

# **Devising Solo Performance: A Practitioner's Enquiry**

by

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## Abstract

This research explores the validity and value of 'solo devising' as a means for specifying a category of theatre-making that has been little discussed, compared to group devising, in existing literature on devising and postdramatic theatre. Primary source material was obtained through carrying out extended interviews with five experienced British theatre practitioners who have made work that could be described as solo devised performance: Tim Etchells, Bobby Baker, Mike Pearson, Nigel Charnock and Wendy Houstoun. In analysing these interviews, referred to in detail but not reproduced in full, the enquiry draws on a range of writings, including Oddey, Heddon, Harvie, Alexander and George, on devising and making performance and in particular on Melrose's concept of practitioner-centred expert knowledge, Lehmann's notion of the postdramatic and Sennett's specification of expertise in craftsmanship. Chapter One considers solo practice in relation to the idea of a solo devising economy, the interviewees' professional work and other experimental solo practices within theatre, performance, dance and art. Chapter Two explores how the interviewees create multiple performance personae, doing and undoing notions of individuality and autobiography through strategies of working 'about', 'from' and 'beyond' the self. Chapter Three explores solo devising processes, involving research, generation of material, composition, performance and 'orchestration'. Chapter Four scrutinises different kinds of collaboration, including 'audiencing', as both enabling and productively confounding activities occurring within solo devising. Chapter five specifies some findings about solo devising: that it both involves expert, crafted, individual working, requiring orchestration of a high number of activities and skills, and, simultaneously, practices of negotiated authorship with other artists and audiences, enabling a potentially political reading of its distinctly ambiguous working. An additional finding is that close attention to what expert practitioners say about their work can yield rich information about a specific practice.

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Never last, I give thanks to my partner, Louis, for building my tables and managing my life, and my son Leo, for giving me pictures and interrupting me.

## Author's declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award. This study was financed with the aid of staff-supported bursaries from Dartington College of Arts and Falmouth University. A programme of doctoral research training was taken, provided by Dartington College of Arts.

### *Conference Presentations*

2007. 'Resonant Performance: a mixer's search'. *New Performance Paradigms*. University of Salford. England. Oct. 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007. Performance paper.

2010. "'I know this won't work, don't we?" – Solo Devising and Collaboration'. *Theatre and Performance Research Association*. University of Glamorgan. England. Sept. 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010. Conference paper.

2011. 'As Yet Impossible' Symposium. University of Salford. England. May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Workshop facilitator.

2012. "'I know this won't work, don't we?" (MP1: 10) – Solo devising and collaborative practice.' 'On Collaboration'. University of Middlesex Symposium. England. May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Conference paper.

### *Solo Contemporary Performance Forum*

<http://www.soloperformanceforum.co.uk>

### *Solo Labs*

#### *Dartington College of Arts*

Lab 1: April 3<sup>rd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

Lab 2: Sept. 5<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

Lab 3: July 12<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

Co-ordinator and artist.

Performance Platform: Premiere 3 solo performances including *Taj A Chino Blues*, Dartington College of Arts. Nov. 9<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

Co-ordinator and artist.

### *Solo Dialogues Series*

#### *Falmouth University*

A series of conversations, focusing on making solo work, with national and international practitioners. Artists have included Andrew Morrish, Jo Bannon, Bec Applebee, Ria Hartley, Jo Hellier, Chris Crickmay, Gregg Whelan and Fred McVittie.

### *Solo Performances*

2003. *Bed*. Radio play.

Broadcast on 'Saangam', BBC Radio Bristol and BBC Radio Commonwealth, June 23<sup>rd</sup> and July 8<sup>th</sup>. In 2006, it toured South West England with exhibition 'All Different All Equal'.

2005. *Outlaws*. Solo radio play.

Performed at Bristol Empire and Commonwealth Museum, March 8<sup>th</sup>; Exeter Phoenix, May 13<sup>th</sup>; BBC Radio Bristol, Oct. 10<sup>th</sup>

2006. *Taj A Chino Blues*. Solo performance.

Performed at Theatre Museum, London, Oct. 28<sup>th</sup>; Dartington College of Arts, UK, Nov. 9<sup>th</sup>; 2012. 'Face to Face Solo Performance Festival', Lost Theatre, London, July 12<sup>th</sup>.

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Signed

Date: 12.6.2014



## Notes to the reader.

1. I have used a system of internal cross-referencing indicated by a (page), which directs the reader to the more fully elaborated writing in the thesis.
2. All practitioner interviews are referenced according to initials of the practitioner (WH), the interview number (1 or 2), and the transcribed page number. This referencing is for my own and later use, as the transcribed interviews are not included in the thesis. This is due to their considerable length (over 200,000 words) and current conversations about publication.
3. Appendices are listed in the table of contents for easy access.
4. My focus is on processes of making, not the performed product and I am viewing all else in relation to this lens. At times, perhaps, this creates an unfamiliar experience for the reader, who may not have seen the performed work. I have therefore included a description of the main solo works discussed in Appendix III.
5. The issue of deciding which tense was appropriate to use when writing about the interviews was a challenge, given the amount of quotation and indirect reportage I have chosen to use. I decided to apply the following rules. When I reference what the practitioners said in interviews, which occurred clearly in the past, I use the past tense. When work or working processes are analysed which are both relevant to the interviews but also continue to be worked within the present, I use the present tense. I will generally reference published

writings as being in the present, as they are ongoing public sources of information.

6. I will be dealing with the issue of gender in relation to my speaking about female and male interviewees as a group throughout the thesis by using 'they' and 'them' as an ungendered singular pronoun, as opposed to the gendered 'him' or 'her'.
7. I include the first performance date of each piece of work when I first cite it, and thereafter only when it is relevant to the argument.

## Preface

This research explores 'postdramatic' solo devising as a particular and rich kind of experimental solo practice. In doing this, it makes detailed reference to the thinking of five expert performance practitioners in relation to their solo making, using material gathered through two extended interviews with each practitioner. Although it does not include discussions of my own solo devising processes or performances in the main body of the work, the research has arisen from my experience and work as a deviser and performer, researcher and teacher. Reference to my practice is therefore relevant, but mainly limited to this preface.

In my career so far, I have been involved in several kinds of practices related to performance, which are relevant to this study. I have worked as an actor in classical, dramatic theatre, as a deviser and performer in groups and solo experimental performance (for the latter, see the list of solo works in the author's declaration) and am employed as a composer and singer in ensembles and bands performing original material. I also work as a lecturer in theatre, acting and music theatre and as a researcher, having previously completed an M.Phil. on Contact Improvisation. The work with Contact explores issues relevant to this PhD, as a generative, experimental dance practice using improvisation in a variety of training and performance contexts. It also gave me training in the use of interview materials for research purposes.

Over the past ten years, I have devised a series of four, connected solo works (p.8). My primary stimulus material revolves around the subject of mixed ethnicity and what it can perform. Despite the obvious sociality implied by this topic, working solo makes sense for several reasons. Individual authorship allows me to work obsessively with particular interests and questions and return to them across several pieces of work. Some of the questions raised by this practice includes: how to effectively use autobiographical material and connect it to wider social questions, how to include multiple voices, how to combine humour and lightness with political material about ethnicity and culture, how to collaborate effectively and how to give objects, music, light and space further presence.

In deciding on a method of enquiry for further addressing these questions in a doctorate, I made a decision not to attempt to answer them through further making of my own solo practice, and this was for artistic reasons. Artistic process, for me, means working in realms of the imagination and the impossible, in embodied form and practice contexts, and I wish to keep it in those domains. Engaging, as I do, with issues of ethnic visibility, authenticity, truth and lies, I was also reluctant to further subject this kind of content within my practice to the particular kind of public, rationale scrutiny that working towards an advanced research degree in the UK requires. I decided to initially focus on the formal questions about solo making in a more reflective and collective space, in order to open up a spectrum of possibilities and approaches which I would potentially be able to work with at a later date. This led to my methodological decision to interview in depth a group of expert practitioners, who at the time had not

spoken extensively about their solo practice. What evolved from this initial and critical decision was a particular method of 'practice-led research', defined below (p.17). A specific example from my own practice may help to clarify this further. An initial first working of my solo *Taj A Chino Blues* (2005) involved me standing on a set of tables, being interrogated by a pre-recorded voice, attempting and inevitably failing, to answer the question: 'Where do you come from?' For a mixed race person, this question has particular issues and challenges and I was exploring how repeated failure to answer this might also resonate with a wider audience. However, I was never comfortable with the recorded, interrogative voice and questioned how else to incorporate multiple voices and personae into my solo work. Through my subsequent analysis of interview material and wider reading and viewing, a range of strategies for including other voices in the work were revealed. This included performing multiple personae, re-performing recorded voices of others through headphones or speakers, through to offering moments of silence and space in the performed work for the 'voices' of the audience to inhabit the work. This also had the effect of connecting personal, autobiographical material to wider groups of people and wider social questions. In turn, these methods of research, from studio to interview to reading and viewing further expanded the enquiry, revealing that solo devising was an underdiscussed, undertheorised area of performance making practice. I detail this here with the aim of clarifying how my methodology was arrived at out of my individual practice, which led to the opening up of an area of enquiry, about solo devising.

I have also been curating the Solo Performance Forum at Dartington College of Arts, now working out of Falmouth and Bristol. It is a multi-platform group, providing labs, residencies, scratch and showcase performances and connecting practitioners digitally.<sup>1</sup> This forum includes a series called 'Solo Dialogues'; conversations with artists about how they make solo work. This has moved the method of gathering solo material from interview into conversation, where I am testing out some of the findings of this research with others. The laboratory sessions involve practitioners showing solo work in development, exchanging ideas and exploring their materials with each other. Finally, I have a piece of solo work in development, *Vibrato*, and have worked as a dramaturg on a professional solo piece, *Matilda and me* (2013) by Ria Hartley, a collaboration born from the Solo Dialogues series. I look forward to further activating in that practice some of the findings specific to solo dramaturgy that arise from this study.<sup>2</sup>

Solo working has proved to be a practical choice for me over the past ten years. The elasticity of solo practice in relation to working time and space usage has allowed me to make work in a schedule where the group devising activities included in teaching and motherhood take considerable amounts of time. I am encouraged by the way in which I have been able to test out and work with the ideas from this research, with my students, colleagues and fellow solo practitioners and curators of solo performance work. I will discuss some future directions and possible applications for the research in Chapter Five.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.soloperformanceforum.co.uk>

<sup>2</sup> I use this term to indicate compositional issues specific to solo working and performance and explore this further in Chapter Four.

