

**LEIF ELGGREN**

*Art is a universal and amazing tool which we can use to make miracles happen*

**You started your artistic pursuits working with visual and graphic art back in the 70's. How did sound come into the picture? Was there some defining moment that opened your ears to the possibilities inherent in the sonic realm?**

Yes, here I would like to quote from the CD EXTRACTION - To leave the periphery and be in the magnificent center. (CD, 57' 25'', FER 1039, 2002.) "This basic sound material was recorded in my biological mother's uterus with my not yet developed teeth used as a fundamental and simple recording device a few days before my birth. This sound material was kept recorded and hidden until recently inside one of my wisdom teeth, but has now been brought to light and exposure. Digitally mastered, reproduced and emitted into the room which we all mutually share and which we usually call reality, the world. Emitted with the main purpose to change that room. You do not necessarily have to listen to this CD, the sound material should be considered more as a tool, a tool with a special purpose, favourable but dangerous. For best results: load this CD in your CD player, confirm that sound is coming out through the speakers, and then just leave the room. When you come back everything will be totally changed."

But also from the book GENEALOGY - §32 UNKNOWN VEHICLE - "Relates to my unknown father who was said to be a driver for many years. I never met my father and I never saw him drive his truck, but I had a lot of fantasies around him and his car when I was a kid and I hated all those trucks I saw everywhere, he could have been in any of them and I was so afraid, afraid that he would run over me with his car, that he hated me and wanted to see me dead, he was a violent person. - This is however the basic stuff we always, as humans, have used to create what we call religion, what we call God (the mythology of the past and what we use to make the unknown understandable). God has always used an unknown vehicle to transport himself over the long timeless distances. This is so fundamental, so basic in our lives, but it has always been so misused by authority to control people." - So, what I want to say is that it was totally inevitable for me to start working with sound, with music, with the hearable.

**Your work is often something that I might call "concept heavy". How important is the concept for a sound piece? Are the sounds inseparable from the concept or is the concept there just to suggest certain possibilities? Do you always have an interpretation ready for the piece, even if it isn't explicitly spelled out for the listener?**

Yes, always, exactly as you say, but not always spelled out for the listener, no. - I must say I have had that feeling of a mission since I was a kid. I am now first in line of my ancestors, my relatives stand behind me and I have to make it now. I have a chance to take it a little further, elevate it a little to another level. Where I came from people was brought up on the countryside; hard work, not much to look forward to, an enormous unequal situation. I remember my grandfather had one cow for the family, he worked for the railway, he was proud about that. He had a little red house and one cow, but he did not have enough green grass for the cow so he asked the rich neighbouring farmer, that had wide fields for his cattle, if his only cow could go there, but the farmer knew that my grandfather was a socialist so he said no. I mean; so much effort, so much struggle and hard labour and so little in return. My biological father (that I never met) was number 11 in a line of brothers. I mean all those injuries that create such a longing for revenge that goes beyond time, that are being inherited generation after generation. And are being merged into new mutated versions, forms or structures. This is totally complex and can be totally destructive, but also wonderfully creative.

**Some of your sound pieces are quite noisy. What is it that you find interesting in noise? Is it just a tool to wake certain instincts or is there something more profound about heavy, loud masses of frequencies? Can one use noise for something more beyond catharsis?**

Well, I do not see it as noise. I see it as a well structured and meaningful bearer of information, hidden or not; but loaded, programmed, coded. I often use different sources that might sound like noise, but that is only on the first level, there are so many levels underneath (or over). It is contemporary music, it is working in the same way as Beethoven or Schönberg or Rammstein or whatever. But are more free in relation to method and structure and underlying formal rules. I often use to think about it as a three dimensional language.

