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**Crossing Borders:
Practice-led research and Improvisation in Post Modern Culture
Orpheus Lecture 26.2.2016:
Anne Douglas**

Thank you for the invitation to deliver this lecture. I am responding to the spirit of the programme – *Crossing Borders*- to present the way that we think about practice-led research in the arts in Aberdeen and Grays School of Art.

This presentation is in two parts:

- The first establishes the first principles of our research approach taking us through an example of a PhD in which the artist is reflecting on her own practice. Our research is predominantly located in the visual arts. More specifically we are researching the **changing nature of art in public life**.

- In the second part I will explore the work of two artistic practices one includes the PhD. In this part I am the researcher looking into the practices of other artists to inform my own practice-led approach. The examples are research led i.e. practices that unfold as art in the world and also take form as critical reflective texts. In this section I explore the work through the concept of improvisation. There are a number of reasons for this
 - Improvisation is both an artistic and an everyday concept. It moves between life and art and therefore appears to offer potential to understanding forms of artistic practice that also move in and out of institutional spaces of production and reception and everyday life.
 - In fact improvisation increasingly appears in the discourse of contemporary visual arts as a way of expressing permeability between art and life in post modernism. It is used but to my knowledge rarely researched.
 - For some time I have been concerned with the problem of knowledge in art and design research. What are ways of knowing that are specific to the arts? Do we rely too heavily on non-artistic ways of knowing to legitimise our research cultures? By working with artistic concepts such as improvisation might we ground research firmly in an artistic domain?
 - Improvisation is hard wired into music and therefore has much to offer other art forms opening up new thinking 'across the borders' of music and the visual arts.

A note on the overarching research context in a post-modern era

Postmodernism is a difficult subject, a little discredited perhaps. I hope through this work to offer insights into what it might really mean in relation to art. The trend within modernism had been towards differentiating art forms from each other aligned with sensory domains particularly of seeing (visual arts) and hearing (music), resulting in a degree of autonomy, a search for pure form, an escape from appearances in the real world towards the immaterial and spiritual in art. Central to this autonomy has been a focus on product as the locus of the 'work' of art. However, in recent years particularly in the visual arts there has been something of a reversal, a seismic shift in the form of a deep engagement not so much with appearance but with the materiality of real social, political and ecological issues and experiences explored through art. It is in this turn that our artistic research and its sub themes including improvisation is situated.

Part One:

I lead a doctoral/postdoctoral research programme-On the Edg- within an Art School, Grays School of Art that is part of a university, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen. I want to focus on the character of our own research approach and how it has been shaped through its cultural context.

Remote rural culture in the NE of Scotland

Aberdeen/shire was until recently the oil capital of Europe within a thriving agricultural hinterland that itself has a strong sense of its own history. Tangible heritage can be visibly traced in the landscape going back for thousands of years. I have explored this in quite a playful piece of writing I the current issue of Tate etc.

What is landscape?

Douglas, A & C. Fremantle Tate Etc. Issue 36. (Spring 2016)

It is this culture that has offered the greatest challenge to our artistic research. Moving from urban, metropolitan centres to remote rural cultures has prompted a rethinking of the role of contemporary art in culture. The geographical situation also consolidated a separation from art world structures associated with the urban and metropolitan. Remote rural cultures support few museums, galleries, studios. As a newly formed practice-led research group of academics, artists, cultural producers in 2000, we realised that art does not depend upon the insulation characteristic of specialised institutions. We found ourselves focusing on issues of place and environment working directly with communities of interest rather than more anonymously with audiences. This is not to reject the museum or gallery – far from it. It has meant placing them as part of, but not the whole frame. We had the opportunity to explore their relevance by developing new values and qualities of contemporary art based in the temporal, developmental and immersive. What seemed at the time to be most pressing was the need to rethink, reimagine the idea of art, how it is made, by whom and for whom.

We framed a research question:

Slide: What is the role of the contemporary artist in remote rural cultures?

- **Slide:** (*What did we believe could be known?*): Underpinning this question was a sense that we might develop very different ways of making art informed by where we were living. We were interested in how research might offer visual artists a different kind of opportunity – one that stretched the assumptions of arts relationship to medium, context, community and place. Research through the arts has tended to draw on the sciences and social sciences for legitimacy and respectability, surprisingly neglecting longer traditions in the arts and humanities. This has restricted the kinds of questions that could be asked. This new research in remote/rural cultures afforded a different quality of space and inquiry.
- (*What was our relationship with existing knowledge?*)
Slide: We brought to this inquiry a deepening knowledge of place and also of new theoretical perspectives that had started to situate art in relation to civic processes, values and issues, in other words inhabiting the post modern. Championed by the artists such as Allan Kaprow in the US, we were interested in what Kaprow described as the blurring of art and life. Correspondingly we were interested in how the Artist Placement Group

(Barbara Steveni and John Latham) in the UK conceptualised the placing of artists in industry.