## Introduction

This research proposes that there is a distinct category of theatre-making that could be called 'solo devising', as related to but different from group devising. I acknowledge that the term 'solo devising' is provocative, with tension created between the word 'solo', commonly considered to signify individual and 'devising', commonly considered to be a group practice.<sup>3</sup> Any distinction between group and solo devising will, of course, be partial: devising practices have many features in common which will often be nuanced in one way or another. In the course of this work an attempt has also been made to map out what I have termed a 'solo devising economy' – a dynamic working system and set of conditions that together further specify solo devising as a distinguishable area of practice.

In the light of these provisos, I shall use 'solo devising' to refer to working processes in which an individual practitioner holds the centre of a conceptual, making and performing environment, although others may well be involved. If such definition or distinction is plausible, it could be of more than simply academic interest. Making such working more visible and adding to public understanding of its nature could help, for example, in the allocation of funding for professional practice and support its development in the realms of theatre education and training.

To start to explore and define this area, I carried out two sets of extended interviews with five highly experienced devisers who also make solo work as

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<sup>3</sup> I further consider these assumptions in Chapter One.

at least part of their performance practice. These are Wendy Houstoun, Bobby Baker, Mike Pearson, Tim Etchells and Nigel Charnock.

I was not initially concerned with the issue of definition. As a solo practitioner myself I was simply curious to know how others worked and how they dealt with certain problems and questions that I had encountered. Only as my research progressed, and I began to read more widely around the subject, did I begin to realise that the activities I was exploring remain relatively unrecognised. There was clearly work that could be done in bringing them into sharper focus.

Obviously the term 'solo performance' is capable of including a wide range of practices according to context, from popular entertainment – magic, conjuring and stand up comedy – at one end, to the more experimental worlds of Live Art and devised theatre on the other. I have chosen to confine my own study in this research to a limited area of self-reflexive, experimental solo working, carried out by highly sophisticated practitioners whose work fits within the category of 'postdramatic theatre'. This is the collective term used to describe contemporary forms of new theatre which work beyond the dramatic text, introduced and widely disseminated by Hans Thies Lehmann.<sup>4</sup> Extended reference is made to Lehmann's ideas in Chapter One and these are also further engaged with throughout the thesis. Any attempt at definition, categorisation, or drawing boundaries is going to be contentious. How things are grouped or differentiated inevitably depends on particular perspectives, including variable cultural, political, or aesthetic

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<sup>4</sup> Although *Postdramatic Theatre* was first published in Germany in 1999 and in an English translation in 2006, its ideas had been widely disseminated before this latter date.



mindsets. Furthermore, any conclusions reached from a small sample of practitioners, such as I have studied, are bound to remain highly provisional. There were, however, clear advantages in carrying out a small group study, and these are explained in the section on research methods below, as well as summarising some of the limitations to this approach. Other methods, which can be pursued at a later date, are discussed in Chapter Five.

## Aims

My aim is to develop an analysis of solo devising as a specific mode of aesthetic and cultural production, drawn out of a significant engagement with five expert practitioners' thinking. Linked to this are the following sub-aims: to determine whether it can be discussed as a distinct area of theatre practice; to connect practices of solo devising to current discourses on devising and postdramatic theatre; to explore the kinds of collaboration used in solo devising; and finally, to start to outline a framework for the study of solo making within experimental theatre, named in this research as a 'solo devising economy'. Ultimately, through this research I would hope to promote a wider knowledge of solo devising within academic and practitioner communities.

## Rationale

This study is 'practice-led' research, following Candy (2006), who ascribes this term to the activity of conceptualisation or theorising about the artwork, as opposed to 'practice-based' and 'practice-as-research', which he equates

with artwork that is the research itself.<sup>5</sup> I use the term practice-led to describe my methodology whereby I analyse practitioners' reflection on their making practices and I develop analytical and reflective theory in dialogue with this, alongside wider reading and viewing. I am suggesting that this practitioner-centred approach can yield different insights from that of the discussions of spectators or critics about practice they have observed.

There are several reasons for my choice of focus, namely solo devising, and for the methods I have used to access and analyse this, which I summarise below:

1. Solo devising as a diverse set of approaches to making new theatre work includes a rich set of experimental creative practices which frequently challenge overly narrow assumptions about solo practice.
2. Writing about creative making processes, compared to writing about performance products, has received relatively little attention, both by writers and practitioners. Bobby Baker acknowledges this gap in her book *Bobby Baker: Redeeming Features of Daily Life* (2008): 'as it went along we realised how little there was about process in it' (BB1: 1).
3. Initial surveys of writing on devising and postdramatic work confirmed that group devising is commonly discussed as synonymous with devising itself and solo devising remains undefined: like practitioner expertise, it is 'not lost but not yet found' (Melrose, 2007: 1).<sup>6</sup> It is this omission that has led me to address solo devising as a central focus in this study
4. Practitioners' discourses about their making processes are under-represented in performance studies and wider arenas, compared to spectator, academic or critical writings about performance-making or performances.

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<sup>5</sup> Several terms are used to describe the different kinds of relationship between research and practice in academic contexts, and these are contested and variably applied. 'Applied research' (Brown, Gough and Roddis, 2004) or 'practice-as-research' most commonly denotes work where the research activity is considered to be located in the artwork itself (Nelson, 2013; Barrett & Bolt, 2010). However this can also be called 'performative research' (Haseman, 2006) and 'practice-based research' (Candy, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> This is in fact similar to the genesis of devised theatre itself, occurring widely in the early 1970s in the UK, but not identified or written about academically until Alison Oddey's seminal book *Devising Theatre: a practical and theoretical handbook* in 1994.

I wanted to explore in detail how experienced postdramatic practitioners experimented with solo devising practices and performance, opening up and challenging widely held assumptions about how and for whom solo practice operates. These include the idea that it works with autobiographical material in a primarily confessional, personal way (Carlson, 2004: 128, Govan, 2007: 60); that it primarily showcases individual performer's skills and virtuosity (Schneider, 2005: 25); that discussions by the artist about their own work valorises the auteur as individual genius (Jones & Heathfield, 2012: 436), or that it prioritises controlled, predetermined ways of working. Etchells acknowledged this assumption: 'Solo is more linked to virtuoso and hard line intentionality, really. At least that is a link that people have. Everything that we are saying is not about that at all' (TE2: 40).

Richard Schechner usefully describes the aesthetic space that theatre offers as a doubly signifying realm, which he calls the 'as if': 'What the "as if" provides is a time-space where reactions can be actual while the actions that elicit these reactions are fictional' (2003: 124). The word 'solo' also offers an ambiguous proposition of the relations between the actual and the fictional, of an actual individual deviser and performer who also performs as multiple personae, containing echoes and habits of others – and this recycling and 'doing and undoing' of notions of 'solo' and selfhood will be explored throughout the thesis.

Self-reflexivity is identified by Karen Jurs-Munby, in her introduction to Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006), as one of the defining features of postdramatic theatre work, giving prominence to 'the usually ignored

anxieties, pressures, pleasures, paradoxes and perversities that surround the performance situation as such' (4). Analysis of the solo interviewees' discourses revealed this self-reflexivity to be at work, for example in relation to specific questions about individual authorship, performer presence, the role of the narrator, use of monologue and direct address and in the ongoing exploration of the charged possibilities between solo performer and audience that solo performance engenders.

Solo devising works with one primary creator and performer, encountering (usually) a multiple audience, exposing clearly the vulnerability and power of the performer. Speaking tends to be addressed towards the audience. This makes it particularly well placed to explore issues of political agency, authorial power and how this power can circulate between the individual and audience. In addition, the practitioners interviewed all create complex personae: shifting, unreliable, failing, multiple presences. Etchells, Baker and Pearson in particular use autobiographical performance methodologies as triggers for an audience to bring their experiences to the live encounter. The solo practitioners interviewed here work with these questions of power and subjectivity in different ways, which are explored throughout the thesis.

I have already suggested that solo devising is undefined in writings about devising and postdramatic theatre practice, and that it can be discussed as related to group devising while also offering distinct features and activities of its own. In her writing on devising Oddey (1994) poses the question: 'must devised theatre always be considered as a group activity, for instance if a solo performer collaborates with another artist but is not part of a

company?’ (3). She questions assumed definitions of devising as necessarily a company activity, while reaffirming that it must be collaborative activity with another person. I argue that this is not the case – solo devising is prevalent and important as a practice context when writing about new theatre making. Govan et al. (2007) map out particular contexts in which devising takes place, for example ‘Devising and Community Theatre’, ‘Devising and Physical Theatre’, without considering that ‘Devising and Solo work’ could form another important context. They do note that the automatic linking of devising to a group activity is a partial one. They mention performance artist Rona Lee’s *The Encircling of a Shadow* (2001), while acknowledging that it ‘may not conform to conventional definitions of devised theatre as collaboration between a company of performers’ (148).

What emerges is a clash of meanings, attached to solo and devising as words and concepts. The misperception that solo making is only an individual activity, when placed alongside assumptions of devising as a group process, offers one reason as to why they are not generally linked and discussed as a practice. Problematizing these definitions and assumptions has been part of the challenge of this project. Solo devising operates alongside group devising, and exclusion from a wider discussion about new theatre practices constitutes a missed opportunity.

