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Making Spoken Word on Combat

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This chapter discusses a spoken word piece written and recorded in a research project investigating somatic social bonding among the Finnish Defence University cadets.[1] It illustrates how sensual and sensory experience can be modes of insight through which difficult questions around soldiering can be examined. In the spoken word piece *Hast & Cast: Ei niin pelottava asia* (2019), the text is constructed from interview data while voice, rhythm, amplification, and repetition all work to open up a space of wonder and association. This humorous and disturbing research-creation is not only meant for academic audiences, but it speaks back to the cadets in a language that is accessible and thought-provoking. This chapter demonstrates how the artistic manipulation of research data addresses the paradoxical emotional stakes of military training by tapping into the rhythmic, corporeal, and sonic qualities on which military training also relies.

HORRIBLE NOISE

In this chapter, I explore spoken word art as a creative method in Critical Military Studies. The use of spoken word became a method in a research project that studied the emotional effects of synchronised movement among Finnish cadets (Hast 2020a). In the study I discovered overlapping and sometimes conflicting corporeal ideals of soldiers' attunement: *minded*, *machine*, and *combat body.* Minded body refers to bodily awareness that enabled cadets to respond to the movements of others. Machine body, instead, is a view of the soldier body as a self-sacrificial part of the military machine. Combat body refers to the ultimate reason why synching as a body technique matters: being able to win in combat. It was through the idea of the combat body that

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questions of killing emerged and became a topic so sensitive that I decided to engage with it in more creative terms.

Before you read any further, I would like you to listen to *Hast & Cast: Ei niin pelottava asia* on YouTube (subtitles available) or Spotify.[2] The vocals and text are by Susanna Hast; composing, arrangement, and guitar by Timo Rehtonen; and the flute by Hannu Mikkola.

The following is a rough translation of the piece, yet I recommend listening to it first if it is available to you. It is the sonic experience that gives the text its contradictory flavour and emotional weight. The piece is based on a text (below) accompanied by funk tunes played by guitar and a flute. The spoken word is art in its own right while scholarly in content. It is excessive, documentary, emotional, political, corporeal, and musical. It is many things, and never just one thing.

combat makes me think of a situation where I clash with someone
that I would have ended up in a situation that someone is so close
that we are really at each other's throats
battle instead is something in which we fight as a group
team, or whatever that is, company
we would fight against some other enemy
combat, well, it is a taboo even in this organisation
even if this organisation is training for that
killing and dying is a part of combat
a soldier is not just some strange and peculiar thing
but a part of this country and society
some of those bodies who inhabit this country
are soldier-bodies

it is not just a scary thing
grenades, artillery and horrible noise

every soldier should be able to kill
this is what I have been pondering
but have not really talked about
it is a different thing to talk about these things with someone
I have never really thought
that what if I die at some point during these assignments
soldiering has become such a strong identity
that I feel it all the time in civilian life
my thoughts circle around it, and everything I do
you feel older here
you grow ten years older here in an instant
I don't see the enemy myself
I have screens, keyboards and then we do it as a group

of course, there is still the enemy on the side
and it is not really a humane situation

it is not just a scary thing
grenades, artillery and horrible noise

for example, if you have a wounded enemy soldier
you have to move forward; you have no time to move the wounded backwards
there is a danger,
that he will shoot you in the back, so what do you do with him?
do you sacrifice a patrol to move him backwards
or shoot him right there
and cover your back although you know it's wrong?
combat . . . firefight is such an easy perspective to it
you have tanks, weapons, forest, buildings
grenades, artillery and a horrible noise
I rarely think about the fact that I could die
you see enemies, and they die
but you rarely die yourself in these imageries
now, this is deep
no combat between soldiers is without deaths

it is not just a scary thing
grenades, artillery and horrible noise

it also says in this school book
that it is the last resort
when political decisions and negotiations fail
that's when you end up in armed conflict
combat must be in its totality then quite a mess
the common soldier,
he doesn't necessarily go to combat by his own decision
but by a decision from a higher level
controlled aggression
we are all vulnerable
hybrid wars and influencing the enemy media
and spreading propaganda
back in the days
they used to hit in the head with a shovel in a foxhole and shoot
it's not like that anymore
it's no longer about having two fronts
and then people are shooting with guns there