- (*How did we go about finding out?*)

Slide: We chose to work with partners responsible for cultural development in local places and developed research/art projects through the challenges they faced and their personal visions of how these challenges might be met. We drew artists into both the challenges and the visions. We quickly established an ethos of co-created research, led by the visual arts as a knowledge domain.

This history is written up in a chapter: Context is Half the Work in *The Everyday Practice of Public Art* eds Cameron Cartiere and Martin Zebracki 2016 pp 141-157.

Since this beginning our research has moved beyond the remote and rural into wider frames of reference including the urban and international still retaining the question of the role of contemporary art in public life. We have engaged with and learned from practices that have moved out of the bounded space of museum and gallery and also moved back into these, but in a different way.

So over a number of years (16 at least) our research culture has sustained a double edge:

- How to **rethink contemporary art practice** in public life (now including remote rural and urban)
- How to develop **appropriate research cultures in art and design** through an understanding of the arts/design as knowledge producing, as practice-led disciplines.

We have borrowed a framework from the research theorists Lincoln and Guba (1994) that has helped us to situate this research within competing research paradigms.

This framework raises 3 questions that need to be taken in order

- *What can be known* (ontological)? We challenged our idea of what art could be both through the histories of art and design and through contemporary theory of the arts in culture.
- *What is the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known* (epistemology)? We positioned ourselves as inhabitants, not sociologists; as makers inside the situation, not observers outside the situation.
- *How can the inquirer go about finding out? ...not any methodology will do.* We set about developing new approaches to the making of art in relation to rural life in order to develop insights into wider practice itself (methodology).

Guba, E. and Lincoln, Y., 1994 Competing paradigms in qualitative research in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln, eds, *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage , 105-7.

Slide: Moving on a few years, the example of PhD I have chosen is an artist whose work is located very precisely in the space between art and public life, not in Scotland but West Coast USA. Suzanne Lacy is a feminist and activist, an established practitioner of international standing. She came to us because

1. she recognised our expertise in practice-led research. Practice-led research did not exist in the US at the time.
2. she was also interested our approach to working between art and cultural organisations in rural life. This appeared to resonate with her own 'socially engaged' practice, working across different cultural frames. Her practice

operated at a different scale of endeavour to our own, engaging not just cultural organisations but civic infrastructure.

Slide: Through doctoral study, Lacy wanted to reflect on a ten-year body of work in Oakland, California 1991-2001, in which she explored the absence of 'voice' among black youth in the 1990s in an area that previously had fostered powerful political movements some 20 years before – Malcolm X, the Black Panther movement. Each project focused in the relationship between young black people and the law enforcement agencies, educationalists and youth services. Each project also included a high profile performance event (Lacy, 1991-2001) (Douglas, 2007).

How does this work address those three questions: the ontological, epistemological and methodological?

Beginning with the ontological – What do you believe can be known by this research?

Suzanne embarked on the research to deepen her own understanding of what it takes to practise well, with quality, in public life. She was seeing many poor examples of practice. She wanted to explore this work through the experience and voice of the artist because the artist had the deepest knowledge of what was involved in producing the work.

While many critics and writers had analysed the Oakland work project by project, the research gave her the opportunity to work across a whole suite of projects in order to develop insight into the complex demands of a socially focused art practice - " One of the impetuses of the Oakland Projects was to explore duration, intimacy, and the relationship of the artist to the 'place' of the work " p 3. Up until that point this area of work had been under theorised and not through the voice of individual making the work.

This resonates with the issues we had also faced, albeit in a very different cultural context.

In terms of the second question – how does this research relate to existing knowledge (epistemology), Suzanne situated her practice within a contemporary US based Pragmatist tradition through John Dewey Art as Experience to Allan Kaprow, Lucy Lippard, Arlene Raven among others. This is quite distinctive from a European based tradition in its emphasis on experiential learning, on forms of activism closely aligned with pedagogy and also in scale of operation.

In relation to the third question, methodology/research approach, Suzanne situated the 10 years of working in Oakland, California as a case study, examining in particular how the social claims that her artistic work aspired to, could be evidenced. She developed five sites that the Oakland project had implicated, including education, health, criminal justice, civic policy and youth experience. She aligned these sites to forms of pedagogy that her work sought to develop, from large scale public pedagogy through to an intimate level of a mentoring relationship. Pedagogy was important because it underpinned the work's claim to hold a relevant place both within public and professional art spheres and as mentioned earlier is bound to the way this kind of art is thought in US. She drew on a comprehensive archive of documentation accumulated over the ten years and also conducted over 40 interviews with individuals who had been part of the process including young people themselves, educationalists, health workers, the major. Despite the gap in time, she had remained in contact with many of the original participants.