### Practitioner discourses on processes of making

Within current performance-research terminology, the approach adopted in this thesis can be identified as qualitative, conceptual and practice-led. My primary research methods have included conducting and analysing

interviews, in conjunction with wider reading, viewing and analysis of creative and scholarly materials. I shall provide detail of these research methods in my next section. I would first like to make clear the kind of practice I am focusing on and explain why I have chosen to do so.

The practitioners' work discussed here comprises several kinds of interrelated practices:

- making the work;
- the pieces of work themselves;
- the act of performing the work;
- the practitioners' discourses on making and performing.

The specific practice that forms the primary source material for analysis in this thesis is the last of these, practitioners *speaking* about their processes of making solo theatre: transcribed audio interviews, rather than, for example, filmed footage of their performance pieces, devising processes or their speaking about their finished performance works. This source material is consequently practitioner-led and also primarily process-based; it focuses on 'making the work' and not the performed works themselves.

However, the solo performances which were discussed in interview are described in Appendix III, in order to offer the reader the possibility to refer to them in more depth and I have also engaged with them when useful in the main body of this thesis. Devising most usually plans towards performance, can continue the devising process in performance and each successive devising process can also build upon preceding performance

experience. As is true of most postdramatic work, the boundary between process and product is not fixed. Some of the solo performances are not created as completed products but demonstrate Lehmann's characterisation of postdramatic performance as 'event', i.e. having a score (a plan) but only fully realised in the live moment of communication and interaction between performer, audience and situation. In fact, Etchells centralises this process/product issue as subject matter in his solo *Downtime* (2001), where he sits facing a large screen image of his head, thinking, and in which he explores the impossibility of narrating thinking processes, as captured on film, in the real time of performance. I do therefore write about the devising that occurs within performance (p.245) as well the ways in which the audiences contribute to making the work (p.277). In other words, I include some writing about the 'eventicity' (Melrose, 2007: 2) of solo postdramatic performances, but inflected through a concentration on making, rather than the made work itself.

This is important to include for two main reasons. Although this is changing, a large number of critical writings on performance practice still focus on the performed works: performance as 'already made' (Melrose, 2007: 2). There are a number of notable earlier exceptions to this, which I detail in the section on devising p.102). Furthermore, as Melrose points out, even when the earlier writing focused on making processes, it often engaged a spectator-led visual economy, based on watching pieces of work: 'Performance Studies has mistaken performance effects for performance-making causes; [it] has sought to infer causes from effects and affects and to fold these back on accounts of performance-making' (2006: 98).

Melrose's work has provided invaluable conceptual thinking to support the concerns of this thesis, in her scholarly writing over the past ten years and her engagement with The Centre for Research into Creation in Performance (ResCen) at Middlesex University. Her work has been useful in relation to my choice of focusing on practitioners' solo *making* processes and also in relation to my method for accessing these, as already suggested, via an analysis of extended interviews with them.

Melrose suggests that performance studies 'is really a Spectator Studies in disguise' (2011: 3), relying on expert spectator ways of seeing, modes of production and times and spaces of viewing work. She argues that this creates self-fulfilling 'models of intelligibility' (2006: 96), meaning ways of operating, understanding and sense making which define the parameters of what the study of performance is and how it can be written about. For example, expert spectator writing centralises a 'visual economy' (98) – knowledge arrived at through watching work performed – as opposed to knowledge derived from engagement in making and performing work. In the case of writing about making performance, Melrose suggests this has resulted in several equally 'as yet' underdeveloped areas of thought, including the discussion of a 'practitioner economy' (2006: 100), by which she means practitioner-specific modes of working, engagement, relationships, or modes of production which are different to those valued in a spectatorial economy.



She argues that expertise and expert practitioner decision making in relation to performance-making exists and operates in practice ('not lost') but is not discussed or written about ('not yet found') within Performance Study discourses, and is in fact subject to 'institutional erasures' (2007: 2). This is despite relying on it within pedagogical and professional working contexts, for funding and assessment purposes: 'however readily we may use the word expertise in everyday contexts, we have not really grasped what expertise means, at least not in research terms' (2011: 1). Melrose acknowledges the difficulties of analysing expert performance-making, given the 'knowledge complexities' (2) that exist in any debate about creative processes. It is deemed either 'unspeakable' or those who work with it are '*not yet* determined how to speak and write it' (ibid.).

She does, however, offer some focal areas, which have been useful to apply to this enquiry into solo making. She points to a morphological link between '*expertise, experience and experiment*' (7), all sharing the Latin root *experire* meaning to 'try, to test'. Thus as well as the more customary usage of 'expertise' to describe a highly accomplished, established knowing, the term also contains in its etymological root an accompanying meaning of knowledge gained through processes of testing, and failure.<sup>7</sup> The further etymological link with the words '*experimental*' and '*experience*' also offers further insights into how expertise might be gained: through exploratory first-hand practice and working with the unknown. Melrose advocates for a much under-theorised 'experience' as a 'vital and constitutive component in

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<sup>7</sup> This expanded meaning is similar to a potential re-interpretation of another linked word – 'virtuoso' – which is also relevant to discussions of solo practice. I write about this expanded meaning to include exploratory, open-ended working in a submission for *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* in Appendix VI.

expert creative practice' (2011: 8). I examine in more detail the specificity of the expert experience (as opposed to everyday experience, for example) that these practitioners reveal, obtained through professional practice and a repeated making of solo works over time. I explore how expertise works specifically in relation to solo making. What does the 'expert' solo deviser do and not do? What is an expert decision and what knowledges do solo devisers draw on to make the many decisions required in their practice? What kinds of particular skills or attitudes do they have compared to an inexperienced solo practitioner or group deviser? Practitioner discourses can offer unique insights into these questions. To answer some of them, I also drew upon Richard Sennett's study of individual expert craftwork in *The Craftsmen* (2008), where he details extended case studies of renowned and successful designers and craftspeople and the particular skills and dispositions they manifest. Although his examples are discipline-specific, I examine how they can have useful implications for performance-making processes. His work allows for the further specification of the particular kinds of expertise being articulated by the interviewees. A case study approach, through practitioner interviews, provides one route to discussing particular and shared practitioner expertise.

Melrose's pairing of the seeming oxymoron, 'intuitive-analytical' working, as constituent of practitioner expertise, is particularly potent for my discussion of expert solo devising processes and decision making (2006, 2011). She identifies intuitive working as a vital practitioner-specific mode of practice, not opposite to analytical thinking but working alongside it in practitioners' decision making (2006: 99). She identifies how intuitive working is

repeatedly excluded from performance studies discussions.<sup>8</sup> In 'The Vanishing: Or Little Erasures without Significance' (2006), she includes samples of major performance studies scholars' indexes which do not list intuition (Phelan 1997, Read 1992, Pearson 2001, Schechner 1997, Kaye 2000). Her argument – that practitioner expertise is internalised, intuitive and does not have an established spoken discourse ready to hand – further supports the focus of this research. In addition, solo devisers, working alone, have no requirement to verbalise their working processes. This does not mean all nonverbal working is intuitive, but it does suggest another reason for the scant availability of discourses about processes of solo devising, including intuitive working.

Melrose also argues for maintaining vigilance in not separating out practice and theory when writing about performance-making in a research context. She offers performance-making as a form of research, a 'theoretical undertaking, a complex and peculiar mixed mode meta-practice' (2007: 4), using analytical and intuitive methods. This also describes well the reflective discourses that emerge from these interviews, operating as practice and theory with a recurrent emphasis on doing as a way of creating knowledge. Barbara Bolt points us to Heidegger's model of pragmatic epistemology: 'we come to know the world theoretically only after we have come to understand it through handling' (Bolt cited in Smith and Dean 2007: 30). She calls this theorising out of practice 'praxical knowledge', distinguishing it from practice itself. 'Handling' and reflecting on solo creative processes have taken place in this research through interview methods which have

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<sup>8</sup> I discuss intuition and intuitive working in Chapter Three.

encouraged reflective open-ended thinking rather than specific, detailed question and answer conversations. My analysis of the interview discourses precisely aims to allow for 'praxical knowledge' or 'practitioner theory' (Melrose, 2006) to be drawn out and foregrounded with the help of wider, critical thinkings.

It is important to note here that Melrose offers useful ideas to work with, but few examples of detailed practice material that demonstrates or extends these ideas. She mentions, in passing, postdramatic practitioners cited in performance studies courses, like Forced Entertainment, Goat Island and Robert Wilson and mentions individual practitioners like Darcy Bussell or Wendy Houstoun. My work is different in that focused attention is given to specific practitioners talking about their solo practices, analysed in relation to my own thinking about solo devising and contextual analysis of writings on solo work, devising and the postdramatic. This method for writing about making has precedents. Denis Diderot's *The Encyclopedia or Dictionary of Arts and Crafts*, whose thirty-five volumes appeared from 1751 to 1772 described 'how practical things get done' (Sennett, 2007: 90) and was compiled, in part, from practitioner interviews:

We addressed ourselves to the most skilled workers in Paris and the kingdom at large. We took the trouble to visit their workshops, to interrogate them, to write under dictation from them, to follow out their ideas, to define, to identify the terms peculiar to their profession. (Diderot quoted in Furbank, 1992: 40)

The relative lack of written examples engaging in this particular method can have, as Melrose indicates, 'knowledge political' (2011: 2) consequences, in

university, research and pedagogical environments.<sup>9</sup> Making performance is linked to the discipline of Performance and Theatre Studies. Omission of the discussion and writing about practitioner-specific ways of working – of intuition, expertise, embodiment, use of the imagination, of skill and professionalism – disables scholars whose main body of work is practice-based and who are nonetheless expected to publish. It also disables students, by limiting their access to discourses about making, whilst they are simultaneously often being assessed on making by these very same departments.

This rationale for focusing on practitioners' thinking about making is not intended to suggest that practitioners are the only authority on their work and that observers cannot also contribute useful and different insights into practitioners' making processes. I simply wanted to increase the valorisation given to practitioners' creative thinking about their work, and to explore new insights about making practices that might emerge from this.