grenades, artillery and horrible noise

ART-MAKING

Here is a manifesto: *Art knows more.* A piece of art can make an absence known; it can describe with precision, archive with care, that which is ambiguous and non-graspable. After eight years of conducting art-based and practice-led research, after two albums and a novel, I genuinely feel that art knows more. I write this not because I want to make a distinction between art and science, but because art is so low in the knowledge hierarchy that pursuing it often requires justification within disciplines outside art itself. Sometimes creativity is seen as self-indulgent in the scholarly world, as if experimentation and creativity did not inherently belong in the realm of science. As if there could be too much creativity. As if too much creativity and expressive power was a threat. The manifesto "art knows more" is not against other knowledge. It is against art knowledge as *the other*. It is a celebration of the vital force of creativity in all its forms and materialities.

Art is for many things, but art is also for its own sake. Elizabeth Grosz (2008) proposes a non-aesthetic philosophy of art that does not assess the value, quality, or even meaning of art. What is that art for then; what does it do? Reading Deleuze, Grosz (2008, 3) refers to art that generates intensity, "that which directly impacts the nervous system and intensifies sensation." She goes on, "Art is the art of affect more than representation," something of indeterminacy and chaos. When art is considered non-representational, interpretation becomes secondary to experience. The claim of non-representational art is a political one. Such creative practice does not bend to wills; it does not bow to authorities but is monstrous, nomadic, unpredictable, unstable, and more (see Hast & Bagheri Nesami 2021). What makes art fascinating for me as a creative research practice, is the fact that artistic practice creates value in the mere happening of it. As bell hooks (1995, xvi) writes, "ultimately only our engagement with the work suffices—makes art matter."

To say art is knowledge is to make art instrumental—art becomes a portal to a deeper understanding of a phenomenon, and potentially a motor for change. As I have argued elsewhere (Hast 2020a), creative practice is not merely an interesting evocation but, more importantly, *an act of responsibility* through which boundaries can be dismantled, reshaped, and questioned. I believe creative practice produces critical insight, but it can also challenge the vulnerabilities, nostalgias, rationales, and violences generated and upheld by militarised societies. Thus, curiosity towards the aesthetic arrangement of research translates into activism—form becomes political.

In studying something so sexualised, destructive, generative, secret, emotional, gendered, and mystified as the military, what could be more revealing than exploring the workings of militaries through its own tactics? I do not

mean taking up a gun, but rather taking up an embodied practice: utilising the body's conditioning, the expressiveness of the body, and the centrality of the body's performance in military training and rituals. Since militarized cultures, including military bodies, are highly performative (see, for example, Brady and Mantoan 2018), our research can make that performativity known in many different ways. The spoken word piece is very much at odds with the public image of the Finnish Military when it depicts soldiers who are confused and critical instead of patriotic and obedient. Being "out of place," the spoken word creates disorientation in others (see Ahmed 2006). It juxtaposes the soft voice of vulnerability with an imagined soldier's body made of sacrifice, bravery, and hardness. Due to the perverse soundscape, the militarising act of a recruitment video would probably turn into a critique of the military, while the spoken word still vocalises military ideals of Finnish cadets.

I have played with the quality of my voice in different academic contexts to subvert the patriarchal privileging of reason and dominant articulation, by centering the emotional body in my research. Researching the Finnish military, qualities of voice became an apparent ground for experimenting with distance and intimacy between bodies. I could not help feeling my voice was out of place, and as such it could become a tool for disorientation which taps into the more subtle qualities of militarisation, its seductiveness that does not express itself necessarily in hypervisibility but in the undercurrents of corporeal sensations. Think of the masculine shouting of commands contrasted with the seductive speech from my mouth. We associate command with the military instinctively, but we rarely think about how the seductive side of militarisation is voiced, lived, and promoted in softer qualities of voice, in softer words of care.