SLIDE: Suzanne's approach to critical reflection and analysis was simultaneously performative and pedagogical. At the beginning of the research she stayed in Scotland for a few months and together with Creative Scotland, we developed a learning space in the form of a seminar programme that took place within Scotland's four cities, Working in Public Seminars (www.workinginpublicseminars.org 2006-8). With the Oakland projects as the focal point of learning, we developed a framework of paired concepts that were also points of tension: aesthetics and ethics; representation and power; quality of art and quality of social process. This formed an analytical framework through which to review the work. Suzanne presented her Oakland work through a particular project within each seminar. Aspects of the programme took the form of public events and other aspects involved smaller expert groups learning through debate and discussion, through finding resonances and dissonance between the US based Oakland work and ongoing work in Scotland. The PhD took some years to complete because in the interim Suzanne's profile as a significant artist caught the imagination of the international gallery circuit including Tate Modern, Arnolfini in UK as well as Reina Sofia in Madrid and Getty Foundation, each time challenging these institutions to take on the full implications of her work through live performances v just showing the material culture surrounding a performance. The research was completed in 2013.

SLIDE: Suzanne is an interesting example of our doctoral culture for a number of reasons. She is an experienced artist whose pioneering work has always been research-led in the sense mentioned earlier. It unfolds as art in the world. It also evolves critical reflective writing that places the work in a wider theoretical context. In this PhD – and this is perhaps unusual - she was simultaneously 'research student' and mentor to us in learning what the practice could be along with figuring out an appropriate way of researching it .

Our experience of this work has inspired further research including emergent themes within our whole programme such as leadership through arts practice and improvisation.

SLIDE: Characteristics of our research approach:

- Experienced practitioners (artists as well as producers and administrators) seeking to deepen understanding in a changing world
- Each PhD draws on experience (gathered through documentation, interviews and experimental 'live' projects) as well as theory (drawn from the history of art/design practice, cultural theory)
- Each doctoral project establishes exploratory threads, tests different analytical frameworks within a shared unfolding discourse that draws together artists with cultural orgs, cultural leaders and communities of interest
- The resulting research has challenged fixed paradigms of research (positivism in particular). It mixes methods crossing different paradigms raising the question of whether it is a different paradigm.

SLIDE:

Moving into part 2

Suzanne Lacy is an example of an artist looking into her own practice through a practice-led PhD.

In this second part, I am the researcher looking at artists' practices (including Suzanne's) from the perspective of improvisation. So this is a shift in gear. As a practice-led researcher as I mentioned before, I am concerned with developing insights into specifically artistic ways of knowing, to deepen my understanding of practice in a post modern context. The selected artists offer exemplary practices in the sense that their work is situated between the institution of art (gallery, museum, concert hall) and life. They address issues and build processes that also inhabit a space between art and research.

I want to begin with a story of an experience that has over 3 years left me puzzling. This was a discussion within ORCIM 2012. At the time Kathleen Coessens and I worked with improvisation as a way into experimentation, the thematic underpinning ORCIM's 5 year research programme.

In a presentation at an ORCIM assembly in the spring 2012 there emerged two different apparently conflicting notions of improvisation, one phenomenological and the other drawn from music

1. improvisation in life

"There is no script for social and cultural life. People have to work it out as they go along. In a word, they have to improvise."(Hallam & Ingold 2007, p1)

2. improvisation in art as a particular approach to form building, particularly in music (theoretically explored by Prevost, Bailey, Cardew)

The ORCIM fellows were not happy with our defining improvisation in the anthropological/phenomenological sense as a condition of life, given their knowledge of creating music and improvisation's history in music. It rendered general what to them was something very specific in relation to formal approaches to musical composition and performance. The strength of their resistance was a little unexpected.

In different ways both Kathleen and I have continued to work on these questions and I will draw on some of our work together along with other materials(Douglas and Coessens 2012, 2014).

What is puzzling is that both senses of improvisation are **in common use** but appear to be incommensurable, drawing, as it did, an impassioned response. How are they different? In what sense might their apparent incommensurability problematize and deepen an understanding of improvisation that re-entangles art with life? How might its artistic manifestation inform its presence in everyday life? This it seemed could an opportunity to grasp the specificity of artistic ways of knowing.