## Research methods

In the light of the rationale for practice-led, practitioner-focused research about solo devising outlined above, I set up a series of ten, in-depth interviews with five expert solo practitioners. My aim was to explore some initial ideas and questions I had about solo devising, through extended discussion of their solo making practices. This was my first research method. My second method involved the contextualisation and analysis of this

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<sup>9</sup> The Encyclopedia also had knowledge-political intents. It emphasised the ethical equivalence of mental and manual labour, aided by alphabetic sequencing, where in French the *roi* (king) lies near to the *rotisseur* (roaster of meats/fowl). (Sennett, 2007: 92)

material through wider theoretical reading and viewing of practice. From these processes emerged a conceptualisation of solo devising as a nameable creative practice with its own specific economy. What follows is a discussion of my methodology and a brief summary of the limitations and the productive nature of my chosen methods. The wider contexts and conceptual tools which I brought to bear on the interview material are detailed in Chapter One.

### Practitioner interviews: choice of practitioners

The interviewees were Bobby Baker, Wendy Houston, Tim Etchells, Mike Pearson and Nigel Charnock. Initially I contacted a larger number of solo makers whose work interested me and who have a history of working in experimental ways with theatre and performance. These included practitioners working in the USA (Anna Deavere Smith, Miranda July), Germany (Sten Ruudstrom, Eva Meyer Keller), Canada (Robert LePage), the Netherlands (Andy Moor) and the UK (Wendy Houston, Tim Etchells, Mike Pearson, Nigel Charnock, Bobby Baker and Mojisola Adebayo). This initial contact was made to test out what kind of parameters I could work with. I carried out extended first interviews with nine of them.

It soon became evident that I would need to limit the number and range of interviews, since I wanted to work with detailed, reflective, qualitative material, which a wider call-out using email, survey or questionnaire would be unlikely to provide. I was also aiming for a group size which would yield diversity, but was manageable in terms of handling the interview material and whose practitioners came from different disciplines but also shared an

interest in making experimental theatre work. The aim was that this latter commonality would allow for some nuanced articulations of how solo devising might be practised. I also wanted to carry out live interviews, to be able to pursue unexpected material and ask related, follow-up questions.

I chose solo practitioners who have an ongoing commitment to making theatre, as well as Live Art, dance and performance: 'performers working within a "theatre event" idea of performance' (Phelan, 1993: 16). They all foreground experiment, and make and unmake theatre. In other words, they use and abuse theatre conventions, devices and frames and have a sophisticated notion of theatricality and its problems, possibilities, ruptures and breakdowns. They all reveal a clear connection to experimental, 'postdramatic' performance practices. They do not work with representation of dramatic narrative but instead with multiple media to explore thematic interests and events arising out of the live theatre situation and their relationship with their audience.<sup>10</sup> Although I interviewed Mojisola Adebayo and found her work extremely strong, I decided that her use of character, plot and dramatic narrative would, if properly engaged with, unhelpfully widen the boundaries of the research.

I was interested in working with a group whose training and professional practice originated from different disciplines (two in theatre, two in dance and one in art) in order to offer different 'inter'-disciplinary elaborations of solo postdramatic working practices. Between them, they create a wide range of solo work as site-specific theatre, audio-walks, autobiographical

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<sup>10</sup> In Chapter One, I further demonstrate how analysis of their solo devising concerns and practices can usefully extend Lehmann's discussion of solo postdramatic working p.76).

monologues, physical theatre, cabaret, dance-theatre, live and performance art, durational events and performance lectures. All of them also work in intermedial ways, each practitioner engaging with a number of theatre materials in their devising, including text, movement, voice, music, image, object, space, place, film, sound and lighting.

I also wanted to work with a relatively balanced gender combination, so included interviews with three men and two women. I focused on UK-based practitioners to reduce variables and allow for the differences to emerge from the practitioners' different approaches and experimental performance disciplines, rather than be the result of broader political, economic or geographical contexts. They have, at times, also worked with each other and this exchange of knowledge is acknowledged and forms part of the discussion on collaboration. My aim is not to define solo devising in its entirety, but rather to start to delineate and analyse some of its main features, in dialogue with the thinking articulated by a specific group of professional practitioners.

I chose experienced practitioners who have each been working professionally for over twenty-five years, making solo and group experimental theatre and who are well known nationally and internationally. They are experts in their respective disciplines, practised in speaking about their work, and in Baker's, Etchells's and Pearson's cases, in writing about it (see Appendix III). Importantly, however, the focus of other peoples' interviews and writing has been either on their company practices (Etchells, Pearson) and/or on the performances produced (Baker, Houstoun,



Charnock). All the interviewees acknowledged this. My focus differs, in concentrating on their solo working.

I also chose practitioners who are individually responsible for the initial conceptualisation and ongoing vision of the work throughout the devising process and into performance. They all perform the work they devise. This has implications for how they work, in that they all occupy at least three roles (deviser, director and performer) throughout the production process. They all have to negotiate the challenge of managing these multiple roles. In this research I use the term *solo deviser* in this inclusive sense unless specified otherwise. However, after conducting the interviews and during analysis of the responses to my questions about collaboration within their solo devising, it became clear that Mike Pearson's collaborating with Mike Brookes included a shared working in all aspects of their devising processes, including conceptualisation and the ongoing vision of the work. Pearson does however perform the work solo. I discuss this issue and my subsequent use of different terminology for his working ('co-devised') in Chapter Four, which focuses on collaboration.

### Finding the 'right grain' questions

I carried out two rounds of five interviews, in order to be able to reflect on the answers and then follow these up with further questions.<sup>11</sup> The ten interviews amounted to approximately 200,000 transcribed words. In both rounds, I used a mixture of set and open questions and also allowed areas of interest to emerge as the interviews progressed (see Appendix I).

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<sup>11</sup> My work to find productive questions included drawing on past interviewing experience in my M.Phil. and employment as a researcher conducting focus groups for Bristol University.

Prior to each interview, I paid close attention to the choice, register and method of ordering the questions, knowing from previous interview experiences that this was critical in order to obtain detailed, primary source material. I was not conducting the interviews in order to prove an already fixed theory about solo making, but rather to develop resources in relation to certain questions I had about experimental solo practice and its absence from discourses on devising and performance studies. My aim was to translate what Guy Claxton calls 'right grain thinking' (2006: 60) into 'right grain questioning'. Claxton, who is involved in researching creative processes in performance with the ResCen research group suggests that our thinking about such processes needs to be neither too 'coarse' nor too 'fine' (61). If too coarse, or general, interesting practitioner-specific methods or languages can be missed. If too fine, targeted or closed, one can get lost in particular biographical detail, centering only on the person being interviewed, thus not enabling the material to be more widely applicable.

Before the main interviews I conducted a pilot interview, audio recorded for later reference. This was with Sten Ruudstrom, a Berlin-based practitioner who works with Action Theatre<sup>12</sup> and improvisation and makes solo work using real-time composition and devising. I drew up an initial list of questions and the interview tested (and answered) several pragmatic issues: the number of questions I could cover in one interview (six/seven); the length of interview (three hours maximum); the necessity for audiotaping (essential). Reflection on the transcribed pages also confirmed that it would be necessary to return to people on at least one further

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<sup>12</sup> See Zaporah, R. 1995. *Action Theatre: the improvisation of presence*. Berkeley, North Atlantic Books.

occasion. Open questions offer several pathways to pursue for questioner and interviewer, and the richness of Ruudstrom's responses meant I had several choices to make in the moment of interview. I wanted the opportunity to follow up some questions or statements. The pilot interview also revealed that using open-ended questioning could stimulate insights for the practitioner,<sup>13</sup> and that the most generative questions were those focused around making specific solo works. I also tested out a question about questioning: 'What have I not asked you'? As the practice that I am calling solo devising was unspecified, I could not assume that I would ask the most pertinent questions. It seemed useful to offer space to the practitioners to speak about what they thought was important.

After the pilot interview I decided that I would use fixed, open-ended questions, to provide consistency and enable comparison. I was flexible in how they were ordered, to allow for unforeseen ideas to emerge and be followed up. I did however always also start with the same question, in order to access the practitioner's current interests: 'Are you working on a solo at the moment?'

Reflective thinking space was offered by sending the practitioners the questions I would be asking at least a couple of weeks before the interviews (see Appendix I and II). I also included a statement of ethical conduct in relation to the use of the material (see Appendix III).

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<sup>13</sup> In Ruudstrom's case, this was revealed as a change of thinking during the interview from stating that he did not collaborate to realising that his improvised performance involved co-creation with his lighting designer.

Chris Crickmay, an artist and writer with whom I have collaborated in my practice interviewed me to test out the process. I needed to experience the ways in which a speaking practice with another could describe a making practice and also gain a sense of the gaps that would inevitably exist between these different modes of engagement. I also wanted to experience how an interview might facilitate the articulation of latent knowledge.<sup>14</sup> Solo working is frequently carried out without the exchange of words, and therefore thinking about it can remain in the private domain of the individual rather than be publically expressed. As a test practitioner, the interview with an informed 'other' offered a rare opportunity for focused verbal processing of my practice, and offered reflective space to gain perspective on some of my working processes and patterns.

For the second round of interviews, I set out to develop the findings from the first ones. I wanted to be more specific and detailed, and test out what using the performed work as stimulus for conversation would reveal about the making processes behind it. The interview was scheduled around one common question and several specific ones related to issues that arose in the first interviews. The shared question, drawn from a specific moment of performance identified and viewed on DVD, was: 'How did you arrive at this moment?' The practitioners could choose the moment or I offered to, if they preferred. We had to be able to watch it on DVD before the interview and also together at the time of interview. Initially, the findings from this

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<sup>14</sup> Types of personal knowing which are not necessarily verbally articulated or externally expressed. Latent knowledge has a relationship to 'tacit' knowledge, introduced by Michael Polanyi (1958, 1967) as a kind of personal knowledge connected to traditions of knowing and to which I return in my discussion of Richard Sennett's writing on expertise (p.99) and my discussion of intuitive working (p.189).

exchange were to become the focus of a chapter, but it became clear that this would also unhelpfully widen the present research project. However, since the material did also relate to the discussion of solo devising, particular material from them are included throughout the thesis.