Taking part in a march with Finnish cadets in 2018, I felt drawn to the collective rhythm and the culture of care as it extended towards my body (Hast 2020b). At the end of the thirty-kilometre march, I was so attuned to my "research subjects" that I did not want to leave their company. I felt the "muscular bonding" (McNeill 1995) I was researching happening to me. *Seduction* was the word to which I kept returning when I tried to understand how I had transformed from feeling like an outsider (civilian, researcher, woman), to feeling like part of the military group. Voice was the means through which I could express the emotional weight of the autoethnographic moment, so I created a spoken autoethnography in which there was no room for a distant researcher-observer (Hast 2020b).

Grosz (2008, 7) writes that seduction entails becoming the other. The word *seduction* is easily attached to the feminised body, an act of transgression that centres a feminised body as culpable. Seduction, or enticement, is a use of the erotic, where erotic, borrowing from Audre Lorde (2017, 23) is "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest

feelings." Erotic does not mean pornographic. Erotic refers to a depth of feeling, a creative power of the body. Seduction is the quality of voice through which I can address the erotic, the military, and their entanglements. I was easily seduced, and I could have never imagined that happening. I was seduced by marching, by becoming visible, by becoming a body (see Hast 2020b). The promise of martial masculinity was summoned, and I enjoyed becoming another body, a momentarily military body. The man-to-be, the exceptional body, and the promise of inclusion, are they not seductive? What I then do in my art is make the seduction, which is often invisible and inarticulable, audible and lyrical. In practice, this means accepting the uncertainty with which a non-argumentative performance such as spoken word is imbrued.

COMBAT

What is combat? Does it mean killing? This is what I asked about twenty-eight first-year cadets during my time in their company in 2018. I asked many other things, too, and combat was not on my itinerary, but once I opened that troublesome window, it was evident that the topic required special attention.

During the project, I came across a paper by Katharine M. Millar and Joanna Tidy (2017) titled "Combat as moving target." The authors were curious about combat as an empirical category. They pointed out that while critical scholarship had investigated how masculinities are constituted in relation to combat, it had not tackled the question of how masculinities constitute combat as normative imagery. This paper came to my mind when I was marching with cadets in the autumn of 2018, and I could not resist the temptation to ask the cadets what they thought combat means.

The question—What is combat?—was not the trouble to stay with, but the follow-up question—Is it about killing?—was. The responses to these questions took me somewhat off guard. I did not expect to meet silence, unease, and hesitation when I asked this question. I did not anticipate confusion, embarrassment, and a lack of language on an aspect of soldiering that appears central in military training.

There were instances when we talked about the death and dying of the soldier. When the cadets spoke of dying, they spoke of violence. However, when they spoke of combat, violence went into hiding. Perhaps I had set a trap and was being unreasonable. *Killing* is a word with much weight. It is not easily spoken of, especially with a stranger. We stayed with moral questions of injury and never discussed more practical questions such as the fact that "the vast majority of soldiers cannot kill in cold blood and need to kill in a de-subjectified state, e.g., in reflexes, rages, and panics" (Protevi 2013, 130).

When I asked about killing, time slowed down. Cadets prolonged the answering time with pauses and filler words. Physical gestures of discomfort and signs of stress were evident. I wrote in my notes, *He is smiling, but he nervously touches an item in his hand, moving it between his fingers. His legs are shaking too.* Hesitations indicated that maybe this question had not been asked before. Although claiming to be an academic institution, it appeared that at the Defence University, there was no space for questions that are unpatriotic, questions like, "A military solution is a solution for whom?" or "What is violence, whose body does it touch?"

I became interested in how cadets' bodies responded to the question, but also what words they used. As I studied the military manuals (Puolustusvoimat 2021), I discovered that the phrase *to kill* is not mentioned. Plenty of creative alternatives appear in a combat manual, such as *choosing a goal*, *centering fire*, *disabling*, *destroying*, and *conquering*. Language can erase violence; it matters what words are used. The distaste for the words *to kill* is unsurprising, considering it is not part of the military vocabulary. Yet there is another side to the coin: the interviewed cadets paid attention to their own hesitation and became aware of what it meant. They knew it was a taboo, they knew it was a topic that needed to be discussed but was not, and they knew that "guns were dangerous tools." No cadet valorised combat. Only one cadet spoke in a manner that made me somewhat concerned. They did speak excitedly about combat exercise but got serious when they remembered the times when they used real ammunition.