Another way of imagining improvisation may be in relation to freedom and constraint. What might we understand 'freedom' to be in improvisation? How does improvisation inform human freedom? Given the practice-led nature of the research, the overarching aim is not limited to knowledge about improvisation, but to reach a form of *understanding* that allows us to *make* differently.

So my overarching **aim** here is to try to create a more developed position from that of 2012 and then open up the issues for debate, inviting more and different questions and critical feedback from the DocArtes community that we can fold into our developing research.

My **approach** will be to explore the tension between the two meanings of improvisation as a dialectic, allowing each definition to problematize the other – or

maybe allowing the musical to problematize 'life'/phenomenological. The first, developed in the field of anthropology to address culture, may be too simple to adequately grasp the complexity of the work as art and the second, within the field of music, may be over specialised, too tied into a particular art form and convention of production.

First I will set up a theoretical framework, then use this framework to look at 2 practices: *Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison and Suzanne Lacy*.

Discourse

“We know quite well that we do not have the right to say everything, that we cannot speak of just anything in any circumstances whatever, and that not everyone has the right to speak of anything whatever.”

(Foucault 1981 p 52) *The Order of Discourse in ...Untying the Text: A post-structuralist reader* ed. Robert Young Routledge 1981 pp 51-78

Who is excluded/included by either definition of improvisation? In what circumstances do we use one or the other? Who is in control of those circumstances? *What do the answers to these questions reveal about freedom and constraint?*

Foucault immediately problematizes Hallam and Ingold's idea of a free ranging life 'without a script' by drawing attention to how in fact experience is constrained by multiple *scripts* in social/political life in relation to authority of different kinds: the formal responses given in **religious services** and other ceremonial settings (which are literally scripted); the **professional** ways of acting and speaking in most work environments; expected ways of **relating or deferring to forms of authority** outside our own work (in education, when encountering the police, dealing with the medical profession, speaking to elders etc.); in social or family environments (avoiding politics at the dinner table, not swearing in front of the children). We have ways of correcting errant behaviour, from glaring at the person who claps between movements in a classical performance to gently teasing someone who's being too serious at a party.

In other words not all experience of being in the world, is imagined as 'improvisational'. One might respond to the unknown in experience as in these examples by applying something already learned, through forms of control that are not improvised, but rehearsed. Both forms of response are metaphors, ways of seeing the world either as predominantly ordered and controllable or open to serendipity, to chance. In fact the artists' practices that I explore later reveal the degree to which scripts are indeed followed in relation to the environment, race and media manipulation and where through the work of artists, a space is opened up to deviate from those scripts. That space however is not purely formed by the artist but as a relation between the artist and an active public.

An etymological lens

Improvisation and experimentation

According to everyday/lay sources of Collins and Oxford improvisation commonly means to 'make do with the materials to hand' ("improvisation" in Oxford Dictionary) or 'act on the spur of the moment' ("improvisation" in Collins Dictionary). The Latin root of improvisation, "improvisus," consists of two components: "im," as "not," and "provisus," which stems from "providere"—to "foresee," "to provide" ("improvisation"

in Oxford Dictionary) - **in other words to improvise is SLIDE: not to foresee or choose to foresee and not to reach beyond what is readily available.**

This particular construction in lay language emphasises the moment of an experience and its situatedness. It could appear to reduce improvisation to a particular kind of temporality, one in which there is no *before* and no *beyond*, insisting on the present as a perpetual state of being. This traps improvisation in a kind of **stasis**, a temporary interruption in continuity.

In contrast Hallam and Ingold provide us with a way of imagining improvisation as a kind of **ongoing** figuring out/ working out through time and experience, a movement in which experience itself becomes a kind of experiment 'without script'. Experience and experiment share the same root in 'experire', meaning 'to try out, attempt to'. 'Periri' carries an altogether more sinister meaning 'to perish', 'to die' and the prefix 'ex' indicates a movement out of a location or place (Douglas and Coessens, 2012). In other words improvisation as experience in life could be imagined in the opposite sense of a temporary interruption/ as stasis. In Hallam and Ingold's sense, it is a moving out of the present constraints and its ways of knowing, creating a new opening.

Interestingly unlike the everyday sources of Oxford or Collins' dictionaries, the Grove Dictionary of Music refuses to define improvisation working instead through examples across time contemporary/historical and across cultures Western/Eastern/African.