**Does music go "beyond" language as a vehicle for information? Often I get the feeling that it's possible to convey very complex emotions/impressions via sound in a way that seems impossible using written/spoken language. Maybe that's the extra two dimensions at work there? And the freer methods and structures are needed to gain full access to these dimensions.**

Yes, I believe so, very much like something that is not that fixed and heavy in the bottom as especially the written language. And “something” here is of course a totally free and open work of music (art). When I did the piece *Pluralis majestatis* I had an object (a brass bed with a thin sheet of iron instead of a mattress) that was equipped with a few contact microphones. In the tradition of Dr. Frankenstein I just wanted it to start and get its own life. Like some sort of autonomous system. I gave the bed a kick and through feedback the whole system started to work. I recorded 60 minutes, but it could have been going on for a lifetime. It was exciting to see and hear what happened during this period of time. It was not me, it was the bed itself generating a field of complex frequencies. Like giving and taking. Like having its own life. And me just as an observer and caretaker.

**What about improvisation? Your sound work can hardly be called improvisational in the normal sense of the word but then it's not strictly composed either. Are there differences between your recordings and live performances in this sense?**

Yes, there are differences, the records are often more dedicated to a certain focus (conceptually) or aiming at a certain direction or are often a certain part (or detail) that has to be fulfilled before the next part can be realized. Like different steps in a bigger construction. Like small details in an immense structure.

**Are you interested at all in the technology of sound and recording? Do you explore different possibilities to find the right tools for the sounds you need or do you usually work with equipment that you're already familiar with? What about analogue vs. digital? Is there something unique about the analogue media, tape, vinyl etc.?**

Yes, that's an interesting question. I am very much interested in finding the right tools for to extract what I need in terms of everything. Most music on this planet have been using a limited language like the Pentatonic scale for instance and music have been written like a text, transferable to the hearable, tones within a very limited range of what was (and still are) acceptable among the agreements in our traditions of society. Today we have new and other possibilities that are wider and more diverse than ever before (not that accepted yet) and that is fantastic. I believe into exploring totally new (green) fields of possibilities, to discover and put forward other qualities that we still hardly can dream of. You can compare with astronomers watching out in the infinite universe. This is a more open method for creating music, or maybe better: work with the hearable, with structures that reaches our ears and are being interpreted by parts of our brain that is occupied and focused on audible phenomenon in our existence. One detail or part among all the other parts we are dealing with as means for trying to understand a little bit of everything. - And maybe also give some comfort and courage in this incomprehensible existence and personal experience of a vulnerable and lonely I.

**One of the things I often detect in your pieces is the interplay and/or conflict between the mundane/earthly and the divine/transcendental. Is this one of your pursuits in art, to show us how to connect and work with the “holy” (in many senses of the word)? Or maybe to reveal the true faces of certain abstractions, to bring them to the level of the everyday?**

Yes, I believe that the authorities exploitation of human fear and confusion in relation to the period of time we are visitors here in this life on what we call our Earth between birth and death (that are so short and so fearful and so unequal and unfair) are so oppressive and abusive that it leaves people out in the dark and leave, or better: keep them out of any chance to have the possibility to fulfil their missions that all of us, all of us have while entering into this existence, to fulfil our mission as travellers from one level to another, from one point to another. This is of course the worst and most painful exertion of power that is possible. To keep people down and keep them out of what is their rights, our rights, on this planet, in this life. The right to be free and individual, with a personal integrity; giving and taking respect in a mutual fruitful field of exchange and dependence. - I remember when we were kids we used to wave in front of each others faces with our hands (without touching) and yell: Free air! Free air! And laugh. Because the air is free (sic). And we never touched each other; never touched another body and by that never break the mutual rules of personal borders. It was of course provocative and annoying, but still not enough for to go to personal attack (even if some did of course) This was the space that was free enough for certain provocative actions with the other of a more offensive character borrowed, to a certain degree, from the power and the church. What could they do? What could we do? Not much more than wave in the air, a small but anyway open field of action. Frustrating games that mirrored the situation we all was part of, and still are. Intelligent but limited.