When I tried to figure out other reasons for the difficulty to see combat as killing, I first reasoned that it was because combat, and warfare in general, was so distant to this corner of the globe. But that made no sense considering how much remembrance takes place throughout society for past wars. We are not allowed to forget. And war cannot be so distant since the cadets do train operational skills (battle skills and motivation to win battles) as part of their bachelor's degree in military sciences. Moreover, Finland is still very much a country preparing for war, taking part in the arms race and rationalising it with traditional security threats (inter-state war). For example, the state plans to purchase sixty-four multi-role fighters (HX Fighter Programme) on a ten-billion-euro budget to replace the current Hornet fighters. In addition, Finnish cadets might experience combat if they applied and went to serve in an international military crisis management mission. According to a news report from 2014, Finnish troops were involved in forty-four firefights in the ISAF-operation in Afghanistan between 2008–2014—two died, and fifteen were injured (Moilanen 2014).

One reason for the difficulty in addressing killing in combat has likely to do with the academic side of the cadet training. Based on my interviews, the cadets' self-image was that of a peacetime soldier, an officer in a military

outfit. Someone who looks like a soldier but is not a soldier who would have to go to war and kill people. I believe there is a pull between the ordinary and exceptional, civilian and soldier, when academic requirements cannot help but co-exist (or collide) with the norms, values, and practices of militarism. Jan Hanska (2015), an academic and a soldier, describes this as a tension between the academic and the officer, the critical and the obedient.

A retired professor from the Defence University, Juha Mäkinen (2019), problematizes the fragmentation of military and civilian selves, arguing that the two spheres are no longer so distinct. He writes that instead of seeing the two as opposites, we should focus on soldier-civilian relations, their conformity. Even if this is the case, it has not made the soldier any less exceptional and worthy of special praise, and so "the hierarchical elevation of the soldier over the civilian population is assured, despite changes in the 'actual' empirical practice of martial violence over time" (Millar and Tidy 2017, 150).

Of course, there is no pure civilian space to begin with, since political life is not apart from but constituted by war (Howell 2018, 6). As Maya Eichler explains,

> The military sphere is not simply militarized, but itself partially constituted by politics and by the civilian. Even military members—quintessentially militarized subjects—are not just martial subjects, but have complicated and varied entanglements with the military and civilian worlds they inhabit (MacKenzie et al. 2019, 12).

Thus, to speak of a soldier or a soldier in combat, we would have to investigate the flimsy border between the civilian and military spheres. This is where the music begins to play.

SPOKEN WORD

I had these findings. Cadets uttering their images of combat, killing, and their soldier bodies—and I wanted to undo the erasure, speak back to them, and do what I do best, shake things up a little. I told my collaborator, Timo Rehtonen, that we would make a spoken word piece, and I travelled to Rovaniemi in Northern Finland to record it. I had transcripts with me, and in one go, I underlined intuitively the sentences that felt compelling and created a text that was nearly copied word-for-word from the cadets' interviews.

Yet even choices that seem random are often not. The lyrics are filled with artistic choices that create new meanings and feelings. For example, the chorus, which goes, "it's not such a scary thing/grenades, artillery and horrible noise," is composed of two disconnected sentences that two different cadets

said in different contexts. “Not so scary” refers to soldiers as human beings like any other rather than martial bodies to be afraid of, while “grenades, artillery and horrible noise” refer to a description of what combat is potentially like, a huge mess, as the cadet in question continued. It was not intentional to combine these two, but we were missing a repetition that would make sense musically (creating a structure for the song). Rehtonen asked me to pick something compelling, and I did that in the middle of the recording session. Combined, these sentences pieced together, became a puzzle for me, creating an unintentional new meaning, an iteration that reminds me of the power of language and the power of imagination.