Improvisation: The creation of a musical work or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed. It may involve the work's immediate composition by its performers, or the elaboration or adjustment of an existing framework, or anything in between. To some extent **every performance involves elements of improvisation**, although its degree varies according to period and place, and to some extent **every improvisation rests on a series of conventions and implicit rules. ...By its very nature – in that improvisation is essentially evanescent (soon passing out of sight, memory, existence, quickly fading)- it is one of the subjects least amenable to historical research**

Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians 2nd edition Vol 12 ed Stanley Sadie 94-95

So the lay definition of improvisation as a failure to plan ahead or as making do with whatever means does not sit well with the fact that **improvisation is highly valued**. Improvised parts of a performance carry the most prestige across cultures.

A theoretical lens

This contradictory nature of improvisation is resonant with Gary Peters, who as both a philosopher and a free improviser has attempted to explore a philosophy of improvisation that is significantly informed by the practice as well as deep theory. He dismisses the clichés of lay readings as reducing improvisation to a 'glorified love-in' between one improviser and another improviser i.e. improvisation's more celebratory notions by suggesting

"Improvisation is usually either lionized as an ecstatic experience of being in the moment or disparaged as the thoughtless recycling of clichés." (Peters, 2009)

Peters analyses improvisation on the one hand as a particular approach to form building in art, but in his analysis improvisation is never separated from life. This is explored through the way we have come to think through philosophical traditions as informative of the way we imagine ourselves as individuals in community. Peters is useful to the dialectic of improvisation as life without script v a specialist practice because his experience of free improvisation informs his understanding of music making while also informing experience itself, within and beyond the making of music.

He builds a way of imagining improvisation through two vivid references /metaphors: Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* (Figure 1) as described by Walter Benjamin's poem, and television shows such as *Scrapheap Challenge* (U.K.) and *Junkyard Wars* (U.S.A.).

A Klee painting named
Angelus Novus
shows an angel
looking as though he is about to move away
from something he is fixedly contemplating.
His eyes are staring, his mouth hangs open, his wings are spread.
This is how the angel of history must look.
His face is turned toward the past.
Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one catastrophe,
which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage
hurling it before his feet.
The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead,
and make whole what has been smashed.
But a storm is blowing from Paradise;
it has got caught in his wings with such violence
the angel can no longer close them.
This storm irresistibly propels him
into the future to which his back is turned,
while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.
This storm is what we call progress. - Benjamin, "[Theses on the Philosophy of History](#)", p. 249.

The imperative in the scrap heap is to make something new/whole out of the debris of the past, out of what is given. The improviser in the scrap heap challenge certainly 'draws on the materials to hand' but the task may not be as simple as 'working it out as he goes along'. He knows as a creator, he must escape the urge to reconstruct the familiar. He must make new in a situation that is wrought with a degree of anxiety about what is old. The materials build up to engulf him as fast as he attempts to manipulate them. There is a sense of impossibility about the task.

Peters echoes Hallam and Ingold in as far as he suggests that creating an artwork is like following a line in life. It is not a question of imitating life (following Kant) or of fixing or re-presenting, but a process of bringing into being. Artists sense their own creativity finding new ways of inhabiting the old, reviving dead forms. What is important is to avoid becoming trapped in the past and simply repeating what is familiar or liked (Peters, 2013, p 3).

However, Peters offers an edge that is absent in Hallam and Ingold. The improviser, he suggests, needs to work with irony. Without irony art falls back into the fixed, producing more and more cultural artifacts. Irony is the means by which artists can

seriously engage in the paradox of creativity - the powerful presence of tradition that cannot be accessed by merely imitating it, to be part of tradition but to also be able to be critical of it. Irony is very significant to making the transition from modernism to postmodernism.

This coincides with another paradox concerning freedom and the way in which we imagine freedom in society. Drawing on the writings of Isaiah Berlin (1958), Peters juxtaposes two notions of freedom, the one positive and the other negative. Positive freedom is **'a freedom to'**, driven by **the desire to be one's own master**.

“ The “positive sense of the word “liberty” derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own...acts of will. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer”
Berlin requoted in Peters 2009, p 23.

It is a competitive freedom.

In contrast **negative freedom** is a **freedom-from**. It consists in **being prevented from harm** by the actions of others.

Berlin recognises the closeness of the two concepts – they may be read as different ways of saying the same thing but in actuality each has profoundly different implications for the way one improviser may act in relation to another. Negative freedom is a collective ideal that allows the individual the scope for (to quote Berlin) “spontaneity, originality, genius, mental freedom”. Positive freedom is a freedom of singularity, establishing the individual as his own master without the collective. At the risk of caricature, positive freedom may be the freedom of the self seeking anarchist (or avant-garde artist) who might go to any lengths including violence to realise self, whereas the second may be the freedom of the activist driven by a desire not to be oppressed, attacked or exploited.