**Is it better to try to strip the authority of its power over us or to elevate everyone to the same level that the authority already occupies? Is it better to kill the god or to become one?**

Yes, what can we do? The tradition in the human society is so deep and heavy that it is extremely difficult to change the social and political structure we all are part of. So many have tried and so many have failed, as we all know. The power has always misused its power, in one way or another. The fear makes people go wild and crazy. And the search for immortality nourishes violence and greed. Makes people oppress each other. The few over the many. It is in many ways still a feudal society we all live in. A fragile social and economical situation for the many that locks the positions in a “clever” way for the few.

**You are also part of the duo Guds Söner (Sons of God) with Kent Tankred. Your pieces combine performance art with visuals and sound. Would you like to say something about what’s behind this concept? It seems to me that you often stage mundane events that you then try to transmute into something sublime by using repetition, physicality and downright silliness. Like you would be using yourselves as sacrificial lambs to channel the energy of the performance space and audience into new forms. Are these actions always successful and how do the effects manifest themselves?**

Yes, exactly, great! These actions are never successful, they are so poor, but we do what we can and are trying to elevate the situation as good as we can. Mostly it is a failure. Depressive. But as we use to say: “The Sons of God’s field of activity can be described as an investigation of a mental airspace, undertaken with the aid of unconventional tools. The aural aspect is important, but equal care is devoted to the visual. The Sons of God is often augmented with supplementary performers who then also influence the ideas and their expression. The Sons of God put themselves at the disposal of civil defence and strive to imbue fortitude and courage.”

And also: “The Sons of God work in the borderland between performance, installation and music; everything contributes to the whole and provides the basic structure for that inquisitive and expansive spirit which is apparent in the Sons of God’s working method. Sound objects, pre-recorded compositions, physically demanding movements, the voice, the staged meetings and conditions, the objects: all of this constitutes the foundation for an attempt to gain access to those hard, to those rare moments when daily life merges with the heroic nature of the inner self.”

**Quite a few of your pieces deal with members of your family, in one way or another. There is the Extraction cd which is based on a concept of recorded sounds from your biological mother’s uterus using your own teeth as a recording device a few days before your birth. And then there is the installation As if I was my Father, which has you dressing up as your deceased non-biological father and sitting in his favourite chair. Do you use these pieces as tools for processing your own past or is there something more universal you try to convey?**

Yes, you know, this seems so god damn private and personal, but it is like all stories of personal experiences or reflections something that we all share: the questions about life and death, about fear, about what we can do or not do, what is beyond the surface and what we all are going to face, even if we are trying to keep it away: Death. - Oh yes, this eternal materialization, this chance of a body, an opportunity. As I write this they report in the media that the population in Sweden has just become nine million bodies. Nine million bodies that come from where? From where? I remember that when my kids were big enough we could, in one way or another, communicate verbally. I used to ask them where they came from. - Where do you come from? Do you know? Do you remember? I was wondering if they had some small reminiscences left, some small memories or so. They were still so close. So close to that incomprehensible. So close to that threshold just recently passed.

**I’ve recently been reading your book Genealogy. It’s a collection of texts from over the years and sometimes it reads like a private journal. And from the “god damn private and personal” rises a sense of distinct humour, something that I feel is essential when tackling these issues of life and death. Fear and death shouldn’t be confronted with a serious face and to gain access to frolic and play one needs to step down to the level of the personal.**

Yes, as a motto from that book: “A book about the suspension of time and space, about the future and about the possibility to move freely along all coordinates simultaneously, about the realization that everything is impossible but lies open before each and every one of us, about miracles, about the inevitable desire to dominate the world, about violence and about death as a lifelong friendship.”