Decisions that were made within a day, sometimes in minutes, are not haphazard when you take a closer look. To quote hooks (1995, 126) again, “Work for women artists is never just the moment when we write, or do other art [. . .]. In the fullest sense, it is also the time spent in contemplation and preparation.” There was entire research behind the spoken word that was in the making. There was also a long-term collaboration of music-making, composing, arranging, recording, and performing around the topic of war and researching war (Hast 2018) with Rehtonen and Mikkola. We had already lived through the uncanny nature of this kind of work, in which musicians who had nothing to do with my research suddenly were creating more than an expression of research—the very heart and soul of it.

Musically, we had Gill Scott Heron’s “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” from the album *Pieces of a Man* (1971) as an inspiration. Tracing the history of spoken word and rap, Alice Price-Styles (2015) begins from old oral storytelling traditions and oral performance in African cultures. In the United States in the 1920s, she continues, jazz poetry became popular, and towards the 1960s spoken word became openly political. Price-Styles (2015, 12) describes Scott Heron’s “Whitey on the Moon” and “B-Movie” as “examples of how rhythm and melody can perfectly offset uncomfortable truths and deep messages.” Thus, in the spoken word piece, we are borrowing from African and African American cultural and musical traditions, from an art form in which poetry and music come together, and which “emphasizes the dynamic qualities entailed in speech” (Jones 2011, 184).

Just like in Scott Heron’s song, the flute plays a distinctive role in our creation. Hannu Mikkola (2021), who played the flute, describes his playing as free improvisation in the genre of soul/jazz. The flute, an Armstrong brand dating at least to the 1970s, follows the development of the piece itself: it intensifies in the middle when the key is modulated up until it returns to the original and calms down. The melody (and lack of it) was improvised, and the flute was placed in empty spots, making it impossible for me ever to perform this the way the recording goes.

Timo Rehtonen (2021), who did everything else to the very last stages of mixing and mastering, describes the piece as music dictated by the lyric and the declarative nature of the vocal performance. Spoken word in our case—and unlike rap—does not aim at articulating on the beat. Parts of the text and the feeling change according to longer sections in the piece. Rehtonen explains further that we felt the drum could be electronic, but the flute needed to be loyal to our source of inspiration. If the drum machine is punctual and precise, the flute is improvising within the limits of the key but still with plenty of liberties. We humorously called the flute "porn-flute," because there was something erotic about how it sat into everything else in the song. The flute's particular energy can also be heard as a reference to the sexiness of military and military bodies, or the seductiveness of militarisation. The background music is funk, a timeless musical genre that we have explored in our music before this. Rehtonen explains that he made a "basic riff" that stays relatively constant for a long time. The flute's improvisation is constant but shifting and overflowing to the extent that individual notes do not matter for the whole.

After we had recorded the entire thing, I was uneasy. "Are we really publishing this?" I uttered, staring at the microphone that had just taken in my voice. The whole thing felt perverse, and I was afraid that instead of expressing the problem of erasure or the uncanny ideas of combat, I had created a monstrosity that would not be understood. As this concern rose within me, I realised that I am worried because I care, and since I care, I need to trust myself and the art.

After the piece was published in 2019, I asked three cadets about how they felt about it. This is how they responded:

> The background music was positive all along, yet the text was negative and even morbid. The quotes you used sounded very familiar, part of the cadet life. I think it is easier to listen to a song than to read a black-and-white text.

> My first impressions: This is brutal text and still somehow very thought-provoking. The background music makes this chill. There's contrast! Really awakening! This is amazing! And I don't believe anyone will be offended. I am really excited about this.

I actually heard this song through my friend. It is pretty cool, and I like music.

> The quotes sound like campfire stories. I could imagine building on something similar, like freestyling by a campfire. I first felt it was somewhat confrontational, but then I realized you had used the interviews as material. Some of the staff (at the Defence University) have heard this too. They have diplomatically

> commented, "Everyone can express themselves as they please as long as no names are mentioned." I thought it was bold.

The spoken word did reach at least some cadets and personnel, and it succeeded in provoking thought. Two cadets told me that, to their knowledge, no one had openly criticized my work, but they felt that some people in the personnel did not quite appreciate the art. There is something disarming about the effort to create music out of these interviews, something out of the ordinary. But it can also be too much, too bold.