Gielen: on paradox of autonomy: on the right, removing public funding gives organisations autonomy by removing their dependence on public funding v on the left public funding relieves artists from the vagaries of the market. Jackson: Autonomy/anti authority of the modernist artist meant that they were easily co-opted by neoliberalism and their desire to dismantle public institutions. In contrast artists as activist unnerve the whole food chain of production/consumption viewing this as a social structure , putting it into context.

Peters suggests that free improvisation is an aesthetic space in which we enact the paradox of the two different qualities of freedom. The positive freedom of being one's own master within modernism frequently led to a cacophonous overkill in the context of a performance

“ ...the brash and virtuosic exhibitionism that excited performers and audiences alike before the 1960s, the competitiveness and one-upmanship that was everywhere in evidence, the arrogance, callousness, and cruelty that gave so much performance its edge.” (Peters 2009, p 24)

This has now been displaced in post modernism as part of a wider trajectory in culture and society, a “gentler activism” marked by “the concern for the ecosystem, the concern for the downtrodden and silenced” (Peters 2009, 23-24).

Peters' analysis is particularly useful for understanding the three/two artistic practices to follow. Improvisation is a movement not a moment, echoing Ingold and Hallam, but

it is a movement that is simultaneously constrained and free in a particular sense. There is a crucial and precise difference between being consumed by the past or by expectations within the immediate present. The improviser needs to act freely with an awareness of constraint. To fall one side of tradition or expectation is to risk entropy, the death of improvisation. To fall the other side is to engage in a kind of mastery over what has not yet been previously achieved. This is also the death of improvisation. Peters' sense of improvisation is the search for a fine line that acknowledges the contingencies of improviser's present and past and avoids being trapped. The improviser is free from these forces to search for a new opening through the available material and circumstances.

“...the freedom of free-improvisation is not something that is enacted or expressed therein as a given substance of the performance but it is, rather, something the improvisation allows us to *find*. Free improvisation then is not the embodiment of freedom but a search for it in the here and now of the work's becoming. In a sense it is the negative freedom that is necessary to free the improviser and improvisation from the forces that would devastate it: past works, the work, the other, the collective.” (Peters, p 72)

What might it look like in practice? What is its relationship to practice-led research?

New Contexts, New practices

As mentioned earlier I have selected two artistic practices that focus on issues of public life (ecological, social, cultural) as well as engaging in processes of public life. Some directly reference improvisation. For others, improvisation is an unspoken quality of process, of the way they work and its presence in the world.

*The following is a slight reworking of the content of a forthcoming book chapter: Douglas, Anne. Venturing out on the thread of a tune': the Artist as Improvisor in Public life In **Creative Practice and the Art of Association**, trajectories of practice as research. ed James Oliver University of Melbourne Press 2016.*

Improvisation's past and future: Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison

As artists and ecologists, Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison have been concerned over fifty years with the implications of eco-cultural well-being between human and non-human communities. They explore the ecologies of particular places through a series of questions: How big is here? How long is our now? These questions are not seeking definitive answers. They act as a point of entry into the complexity of relationships in eco-systems (Douglas & Fremantle 2016).

The Harrisons' work is a profound critique of mankind's increasing tendency to assume control over nature, resulting from a problematic transmutation of knowledge into economic systems based in values of progress and profit. They have slowly evolved an alternative imaginary recasting human/environmental relations as interdependent. This is most vividly in their first project together, *The Lagoon Cycle* 1975-85. In this project they studied the ecology of a species of crab in Sri Lanka. They then attempted to reconstruct the habitat of the crab in California by substituting all the subtle processes that nature had so finely balanced in the crab's original environment. The idea was to explore and critique in a very specific context the way in which man has attempted to gain mastery over his environment.

Are the Harrisons improvising in this work? If so, how?

SLIDE: *The Lagoon Cycle* takes the form of a published text and an exhibition that includes large -scale maps and images as well as the physical setting up of a series of 'lagoons' as a process of inquiry and experimentation. The text takes shape as a dialogue between two opposing perspectives or characters– that of the Witness as someone who reflects on and questions courses of action, versus the Lagoon Maker, who is more spontaneous, driven by pro-action more than reflection. In other words freedom and constraint play between the two positions. Differences are not resolved but held in productive tension.

Sixth Lagoon On Metaphor and Discourse.