**I think you can already be called a veteran of the experimental music / sound art community. Do you follow what the later generations are doing and if so, do you find exciting things being done? Are there fundamental differences to be found between young people doing noise / experimental sounds now and artists who started in the 70’s or 80’s?**

Yes, I believe there are differences actually. Differences like that the community is much bigger now, there is a wide spread network of artists working with a new attitude towards music and “sound art” and that is fantastic, it’s gonna change even more, this is just a start of a big change, but still so stiff and difficult, you know, so many privileges that so many still are defending, guarding; for heavens sake it is nothing to protect! - We are all going to end up in the same way, this is just one level among many levels that have to be passed and we should take care of this and use it as something extremely valuable, something that is going to stay, stay in an unsubstantial way. In an inner way, but shared, shared. - It is so god damn selfish, so greedy and so short-sighted, so narrow-minded.

**You have been involved with projects that deal with EVP (Electronic voice phenomena). These are sounds captured on recording media that are interpreted as speech even though they are the not results of an intentional recording of a voice. Explanations for these sounds range from paranormal to psychological and physical (interference from radio transmissions etc.). Why are you interested in these phenomena? Is it important what the underlying reality is behind these strange voices?**

No, not at all, it is not important what is behind these voices. It is more like a new door has been opened and by that we have new possibilities for to understand, in a wider perspective, what we all are part of. Like when Mister Jürgenson started to record without a microphone. But with the recorder on full recording input volume. And found interesting phenomenon occurring, totally hearable on the tapes. It is more like tuning your ear (brain) to a certain level and interpret what is there already, like always. And share it with others. And if the voices or messages, or whatever, are parts of a true reality on these recordings is not so interesting. What is interesting here is that we have new possibilities for investigations. If this is voices of the dead, from the other side, or so, does not matter; it is a new open field, a new source, a new space that is possible to explore. For what, we will see in the future.

**I don’t think your work can be generally described as being explicitly political. Still, I think there are characteristics present in some your pieces which could be called egalitarian or even utopian. How do you feel about combining politics and art? Is it something that you actively pursue?**

It is a remarkable discipline; art. A discipline that goes through all human activities, shortcut all parameters in life and are part of something that goes beyond what we see and hear. Are related to religion and philosophy and all those activities dealing with thoughts about why we are here and what this existence is, etc. Nourishing. Stimulating. Triggers the imagination. The dreams. The longing. As Mister Swedenborg says: To grow old in heaven is to grow young. ☺

**Sweden has had a very active community of sound artists starting from at least the 1960’s. It seems to me that for a country of modest size there have been unusually many great experimental sounds coming from your shores. Is it just by coincidence or can one find reasons, for example, in well directed public funding?**

The Social Democrats founded and constructed (“we that built the country”) what we call the welfare society in the beginning of 1900. This was a good consequence of the horrifying social situation during the 19th century. A situation that was radically changed into something to believe in and gave people an equal situation that was never seen before. A gigantic social change that gave most people a better life. The political space became wider, more tolerant, and the middle-class kids could explore the margins. Nothing was impossible in this little corner of the world. And it is beyond doubt that the old seer of visions, Emanuel Swedenborg, also had and still have a great impact (influence) of the courage, especially on the artists. And not to forget Ernst Josephson and Carl Fredrik Hill of course. Their importance for the whole Modernist era is totally underrated.

**Over the years you have collaborated with a number of artists all around the world. People like CM von Hausswolff, Thomas Liljenberg, Kevin Drumm, Mats Gustafsson, Hafler Trio, Chop Shop and so on. How do you approach these collaborations? Do you feed off the interplay with the other artists or are they always based on a pre-defined concept?**

Yes, this is of great importance for me. I have learned so much from these collaborative projects I have together with colleagues and friends. I have learned so much from these persons and I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to work with so many fantastic and inspiring artists and friends. You know, it is always a challenge to work with others, like suddenly having the possibility to go beyond your own limitations. To create something that, so to say, develops and goes into a third direction; something unexpected, something that encourages you to take certain steps that you maybe not have dared to take alone. To be more brave. - I am grateful for this!