The spoken word both documents cadets' views on combat and the soldier body, and also messes with them. I brought the cadets' words into a new environment and made them sound unfamiliar. I was not analysing or theorising the interviews but arranging, unsettling, uprooting, and realigning military idea(l)s and language in my own tone. Only after the spoken word was released, and I spoke with some of the cadets about how they felt about it, did I understand that because of the musical form, the research findings were accessible and thought-provoking. It provoked the question, "do we really think like that?" The cadets were my intended audience, whose critical thought I wished to excite.

Later, I performed the song at an event in which we discussed the taboos of violence and militarism with a soldier and two other researchers. This was during the COVID-19 pandemic, so we were streaming the event. I went to a shop selling old military clothes and bought a pair of "pickled cucumber salad" pants, and as I stood in front of the microphones in those trousers, I instantly felt more serious, manly, and strong. Voicing the elongated text, trying to keep my composure as I performed in clothes that were purposefully provoking while making me feel things, it all returned to where I had begun: the body—all the body—through and in the body. Music is meant to be performed, and it is in performance when again something new emerges in the moment. Something happens to me as a researcher and artist, and a new layer appears on the piece of art that was not there before.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

I rely on chaos in creative practice. Improvisation is a direct way to tap into the possibilities of risk and the present moment. The spoken word is not the same as the conversations I had with cadets, not the same as their thoughts, not the same as my thoughts on their thoughts. It is a shadow world of sound and words. Sound gives shape to a subject, transmuting material and changing bodies. This is a research-creation that no writing can replace. And this is where artistic creation matters and why it is compulsive—it is knowledge in

the language of music, music that is integral to human cultures, music without which we could not live.

I consider sound art as a portal. It transports into the world of sound stripped of tactile and visual stimuli. I am aware of the ableism embedded in this quest: it excludes people with impaired hearing. Thick with affect and ambiguous meaning, recordings do not always easily or immediately translate into "research as we know it," which is the entire point. Plunging into the unknown, "research as we do not know it," is to take a long walk of bewilderment, awe, and messiness. The unruliness, wildness, and unexpectedness of artistic creativity is my activism as a woman artist and researcher.

With art, I make myself vulnerable and known, and this is the only way I can study militarism, or anything else for that matter. This is the research I believe in. Such research might have a small but still profound impact. The fact that some cadets and personnel have become curious about militarism and militarism, and the possibilities of Critical Military Studies, feels to me like a major achievement. Drawing attention to the question of killing by simply asking about it and then re-creating the conversations in sounds and rhythms, are minor gestures (Manning 2016) facing overwhelmingly powerful structures. Like Rebecca Solnit (2005, 6–7), "I worry now that many people never disband their armies, never go beyond what they know." At the same time, as Cynthia Enloe (2015, 8) has argued, "militaries are a lot more fragile and contingent than elites will admit," and we must believe that the minor gestures can promote non-violence. Challenging the persistence of militarism as the solution to threats requires radical acts of imagination. It is very difficult to imagine something other than a profoundly militarised world without becoming creative.

We are a singing species, and voice reveals. If you now begin to sing, you will reveal something of your life state at this very moment. Even if you would try to pretend, your voice would still expose you. Music has expressive power due to its ephemeral and experiential nature that draws me to rely on it, especially when the "data" I have at my disposal is troubling. Moreover, with art comes the uncertainty of interpretation, the certainty of misinterpretation and the irrelevance of the artist's intention, no matter how much a piece of art is explained to the audience. All these aspects are present in any kind of research, but with music, I can make them visible, tangible, and explore the paradoxes and (im)possibilities that arise with musical interventions.

The military is a rhythmic institution that relies on regulating bodies, culture, and materialities with their patterns, tactics, beats, strikes, and accents. I believe there is much to study in terms of the deep musicality of the military itself—for example, the tone and volume of command, the auditory experience of military training, the invisibility of automatic movement patterns, the role of cadence, the regulation of bodily functions, continuities and structures

that become a military melody, and so on. A creative effort can open new pathways for research, and music is a metaphoric and practical companion in this quest.