Each practitioner, apart from Nigel Charnock, indicated to me that discussing their work as 'solo' making was not familiar to them. I was encouraged by moments of surprise or affirmation occurring during these interviews, coming from experienced practitioners, which indicated to me that this approach might be worth pursuing. Examples include Baker not choosing to describe her work as 'solo': 'It hadn't occurred to me that I was doing solo work. I never looked at it like that. It just never occurred to me to perform with anyone else' (BB2: 21), or Etchells confirming that our discussion contradicted a more widely held 'imbalanced or inaccurate perception' (TE2: 40) of solo working as overly controlled or determined. Given Etchells's continual exposure to a wide variety of contemporary international practitioners and scholars, this was useful feedback.

### Analysis of interview material

I initially reflected on the interview material by extracting productive strategies, methods, common areas of interest and differences from within it. Alongside this I looked at other solo performances and read other materials, including writing by the practitioners themselves and scholarly writing on devising, performance, postdramatic aesthetics and creative practitioner expertise. The wider theoretical and critical thinking enabled the practitioner material to be read, situated and analysed, so that substantive

thinking, ideas and problems could be drawn out which were not necessarily immediately evident, either to myself or to the practitioners. It helped connect these particular interview materials to wider practices of solo, postdramatic and devised working and in so doing widen its reach and relevance. This early work facilitated the emergence of the central idea of solo devising as a potentially distinct making category and also suggested the usefulness of mapping out a wider context in which to situate this discussion, namely a solo devising economy.

The decision to focus on exploring the potentiality of the practice of solo devising suggested the structure for the thesis. In the introduction, I specify my focus – solo devising – and the particular ‘practice’ I am studying, which is what practitioners say (and write) about their practice: practitioner discourse. I provide a rationale for the methods adopted and also offer a summary of the specific solo practices engaged with by the interviewees, to give the reader a sense of their different approaches and interests in relation to making solo performance. Chapter One details the main conceptual tools and fields of enquiry which enable this category of experimental theatre-making which I am calling solo devising to be located, named and analysed, with particular reference to practitioner interview material. This includes discussion of the key defining practice term, ‘solo’ and how it works in broader practice contexts, different disciplinary histories of experimental solo practice and in the interviewees’ professional practices. The notions of the postdramatic and practitioner expertise are explored, to further specify the kinds of activities and approaches included in this study of solo practice. Devising, as a set of creative practices and ideas is

examined to specify the working of solo devising practices within it. This chapter also includes a propositional mapping of the main features of a solo devising economy, to suggest a number of specific contexts which devisers interact with when working solo. This leads, in Chapter Two, to detailed engagement with the defining feature of solo devising practice, namely the individual deviser and an examination of how the practitioners I interviewed create complex performer presences in their work, doing and undoing notions of the individual performer and autobiographical work. Chapter Three analyses the multiple creative processes that solo devisers use when devising a piece of work and the issues and particularities that arise from the solo-specific nature of this engagement. Finally, collaborative processes occurring within solo devising are explored in Chapter Four, which again helps to further define solo devising as a conceptually individual creative process and an exemplary relational postdramatic performance practice. It does this through its inclusion of multiple others, including importantly the audiences, with and for whom it is realised.

My choice of research methods inevitably led to limitations. I shall indicate the important ones here and return to them in my concluding chapter.

The small size of my sample led to exclusions, for example of practitioners who work with music theatre, body art, Internet or one-to-one solo work. However, I am not aiming at this stage to present a comprehensive commentary on every kind of solo devising. Another potential limitation to the kind of practice I write about, practitioners speaking about their making, relates to the question of what practitioner-interview as a source of

knowledge can tell us. Ostensibly, it contains a record of particular solo devisers' thinking about their own making. It is inevitably a version of what they have done, partial and incomplete. In a wider discussion about documentation, Pearson addresses the impossibility of accurately or comprehensively capturing any event, posing the archaeological question: 'What can be done with the remains of past lives?' (Pearson 2001: 57). Applied to this enquiry, this question could be re-phrased as: 'What can be done with the remains of past articulations about expert solo devising processes?' What is at stake is that one version cannot represent 'the truth' of what actually happened in a making situation and this research attempts to discuss and analyse 'what happens' when people devise. I discussed this explicitly with Etchells in interview:

MD: I wonder if it is a problem that I am getting people to do a practice that is not their primary practice?

TE: Talking?

MD: Yes, talking *about*... You are used to writing about the work so you are fluent in thinking about it whereas some people might not be, because they just do it.

TE: Yeah, I think that is really interesting [...] you can try to close the gap but being in the studio, making things is very complicated and concrete and in a way unmappable and any kind of reflection on that is a distortion. And I think understanding what you are doing lags behind what you are doing by some distance. [...] I don't see any problem with that; I just think that it is a fact that there is a set of gaps between all of these things. (TE1: 6)

I fully acknowledge the difference or 'gap' between making activities and the activities of speaking, listening, transcribing and representing. Once again, this research does not suggest it can describe the whole of a practitioner's working through interview and its subsequent analysis – instead it aims to begin to delineate fundamental concerns, strategies, making processes which together start to specify solo devising as an



aesthetic mode of new theatre production, with reference to some expert solo working.

Instead of accessing making through practitioner interview, I could have observed the performed work and discussed making through this focus. As discussed, a version of this was tested but proved to expand the enquiry into wider issues about the performance context that were beyond my immediate purpose. I could also have attended practice sessions as an observer but at the time of interview, the one-to-one intensity of observation or discussion felt too intrusive or intimate to suggest. What is visible to the eye is also not necessarily a comprehensive record of what is taking place, and solo devising includes a high degree of nonverbal, mental working and processing.

In relation to my analytical method, a different approach could start with theoretical concepts and make the questions specific to these ideas. While this would have made the management of the interview material easier because more tightly focused, this approach would have been pre-emptive, assuming an existing body of writing or theory on solo devising which I was setting out to expand upon or test. This work does not yet exist.

Whilst taking cognisance of the limitations and avenues which could have been explored, my chosen research methods were useful for the reasons outlined below.

The decision to work with a small number of expert practitioners speaking over extended interview times allowed the main issues or salient points about solo devising to emerge and be established. The use of practitioner interview to obtain primary source material was one reasonable way to gain

access to (often inaccessible) practitioner-based knowledges. I was given generous access to the thinking of five practitioners, a detailed resource on which I was able to draw repeatedly. The interviews are transcribed and materially present in a way that the practices are not. While not included in this submission because of length, they are locatable versions. Given the nature of practitioner speech, often complex, this ability to return to material proved invaluable.

Certain making processes that are otherwise hidden in performed work, such as collaborative practices can be revealed through discussion, (although the people themselves are usually credited in a programme). Expert decision making, as the editing *out* of materials, people or avenues is also not visible in the performance of a work. Yet knowing about encountered dead ends and problems can provide useful resources for students and practitioners. Examples from the interviews include Baker's discussion of the problematic issue of crediting collaborators, or Etchells's reflections on his decision not to make a piece with a similar format to his first solo, *Instructions For Forgetting* (2001). Solo practice does not necessarily invite the informal, generative exchange of information that occurs in group practice, and so discussing a version of what happens in rehearsal is one way to access and circulate this kind of information.

## The interviewed practitioners

I will briefly introduce the practitioners interviewed, to give a sense of what their solo practice consists of, as well as what they tend to be more widely

known for. More specific information on the solo works discussed in this research and additional practitioner information are offered in Appendix III.

Baker has made an extensive body of solo work, spanning over forty years. She uses sculpture, interactive installation, theatre, performance art, film, music and more recently movement, and is renowned for her strongly visual performance, having trained as a fine artist at St Martin's School of Art, London. Like many other experimental visual artists, she started to include herself as a performer in her artwork, wryly documented as starting on the 15<sup>th</sup> November 1973 in her piece called *Princess Anne's Wedding Day*: 'a marvellously auspicious occasion on which to become a "performance artist"' (Baker & Barrett, 2007: 30).

Baker subsequently went on to develop a series of small-scale solos from 1988–2001, later named the 'Daily Life Series', using food, projected film and multiple objects, as well as characteristic tones of humour, abjection, celebration and awkwardness. The work is overtly personal, autobiographical narrative: 'It's all about myself. I don't go much further than that because I don't work in another way' (BB1: 18). At the same time, she plays with the notion of identity, as fluid and unstable, repeatedly performing multiple versions of herself: 'I'd like to make it absolutely clear, yet again, that I am Bobby Baker (taps her head) and I am (gestures to her breasts) a woman. Good. I am glad we got that straight' (Baker & Barrett, 2008: 211). However, her work continually links to wider cultural concerns: feminist issues of women's 'traditional' domains of work: motherhood, the home, shopping, domesticity, as well as health and mental illness. In 2005

she started a three-year Arts and Humanities Research Council Fellowship<sup>15</sup> at Queen Mary, University College of London, during which she returned to making a number of small-scale solos, having worked in 2004 on the larger scale group piece *How to Live* (2004), performed at the Barbican in London. These smaller pieces, made in 2005 include *Meringue Ladies sing ABBA's "I believe in Angels"* (hereafter *Angels*) and *Ballistic Buns*, which are focused on in this thesis. In interview, she revealed a strongly conceptual approach to her devising, characteristic of her disciplinary background in performance art. An example is her discussion of making *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988): 'I thought about it over a period of three years – that is a very serious piece with a lot of thinking' (BB1: 8). Baker devises set pieces of work as well as more recently using improvisation in her event-based work and combines a strong, signed vision with collaborative working; historically with director Palona Baloh Brown (1991–2006), and more recently with Sian Stevenson, in her company Daily Life Ltd.