Pay attention to the flow of waters and
the mixing of the earths

*Attend to the integrity of the discourse
between earth and water the watershed
Is an outcome*

Pay attention to the discourse between
earth water and men interruption
is an outcome

*Pay attention to the meaning of the nature
of such discourse and the nature of the
meaning of interruption After all
a discourse is a fragile transitory form
an improvisation of sorts*

And anyone may divert a discourse of any
kind into another direction if they do not
value its present state

Pay attention to changes of state¹

The whole work is formal in an aesthetic/artistic sense, conscious of “rhythm, proportion, measure, weight (light-dark), quality (colour), space” (Grohmann 1959). Every aspect of the text and exhibition is determined, rather than indeterminate. In any formal, literal/artistic sense it is *not* an improvised work. However the products that would normally identify a work as art (text, image, exhibition and book), function as part of **a much larger movement, a discourse that is never completed**. At a relatively early stage of development, the Harrisons open up their creative process to participation (in the case of the Lagoon Cycle – **SLIDE** the fisherman, government agent, developer and so on) and the inevitable collisions that result from multiple understandings and sensibilities. The dialogue between the Witness and the Lagoon Maker becomes a wider conversation gathering participants as it moves, a form of ‘conversational drift’, the Harrisons’ own metaphor (Adcock 1992,p 45). In this way the issues gain in intensity and complexity. Importantly invitation (and not competition predetermined by a design brief) is fundamental to the open-ended, exploratory and mobile nature of their aesthetic. Once they have achieved a sufficient level of knowledge and awareness of the issues to hand, they shape a discrete work like that of the text/image component of *The Lagoon Cycle*. At this stage they are seeking to

1 Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *The Lagoon Cycle*, (New York: Cornell University Press), 82

make sense of what they have experienced and to offer this back to a listening public, putting their thinking to the test and drawing critical response.

On the one hand, improvisation in the first sense (Hallam and Ingold's) as a force or energy that underpins all life, human and non human, holds true in the way that the Harrisons talk about improvisation as a strong metaphor for human life and for life in the eco-system. The form they construct sustains an unfolding, iterative movement, one that functions in the symbolic realm of the imagination with potential for specific action. The point is not to arrive at a blue print to act upon but to start a process without knowing how it will end. The process depends on form but it is also unknowable/indeterminate.

However, there is also the desire in this work to move forward into a future that is different from the past, for renovation in Peters' sense, to make new by bringing forth rather than accepting life as found. The anxiety of the Angelus Novus or the scrap yard challenge is present in the form of escalating environmental change. Their solution does not lie in (technological) innovation and novelty but in participating in the drift of the conversation. In this sense their rejection of the protocol of competition could be read as a rejection of freedom as mastery, freedom-to. In this construction improvisation becomes a process, an artistic method of progressing from past into present that is not a Utopian projection or rupture with the past. It is based in 'hyper awareness' of what the past has led us to. Past and present are thus entangled and mutable, contained within a movement from a closed sense of what has been, to one in which the past is re-opened, re-imagined in the present. The work connects a deep ecological past to the present, keeping the issues, in this case of the environment, alive, urgent and open to new potential. In this way the Harrisons, through the stories of others, tell a **new** story. **They believe that the future is determined by the stories we tell ourselves now, stories of our own becoming, a search for the freedom to think as an individual within and beyond the contingencies of social life.**

The spoken and unspoken in improvisation: Suzanne Lacy

In a parallel way, Suzanne Lacy's work in Oakland is situated between the institutions of art and life.

In *Roof is On Fire* 1993-4, one of a number of performances within the ten year cycle, the artist worked with participants to stage a series of conversations to a listening public with a view to exposing and challenging racial prejudice. The staging, like the Harrisons' *Lagoon Cycle*, was meticulously considered in formal terms. In this case, large cars that seated up to four to five young people created focal points within an Oakland rooftop parking lot. Spectators could wander freely between the vehicles to hear what was being said and to see, by whom. It was a self-conscious, aesthetic decision to time the performance for sunset marking a transition through the colour spectrum from light into darkness. The content of the conversations within the cars was not determined but extemporized by the participants exploring their experiences of the issues.

Again we might ask, in which of the two senses is this work improvisation?

In this particular sequence of projects, Lacy's 'world as found' is socially, rather than ecologically, situated. It addresses issues of identity and power. She draws out a space and time, encircling the disorder of real situations of racial/class/gender prejudice. The point is to acknowledge the conflict inherent in the issues at hand, to be open to the disjuncture and contradiction that differences of view and experience

produce. In this space it is also important for conflicted parties – young people their educationalists, the white middle classes gentrifying the black neighbourhood, to let go of judgementalism, of fixed positions.

The work encircles life as a space of emergence and movement in Ingold and Hallam's sense but with a fundamental difference that the space is an intervention in an otherwise **heavily scripted** situation of class, gender, colour that proscribe how individuals behave in relation to each other – what can be said when, in what circumstances and by whom (Foucault). The work of art in this case allows participants from different factions to foreground the conditions of their oppression, to make visible these conditions in juxtaposition with other perspectives between young people, police, educationalists and politicians.

