanna Lindeborg and Per Anders Nilsson created a second edition in 2018 together with the two young musicians Merje Kägu and Anton Jonsson on guitar and percussion respectively. The point of departure was, and still is, a mix of acoustic and electronic instruments, with an aim to blend elements from diverse musical genres and traditions such as free improvisation, serial music, minimalism, ambient, electronica, and electroacoustic music. What unifies the players however, is their background in jazz. With the new repertoire, comprising of new compositions and improv concepts exclusively created for the present line up, Natural Artefacts continue to explore new and yet unknown musical territories anchored in the tradition.

A major tenet in the group's music is to explore man – machine interaction in a contemporary jazz context. A basic aesthetic idea is to build a repertoire that might be described as modular. With this I mean that the composition work, at design time, is made with an intention that anything can be combined with anything. It might be melodies, rhythmic cells, bass lines, chord changes, scales, as well as more open instructions, including graphics or text, intended for improvisation. One major challenge for me as co-leader and material provider is to compose ambiguous music, which means music that at each instant the music is open for what to come next, the continuation. According to Cambridge Online Dictionary ambiguity is a situation or statement that is unclear because it can be understood in more than one way.

Major musical influences are as well the so-called serial music and open form practices and procedures, which emerged and possibly peaked artistically in the avant-garde movement of the 50s. This way of music making still offers many artistic possibilities, particularly in improvised music, which is different from the practices and aesthetics employed in the 50s. In our rendering, it is simply a way of organizing and performing pre-composed material in an open and indeterministic way.

At the center of Natural Artefact is a machine, a sequencer / synthesizer / sampler, that mostly play the role of the rhythm section, particularly the bass. This is a very conscious choice, an experiment to try to get away from the common jazz rhythm section. Not because it is easy, but because it is hard (to paraphrase Pres. Kennedy). An experienced jazz rhythm section makes the life easy for a jazz musician, since they serve the group with a rhythmic and tonal foundation, at best it is kind of surfing for a soloist. The drawback is that there are so many clichés in jazz, that from time to time is impossible to get loose from, especially with a traditional rhythm section. In this group however, the challenge for me as composer and designer, is to construct electronically generated bass lines, that gives a similar foundation as a bass player may do, with which the drummer can interact, and at the same time creating something that is strange and familiar at the same time. This situation forces the band to play differently, since my machines do not respond and behave normally, rather as if a jazz bass player.

As an example: the group are performing a composition by Nilsson, that uses the 12-tone tone-row from Anton Webern's Opus 30, called *Webern's Mode*. The bassline features all four standard variations of the series: original, retrograde, inversion, and inverted retrograde. What makes the bass part special however, is the use of a special feature in the sequencer employed, namely the possibility to set the probability for a certain note/step to be trigged and played. If set to 50%, only half of that particular note/step will be trigged, statistically. By setting the synthesizer voice to mono, and using a long decay, the previous note will sound instead, making it longer. In mono mode, when a new note is trigged, it will steal that voice from the present note. The four versions of the row are chosen manually during performance, and in addition a number of patterns perform fractions of the series in a loop.