Houstoun brings an expert, physical sensibility to her solo devising. She works across small, medium and large-scale physical theatre and dance work, site-specific performance, film, installation and textual work, but embodies a 'writing on the floor' (WH1: 18) approach, a prioritising of physical presence and compositional development through engaging different uses of energy. She brings to her solo practice considerable expertise and experience of dance and movement practice, having trained

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<sup>15</sup> The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) provides funding and support to researchers in the UK working within the title remit. It operates three strands, working with advanced and postgraduate research and training work.

at the London School for Theatre and Dance and being a founder member of physical theatre company DV8.

We mainly discussed five of her solo works: *Haunted, Daunted and Flaunted* (1995, hereafter *Haunted*), *Happy Hour* (2001), *48 Almost Love Lyrics* (2004), *Desert Island Dances* (2007) and *50 Acts* (2009). She works intermedially, using extended sequences of physical movement, spoken text, interactive lighting, music and an increasing use of technology. Although working with monologic address, she uses an indirect approach, 'third personing' (WH: 16)<sup>16</sup> and discussed performing as a diffuse presence: 'I never think of being linear or someone who makes lines' (WH2: 10). Instead of explicit autobiographical content in her work, Houstoun reveals an autobiographical tone: 'I get cross. It's what I do' (WH1: 16). Humour and anger, 'personal manifesto' (15) are performed, connecting her work to issues relevant to contemporary culture: 'it's an author's responsibility to speak about being alive now' (WH1: 11). She has increasingly been using writing, collages of voices and task-based actions in her work. She also discussed collaborating with John Avery (sound), Steve Munn (lighting) Etchells (writing and dramaturgy) and Charnock (dramaturgy).

Etchells makes group and solo conceptual art, theatre, Live Art, performance, installation, writing and Internet based collaborations. His main work is with the Sheffield based performance company Forced Entertainment, which he started in 1984 with fellow company members graduating from Exeter University drama department in the UK. He works

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<sup>16</sup> A Brechtian technique, used to create distance by using the pronoun 'she' instead of 'I'.

as a writer, performer and artistic director in the company. His solo works reveal expertise in using writing, spoken word, image and video and a strong dramaturgical crafting of material for performance. The main performance materials Etchells discussed in the interviews were four of his solo works: *Instructions for Forgetting* (2001), *Downtime*, (2001), *In the Event* (2004) and *Words and Pictures* (2005). These works mostly involve a performance lecture format, the tone being quiet, contemplative and foregrounding spoken word: 'there is a certain something in that combination of words, in that rhythm and that tone of voice, that conjure something quite vivid' (TE1: 16). His performance presence is low key and pedestrian, which gives him room to explore more unreliable, interrogative material and practice. He collaborates in this work mainly through receiving different kinds of feedback on work already devised, from known and unknown artists.

Mike Pearson's early career work with RAT Theatre, the later Cardiff Laboratory Theatre and Brith Gof Theatre Company established his reputation for devising large scale, spectacular site-specific work that he directed until 1997. He discussed solo practice as offering him the opportunity to work with less familiar forms, like storytelling and the use of monologic address. His first solo, called *La Lecon d'Anatomie* was devised in 1974, with Cardiff Laboratory Theatre, where he created a piece of work based on texts by Antonin Artaud and explored primarily through small scale, task-based working, interacting with objects and monologues addressed towards the audience. He further developed this use of monologue and storytelling in *Whose Idea was the Wind* (1977) and *Deaf*

*Birds* (1977) highlighting the individual, small scale nature of the work, which was set around one table with only Pearson's hands being lit.

From 1997, he started to collaborate with Mike Brookes, who contributes design, video and technological input.<sup>17</sup> They made a series of works which Pearson performed alone and explored questions related to the use of autobiographical and biographical materials, in relation to place and landscape and technology. They continued to explore site related questions, situating the solo works in locations including studios, a village, a museum, a car park and online. Archaeology, scale, autobiography, place, and relations between audience and performer are all ongoing concerns, in work Pearson makes alone and in collaboration with Brookes.

Nigel Charnock died in August 2012, during the time I was writing up this work. In the main body of this thesis, I have chosen to keep the writing related to him in a mixture of past and present tense, as with the other practitioners. He offered this research an explicitly named solo practice, unashamedly autobiographical and in his latter work, a very useful example of the extended life of an initially improvised solo, *Frank* (2001), which he went on to tour for ten years. Like Houston, with whom he worked in DV8 and later, he brought a strong, physical approach to his solo practice, having trained at The Place Theatre and performed for two seasons with Extemporary Dance-theatre (1982–4) before the DV8 work. He manifests

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<sup>17</sup> I further discuss how this conceptual collaboration takes these particular works beyond my definition of solo devising, here framed as conceptually individually authored, into 'co-devised' work in Chapter Four. When these works are included in the discussion on Pearson's practice, it is always with this understanding, that it offers a strong example of co-devised, but solo performed, practice.

very different physical aesthetics and performance sensibility to Houston. He was known for his high energy dance work, blending ballet, jazz and contemporary technique with an oratorical, prophet like provocation of the audience. The solo works he mainly discussed in interview included *Resurrection (1991)*, *Hell Bent (1994)* and *Frank (2001)*. He used set and improvised physical material to generate his work. His work was popular with international audiences, having performed and toured *Frank* over 150 times at the time of interview in 2008. In 2010, it was reformulated as *10 Dixon Rd.*



## Chapter One: Contextualising solo devising

In this chapter, I specify the fields of practice and conceptual tools that have helped me name, locate and analyse solo devising. These include notions of the postdramatic, a solo devising economy and expert practitioner crafting. Key fields of enquiry include other experimental solo practices, the interviewees' own wider creative practices and devising as a set of approaches to theatre-making.

Rather than attempting a generic survey of all solo theatre practices, my focus is on experimental solo theatre practice, in particular solo devising which has arisen out of very particular contexts of theatre and performance practices. The research takes cognisance of multiple solo theatre forms, noting their operation across popular and experimental work.<sup>18</sup> Solo practice operates in scripted dramatic plays, the 'one man show', (Young, 1989) and continuing inherited traditions of circus, magic, cabaret, music hall and stand-up comedy. Experimental solo theatre practice occurs in performance and Live Art, postmodern dance, body art, site-specific performance, performance lecture and one-to-one work. The specificity of *solo* as a defining lens frames some key features which can be distinguished across different solo performance forms, which remain consistent over time and

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<sup>18</sup> Writing which offers focused comparison of both popular and experimental solo work is rare. The closest is work that focuses on a specific genre, including 'one man shows' (Young, 1989), autobiographical performance (Gale, 2004; Miller, 2006), performance and Live Art collections and catalogues (Bonney, 1994, Goldberg, 2004, 2008; Heathfield, 2004, Carlson, 2004) or writing which focuses on a specific topic and includes some solo work. This includes, for example, gender (Goodman & de Gay 1998; Aston & Harris, 2006) and feminism (Hart, 1989, 1993, Goodman, 1996; Martin, 1996, Aston & Harris, 2012). I do not have the scope to develop this comparative discussion fully in this particular research, but wanted simply to indicate that there are shared structural dynamics which solo devised performance inherits and continues, and which have an impact on what its practitioners make.

have implications for solo making and performance practices. The obvious defining characteristic of solo performance is that it is primarily carried out by one individual. One implication of this is the understandable assumption that audiences frequently bring to watching it, that the performer will display virtuosic skills and mastery. On a fundamental level, contained within the structural dynamic of all solo performance, where most commonly 'the one' faces 'the many', is the performer's unspoken provocation that 'This evening needs nothing more than me' (TE1: 38). An intensity of relationship between audience and performer is also frequently evident in solo performance, as there are usually no others in the performance space and direct communication with the audience is common, again across popular and experimental work.

## Understandings of 'solo'

### **Its wider context as a practice**

The term 'solo', when used as an adjective, offers a proposition of oneness, of being alone, unaccompanied or unassisted. It defines a well-known way of working in all the arts, where it forms either part of a group practice – scriptwriter, choreographer, composer – or is a practice in itself, as with a painter, sculptor, musician, photographer or writer. It also has a long history of being connected to the theatrical stage, its Latin root *solus* being used in stage directions as early as 1605 to indicate being alone (Kyd, 1605 cited in Fleming, 2011). The word was used distinctively later in the early nineteenth century by Cardinal Newman, in the expression '*solus cum solo*', by which he meant 'alone with The Alone', to indicate the individual's

relationship to God, in solitude and yet face-to-face with a deity and thus not simply 'alone' (Newman, 1890).

This sense of 'as if' oneness, of aloneness yet being 'with' others is carried on into the later development of the word 'soloist' in the mid-nineteenth century. The soloist plays a singular line of music amidst an orchestra, as in a concerto. The performing soloist as musician is separated out from the orchestra, even as it accompanies her or him. Again, the nature of the 'solo' state of being here does not in fact mean being solitary, but rather being literally 'outstanding', physically separated from the other musicians and playing a usually virtuosic, individual line of music. This is again 'alone with', described as 'collegiality' by Richard Sennett (2008: 33). He suggests the most highly skilled soloists can play *with* the group while simultaneously playing a separate, often complex line of music. The word 'solo' therefore contains multiple strands of meaning: in a state of solitude and 'marked out', yet with others.

I am also engaging with oneness as an ambiguous proposition of 'individuality', taking as a starting point poststructuralist formulations of individuality as performed and relational: not describing an essential, biological self but rather one that is plural and in process, created and enacted in relation to enculturated, dialogic experience with other people and contexts. Rebecca Schneider specifically articulates this with reference to witnessing solo performance:

Often a solo artist performs 'as if' alone or singled out, only to perform a kind of echo palette of others, a map of citation and a subjectivity so multiply connected as to be collective. (2005: 36)

Being one and many, alone and yet with others suggests that the 'solo' practitioner is an ambiguous proposition. I discuss in more detail in Chapter Two the diverse ways these practitioners create 'as if' performance presences, that are seemingly individual, as well as more diffuse energies, intertextual bricoleurs, collecting agencies, ghosts and ongoing 'works-in-progress' (Cashman, Mould and Shukla, 2011: 5).