There is a resonance between Lacy's choreographing of the space for conversation and the Harrisons metaphor of 'conversational drift' in which the artist establishes a form, the outcome of which is indeterminate. Like the Harrisons, what is crucially important about Lacy's work is her focus on creating the conditions that might allow for a **shared sense** of the freedom to think differently not as a consensual process but one that engages significant differences of perspective and experience. She does not attempt to determine future courses of action, but provides the space and time where these may come forth. Lacy uses the metaphor 'imperfect art' to describe this work (the title of her doctoral thesis with RGU). It brings to the foreground the artist's partial control over a creative process **that is artist-led, but not completed by the artist**. It not only requires the implementation and development of others, but it is also not in the artist's control.

'The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist.' ”
Peters p 13.

Lacy adds context and participation to this relationship. She establishes a set of constraints, a form, that connect different individuals through a newly configured set of social dynamics – workshops, performances. These are painstakingly constructed. By not intervening herself and not letting those in power (e.g. white middle classes) intervene in what is said, she makes it possible to speak out across conflict and power. Her insistence on form within the performance works, her refusal to act as facilitator but to act as artist, frequently engages criticism that this *is* a form of artistic mastery. As mentioned earlier the line that makes for true improvisation is a fine line between slipping into the control of the past, the script of institutional and organization behaviours, and escaping this by acting as an autonomous individual, enacting another script in the form of the freedom-to become the master or mistress of a different set of circumstances. What becomes new forms of social action in this work emerges out of the experience of participation.

Conclusions

“While the unforeseen, wayfinding definition of Ingold and Hallam is consistent with the sense of 'using the materials at hand', making use of the materials involves understanding what those materials are as well as what techniques can be applied to combining them. Knowledge, expertise and a relationship to the past are among the available materials. We are not pitches into the future without recourse to what has gone before. We must construct the future from the present moment according to our understanding of what has gone before. The improviser must calibrate this relationship with the past, transcending the horror of Klee's angel by eyeing in the wreckage a reflection of what is to come. There are clues in the materials at hand as to how they

may be used. Improvisation is the ability to work with sufficient flexibility, enough lightness of touch, to sure that the clues are not interpreted - or venerated - as instructions”.

Jonathan Price email 24/2/16

To be *experienced* as improvised, the artistic process needs to manifest how improviser and improvisation both draw on and are free from the forces of the past that might devastate it. The space between is the space in which individuals are given the scope and space for spontaneity and originality. It is not a property, but a quality of freedom that improvisation allows us to find. It is a space that is shared, acted and re-enacted socially. Free improvisation then is not the embodiment of freedom but a search for it in the here and now of the work's becoming.

Why does it matter to differentiate between these understandings of improvisation? What insights does this offer ways of knowing through artistic research?

What is radical in the exemplary practices of the Harrisons and Lacy is the consequence of their processes in overcoming the separation of the artist from society that had occurred within modernism and its trajectory towards specialisation. They show how necessary it has become for the artist to be critically engaged not just in making the work, but in the conditions in which the work is made, to work creatively with a hyper awareness of constraint and freedom that extends beyond physical material properties and formal aesthetics.

Herbert Read poignantly remarked upon the absence of a connection between art and life in his introduction to a lecture Klee gave in Jena in 1924 *On Modern Art*.

“Klee, with the clarity and humility not characteristic of many of his contemporaries, realised that the individual effort is not sufficient. The final source of power in the artist is given by society, and that is precisely what is lacking in the modern artist- ‘Uns trägt kein Volk’. We have no sense of community, of a people for whom and with whom we work. That is the tragedy of the modern artist, and only those who are blind to their own social disunity and spiritual separateness blame the modern artist for his obscurity” (Read in Klee, p 6 1989)

Peters' understanding of improvisation in a post modern world some 100 years later is a recovery of *sensus communis*, a sense common to all both meaning the coming together of all senses and the freedom to play without purpose prior to cognitive faculties, of the communicability of feeling, of a search for freedom rather than its determination or description.

Improvisation in this sense is not a special style or genre for making art though particular artistic approaches can inform its construction. It is a movement and quality within life that is not restricted to art. However, it is a movement in a very particular sense that the arts can inform and shape, a dynamic between constraint and freedom that is particular - a freedom from intimidation and exclusion, commercialisation, artistic conformity.

Traced as a concept and practice through a research process, we come to understand improvisation as a means to undertake a reclaiming of social and civic space.

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