**Can you pinpoint some collaborations that have been especially important/inspiring for you with regards to your evolution as an artist? Some occasions that opened your eyes/ears to totally new horizons?**

Yes, definitely. When I was a teenager I was living in a little sleepy town called Linköping in the more South of Sweden. We were a group of friends that dreamt about to become artists. We were heavily into the romantic poets from the second half of 1800 and Surrealism and all this that stimulated our dreams. I met Swedenborg at this time and read his dream notes that encouraged me to continue to write down my own ones. But we also met another person; a live person that suddenly stepped in to the café where we use to spend our afternoons drinking tea and talking about the Future. His name was Lennart af Larsson and with humble consideration he asked the young girl that was serving if they had turtles. The girl stepped back frightened, but we was excited. Alive among us a living personification of what we dreamt about; another life, with possibilities beyond what we was brought up with. This guy was an odd character that wrote poetry and was a painter as well. We collected information about him. He was seen now and then in the town centre and sometimes we found him staring into a wall for hours. Or talking to himself. Or dancing in a strange way. He was not possible to communicate with, he lived in his own world, he was his own. And we admired him. He was a stimuli for our thoughts of something else. Without knowing it he gave us courage to continue with what we dreamt about. 1979 we released his only novel called *Båten som delades* (The boat that became two) and 2005 we published a small book called *Något om en märklig man i Linköping* (Something about a remarkable man in Linköping). That was a payback project. This man gave us so much in an important stadium of our lives. He was a sort of mentor for us. Maybe he was aware of that after all.

**You're also involved with running the record label Firework Edition Records. In fact, a lot of your own sound/music is released on this label. Is there a specific agenda for Firework Edition or do you just use it as a vehicle to release interesting sounds by yourself and others?**

Well, yes, if you don't mind I quote how it is stated on our website: "In 1995 Firework Edition Records was started by Kent Tankred and Leif Elggren. A company that was emanated through the project and performance group The Sons of God which have been doing extrovert work since spring 1985. Firework Edition Records is also related to the publishing company Firework Edition that was started by Thomas Liljenberg and Leif Elggren in 1982 and was a sort of consequence of the ongoing project Firework started in Stockholm 1978. Firework Edition Records moves freely between performance, music and the visual arts, and whose productions often reach a point where traditional aesthetic boundaries, limitations and concepts are eliminated. Firework Edition Records observe and document, experiment and ask questions, build up and tear down. They leave it to the listener/the viewer to take what he/she wants or simply leave. Firework Edition Records is a platform for contemporary music." - For me it started when I bought (together with two colleagues, Jordi Arkö and Johan Brauner) an old letterpress machine and a small selection of old lead types and then had the possibility to start printing books myself. It did not cost much and it gave a very nice result. Time consuming, but satisfying.

**Do you feel special affection towards the books/records you put out? I mean the physical artefacts as such, the objects you then hold in your hand. Nowadays it would be easy to just release all the sound and text as downloads. Is the physical format just a convenient way of retaining some type control over the ownership of art or is there something more to it? Is it just consumerism that drives people to release/buy these physical manifestations of the creative act?**

Jo, jo, I love the artefact quality, the complex substantial materialization of the inner fragile and vulnerable mental movements. I do not care about the commercial or economical feedback of anything that I produce like books or records. Most of it is anyway being given away to friends and colleagues and interested. The main thing is to, as fast as possible, give ideas and concepts and parts of the whole body of the work a fixed point in time and place; in the world. Give it a certain constitution. Give it a life of its own. I do not care about what anybody else thinks about it. I do not care about the shitty art-world or whatever. Nevertheless I am part of it. And that is fine. There is a certain openness; like an asylum. I need that. And for me it's a question, beside this above, of archiving. That's why I enjoy so much the multiple function of records and books and stuff that comes in an edition. They can be sent out in the world. Multiply. – Like plants do. Yes, like the plants. (And they eat us all. Yes, they eat us all.)

[www.leifelggren.org](http://www.leifelggren.org)