At the same time, the interviewees in this research accept and declare motivational enjoyment in having a certain control over authorship, in being able to work and perform alone. Individual agency as makers is possible: Cashman (ibid.) quotes from Mikhail Bakhtin's observation that 'our mouths are full of the words of others but which words and how spoken, matter' (Bakhtin, 1981: 293-337). Solo working allows detailed personal engagement in the 'which' and the 'how' of performance-making, well beyond a limiting concern with display or virtuosic skill. These interviewees work expertly, alone and in relation to others, perform complex multiple voices in their work and as such offer ways that performing can move beyond the binary of individual/group or self/other.

I will further expand on how they play with their position of power, as the expected authorial voice and focal point in the performed work. The paradigm of the lone genius creator is a curiously enduring one, articulated very strongly in the Romantic aesthetic discourses of the early nineteenth-century. Some solo performance, like stand-up comedy, magic, illusion and circus work requires the virtuoso, individual creator and performer to be at the centre of the work, operating as it does on mysteries, comic timing,

revelations and demonstrations of wondrous skill and sleight of hand. These interviewees play with the power offered through receipt of this attention, devising performance strategies whereby they share this focus with the audience or give way to other theatre forms like music or light, 'things that erase or override you' (WH1: 1). In a similar vein, Baker is happily overshadowed by 100 meringue ladies in *Angels*: 'I took the cloth off and there was a gasp because they are beautiful, the meringues. I had worked out how to make black people and mixed race people – a group of women of the world' (BB1: 7).

Other models of 'solitary' being offer some insights into the complexity that aloneness as a state of being can involve, and what making and performing solo work might also offer to deviser and audience. The figure of the eremite is relevant here. The word derives from the late Latin *ēremīta* and ecclesiastical Greek *ἐρημίτης*, meaning a desert, uninhabited. 'Hermit' is the known name for describing the person who has withdrawn from the world for religious reasons. It was applied from the third century onwards to describe Christian solitaires who 'withdrew' to live a contemplative, spiritual life. Agency is important here, that the person has made a conscious choice to withdraw, in this case into the service of God, as opposed to solitary confinement, for example (Clay, 1914). But as Clay makes clear, both the hermit and the anchorite, (a person who has chosen enclosed withdrawal), although entailing contemplative, primarily solitary lives, were also connected to others: 'they became living witnesses to the reality of the spiritual world. Theirs was no easy religion. Indeed, hermits were regarded as heroes, because of the physical hardness they endured' (xvi). These

lived states of being modeled a 'solitary but not necessarily self-centred state of life' (ibid.). The hermit could engage in the community, move freely, whereas the anchorite remained within four walls; however, they were both also usually involved in 'intercession' – helping the community and consulted by people seeking spiritual guidance and material help. Hermits, according to Clay, were in fact early activists: 'pioneers of philanthropic works which in these days are undertaken and carried out by public bodies' (xvii). Thus these early religious practices of eremitage model solitary and connected ways of being. Similarities between eremitage and solo devising practices include an ability to be alone; to work in situations without externally created boundaries (rehearsal time, space); the choice to challenge and test oneself and to use solo working to engage in questions which are personal and can have a wider relevance to the different communities with which they engage. Baker demonstrates a persistent exploration of feminist issues when discussing her solo works. Pearson narrates his experience as a child within the experiences of a wider family and village community in *A Death in the Family* (1991) and *Bubbling Tom* (2000); Etchells explores his own and other artists dramaturgical questions in *Instructions for Forgetting* and *In the Event*. The source for their exploratory questions is themselves but the work aims to connect with other peoples' concerns.

### **Experimental solo creative practices**

Devisers working in performance or in postdramatic theatre inevitably draw upon earlier disciplinary training and working, which affects how they

approach their current practice. In this study, this includes theatre, writing, dance and art,<sup>19</sup> although they also all work in interdisciplinary ways.

I have found it useful to group the interviewees collectively within the experimental category of postdramatic theatre, as they share many of its concerns, which I discuss later on in this chapter. Nonetheless, they also bring different approaches to their working, in relation to how solo making is carried out within different disciplines. The term 'solo' means something different in theatre, dance and arts practices, disciplines which the solo interviewees have had a strong relationship with over their careers.

Fine art is generally carried out as an individual practice – an act of solitary making (or devising). For this reason, the concept of 'solo' does not appear frequently in discourses around visual art in general, or Live Art in particular. In relation to my interviews, this makes sense of Baker's non-engagement with the term 'solo': 'It hadn't occurred to me that I was doing solo work. I never looked at it like that. It just never occurred to me to perform with anyone else' (BB2: 21).

Although the how, where and by whom their work is seen has always been a preoccupation of the artist, they themselves are not generally present in the display of their work, and the task of bringing it to an audience has tended to be handled by curators and other mediators. The interest for the artist is rather more on the conceiving and making of the work than

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<sup>19</sup> This relationship of 'drawing on' is not simply about absorbing established ideas, however. Melrose suggests disciplinary working is done through elaborative, relational practice, an exchange as opposed to a one-way assimilation of ideas and practices (2011: 1).

presenting it.<sup>20</sup> However the proliferation of forms and contexts for art have vastly complicated this issue. For example, the mass reproduction of images and works in itself totally changed the way visual art is seen by the majority of people.

Fine arts practice offers to creative solo theatre-making a tradition of formal experimentation which, as Lehmann confirms, explains why so many postdramatic theatre practitioners come from that background (Lehmann, 2006: 94). 'Pure form' (64), the painterly or sculptural medium itself, is frequently explored in visual art, pioneered in the early modernist experimentation of Cezanne, exploring the means of representation as much as what is represented. Painting also offers a long history of non-figurative, abstract working, typified, for example, in the paintings of Kandinsky or Mondrian. Translated into experimental theatre practice, this inspires a move away from dramatic mimesis and offers instead the potential to explore the formal qualities of theatre materials: bodies, space, words and movement engaged with for their own aesthetic possibilities – an intermedial 'theatre as scenic poetry' (Lehmann, 2008: 63).

Because of a tradition of art as a practice that engages with materials, Live Art offers the use of tangible material 'others' for the solo performer to work with – physical substances, light and objects can share the performance

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<sup>20</sup> There are other more collective models of fine art practice, some quite ancient: the studio with many artist/craftsmen at work is paralleled in modern times by the successful artist with many assistants who carry out their work under their supervision. As Sennett indicates, however, collective does not necessarily equate with democratic: 'A more satisfying definition of the [medieval] workshop is a productive space in which people deal face-to-face with issues of authority' (2008: 54). The community artist on the other hand works collectively with deliberate social or political intent.



space.<sup>21</sup> Houston speaks of being accompanied by light and sound in her early solo work with John Avery in *Haunted*: 'They bring life to things' (WH1: 8). This can be pushed to the point of 'ghosting'; she is attracted to 'forms that are going to disappear you' (WH: 1). Work with video, film and technology again offers tangible materials to populate and over populate the performance space: for example, Pearson works with 700 images in *The Man Who Ate His Boots* (1998). The earlier film of the Surrealists also offers particular ways of using image sequencing, involving techniques of collage and montage which are suggested in Etchells's video work in *Instructions for Forgetting*, requiring audiences to make their own sense of the collection of extracts he shows. Such time-based art practices also practically offer precise timelines which give a clear 'score' to work around, for example in Pearson's *The First Five Miles* (1998) and *Carrlands* (2007).

Visual art practices also offer critical thinking about the context of the work's reception, its 'frame', with some of the art of the Dadaists and Surrealists moving out of more formal galleries which place specific values on artwork, in relation to a commercial market. They presented instead in temporary exhibition spaces, as in Andre Breton and Marcel Duchamp's 'event art works'<sup>22</sup> and out onto the city streets with the ambulatory work of the Situationists and subsequent site-specific and public art.

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<sup>21</sup> Early examples of this focus include the work of Adolf Appia, Oskar Schlemmer, Tadeusz Kantor and Edward Gordon Craig and later descendants such as Bread And Puppet Theatre, Forkbeard Fantasy, Jan Fabre and Robert Wilson.

<sup>22</sup> A famous exhibition being the 1938 'Exposition internationale du surréalisme' at the Galerie Beaux-Arts at 140, Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris, whose exhibitors included Salvador Dali, Marcel du Champ, Man Ray, and which exhibited objects, inventions (Dali's taxi, where visitors were watered, repeatedly) and early installations such as the 'Surrealist Street' (Lehmann, 2008:66) This is not providing a gloss for 'event art works'.

Developing out of fine art in the USA in the 1960s, with parallels in Europe in 'action art', pursued by Beuys and others, performance art was and is typically performed solo (even though, interestingly its immediate predecessor, the 'Happenings' of the 1950s were typically group events). Performance art developed in the UK ten years after its USA counterpart and arose out of different initial contexts.<sup>23</sup> Historical performance art practices brought live performance into gallery settings and out to other sites. It offered solo autobiographical monologues and task-based processes of working, emphasising endurance over time, or the carrying out of a single concept rather than a series of actions as in theatre. Its practitioners also worked with solo vocal performance, experimenting with the multiple voices offered by technological experiment.<sup>24</sup>

Early debate about apparent differences between performance and contemporary theatre have revolved around seeming divisions between performance art's access to 'the real' as opposed to theatre's concern with the fakery of mimesis and illusion; 'performer presence' as opposed to the representation of fictive personae; work with visual and plastic, as opposed

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<sup>23</sup> Kaye (1994: 2) locates UK performance art as being more linked to radical theatre practice and feminist work, compared to the focus in the USA on fine arts practices. However, Carlson (2007: 127) writes about the convergence of spoken word, autobiographical, political monologic performance art that existed both in the USA and the UK, from early performance art practices in the 1950s onwards. He suggests these more text-based, political works are often ignored in discourses on performance art that emphasis the abstract visual art qualities (Feral, 1992)

<sup>24</sup> Some examples of solo practitioners working in each of these areas include the monologic work of Sarah Jones, Nilaja Sun, John Leguizamo, Coco Fusco, Holly Hughes, Karen Finley, John Fleck, Tim Miller, Saul Williams (USA); Stacey Makishi, Claire Dowie, Bella Fortune, Bobby Baker, Rose English, Fiona Templeton, Nigel Charnock and Peggy Shaw, amongst others. Body art and endurance work also has an ongoing history of experimentation by solo artists including Carolee Schneemann, Alistair MacLennan, Marina Abramovic, Franko B, Tehching Hsieh, Vito Acconci, Stelarc, Ron Athey, Sheree Rose, Kira O'Reilly and Martin O'Brien. Again, one might suggest that the experiential, intensely personal and durational nature of such work is very suited to an economy based on one person enacting it. Vocal performance art includes intermedial performance work incorporating movement, technology, sound and image, in work exemplified by artists such as Imogen Heap, Meredith Monk, Laurie Anderson and Diamanda Galas.

to textual materials and dynamic relationships with an audience (Kaye, 1996; Phelan, 2004, Feral: 1994). In practice, it has been noted that any actual differences have lessened over time, with performance, Live Art<sup>25</sup> and contemporary theatre practices moving closer together aesthetically over the last ten years. Its practitioners are involved with offering work which engages with the live moment of performance and formal experimentation as well as with theatre materials and even play texts (Ridout, 2006; Lehmann, 2006: 134; Kaye, 1984: 3).

Historical and contemporary performance and Live Art practices offer a rich array of aesthetic choices and making strategies which solo devisers regularly employ. These include working with the live performance moment and practices of interdisciplinary working which prioritise visual, spatial and object-based working (Kaye, 1994: 2; Carlson, 1996: 111). Baker contributes to these traditions of working – using and transforming objects, including her body as a physically changing, performing and transforming canvas (bathed in chocolate in *Take A Peek* (1995), wrapped in food in *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* or as a sculpture in *Kitchen Show* (1991).

Despite often focusing on the body, there has been little in performance art that addresses somatic and kinesthetic aspects of the body, which have remained the province of dance. Expert solo devising, incorporating some of

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<sup>25</sup> The development of the term 'Live Art' as distinct from performance art is specific to the UK and as Klein & Heddon (2012) point out, it has flourished and developed into a 'field' of practice aided by smart institutional and organisational support and promotion on the part of curators and supporters, rather than long lasting aesthetic differences between it and its predecessor, performance art. Kaye (1994: 1) argues that current practice in the UK reveals an industry focus on experimental theatre reformulated as Live Art, while its practitioners continue to work across areas, disciplines and genres.

the characteristics of contemporary and postmodern dance, allows for an exploration of 'intense physicality' (Lehmann, 2006: 96), bringing physical presence, somatic memory and movement forward as a primary source of composition into the devising process.

Postmodern and new physical and dance-theatre practices have a long history of working in the solo mode and historically, like fine art, have a freedom to work with more formal, abstract approaches to performance than theatre (Lehmann, 2006: 96). Postmodern dance in the USA, and 'New Dance' in the UK (Jordan, 1992: 7) broke from the patterns of contemporary dance inherited from the 1940s, which still consisted of a choreographer making work for and 'on' a company.<sup>26</sup> Instead, postmodern and New Dance engaged with the dancer as creative, working with characteristics which have many correspondences with postdramatic theatre: experiment, self-reflexivity, inter-disciplinarity, an inclusive array of movement vocabularies, use of improvisation and an awareness of the context out of which work is being made (Jordan, 1992; Banes, 1984; Foster, 1986).<sup>27</sup> Within the limited space I have here, it is only possible to touch on this complex historical development of experimental dance, but what is critical here is an opening up of solo work to be made by the dancer themselves, without the use of a separate choreographer or company model. Soloists became more common, showing work instead of starring in it.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Although they did dispense with the hierarchy of the corps de ballet and the star soloist, still in operation in all major ballet companies.

<sup>27</sup> Practitioners include for example Anna Halprin, Yvonne Rainer, Mary Fulkerson in the USA and Siobhan Davies, Ian Spink or Miranda Tufnell in the UK.

<sup>28</sup> Historically influential solo works could include Lucinda Childs, *Carnation* (1964); Yvonne Rainer, *Trio A* (1966), *Terrain* (1962); Siobhan Davies, *Sphinx* (1977); Charlotte Kirkpatrick, *Then You can Only Sing* (1978); Trisha Brown, *If you couldn't see me* (1994); Anna Halprin, *The Courtesan and the*

Working alone becomes pragmatic and unremarkable: 'it never occurred to me to involve anyone else' (NC1: 10).

Postdramatic theatre develops from this legacy, drawing from dance an emphasis on physical signification and the physical presence of the performer.<sup>29</sup> Movement languages can incorporate the pedestrian, gesture, the casual, the popular, as well as extreme physicalities, which carry the meaning of the work and convey other kinds of 'intelligence' beyond the cerebral and ideational, including for example affective and spatial intelligence. New Dance and postmodern dance approaches also allow for compositional decisions based on changes of physical energy. Houston describes a transition in her solo *Haunted*: 'instead of diffusing your energy and letting it go out, you pull it in and direct it. It's like when people get a bit serious' (WH1: 10). Performance personae can be based on energetic, rather than psychological sources. Postmodern dance practices celebrate different manifestations of physicality, without engaging in a concern for physical representations of character.

Site-specific performance also expands theatrical signification, giving prominence to space and place. Mike Pearson is a leading innovator of this work in the UK, where the performing space moves beyond the studio to a wide variety of places and involves work that is made from, about, and with

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*Crone* (1999). Some examples of current practitioners working with combining dance, Live Art and solo work include Eddie Ladd, Gaby Agis, Matteo Fargeo, Raimund Hoghe, Julie Tolentino, Rosemary Lee, Geraldine Pilgrim, Yumi Umiumare, Jan Ritsema, Nando Messias.

<sup>29</sup> An important example was the influential dance-theatre group DV8 formed in 1985, led by Lloyd Newson in collaboration with Wendy Houston and Nigel Charnock. They incorporated political themes into a new dance-theatre aesthetic, and also foregrounded personal content in the work.

location.<sup>30</sup> Its relationship to postdramatic thinking is clear: treating space as a medium rather than container, and context as a primary material, it also liberates place from being the 'mise en scène', the visual backdrop to the event. The relations between people in sited work are also clearly altered; in *Bubbling Tom*, for example, a site-specific guided walk through his home village of Hibaldstow, Pearson is 'guide' but the audience are not simply the guided – they have different relationships to the work and its location as their village and feel equally able to participate and converse: 'What I hadn't anticipated was that people would start talking the moment I stopped' (MP1: 16). 'Landscape is taskscape' (Pearson, 2010: 219)<sup>31</sup> – Pearson's walk is a work-in-progress where the structural dynamic of the solo as monologue is changed, turned into a relay in which he has to work hard. The solo performer is the facilitator, not the central focus of such work. This is also true of audio-walks; Pearson is a conduit, a recorded voice, in *Carrlands*, no longer physically present.<sup>32</sup>

Houstoun, Baker and Etchells have all also created works for specific sites: Houstoun in *Happy Hour* (2001), Baker in *Kitchen Show* and Etchells in numerous sited neon word works (although he is not present in these himself). The site informs the work, has vital presence and in the absence of other people offers solo work the possibility to again be accompanied, to take [a] place in relation.

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<sup>30</sup> Some other solo practitioners working with site in the UK include Phil Smith, Graeme Miller, Janet Cardiff, Geraldine Pilgrim, Phoebe Davis and Caroline Wright. Fiona Wilkie (2002) provides one useful earlier list of solo and group site practitioners, in her survey carried out in the same year.

<sup>31</sup> Pearson, 2010: 219.

<sup>32</sup> Hear also Janet Cardiff (1999) in *The Missing Voice, Case Study B* and Graeme Miller (2003) in *Linked*.

Writing for performance has a long history as solo creative practice, and is often associated with dramatic playwriting (Lehmann, 2006: 46; Etchells, 1999: 98). Lehmann offers a useful, lengthy account of the crisis in Aristotelian drama aesthetics which occurred in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the subsequent development of 'historical' and 'neo' avant-garde theatre practices out from this.<sup>33</sup> This 'turn away' from story and a 'turn towards performance' (4), and the consequent critical challenge this creates to the dominance of the literary text, is highly significant for writing connected to the theatre. Avant-garde theatrical writing practices can be said to undo a 'service chain', whereby script and character render writing and words invisible.<sup>34</sup> In experimental theatre, words become physical visual forms, staged as written signs or unfolding live thinking, projected onto walls. In postdramatic theatre, 'staged text (*if text is staged*) is merely a component with equal rights in a gestic, musical, visual composition' (Lehmann, 2006: 46). Etchells consults notes and the image leads his live composition (*Words and Pictures*, 2005). Text and theatre are no longer unquestionably joined. The word 'text' is also disjointed from spoken words, expanding to include a myriad of other forms of composition, including music, dance,

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<sup>33</sup> Lehmann goes on to revise Peter Szondi's influential account of the crisis in dramatic form which occurred at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, described in *Theory of the Modern Drama* (1987). According to Szondi, it is only through 'epicisation', in the work of Brecht, Piscator, Bruckner, Pirandello, O'Neill, Wilder and Miller that the significant challenge to dramatic form is made. Lehmann suggests that the simple binary of dramatic/epic as a description of the historical development of theatre is simplistic, arguing that while Brecht's aesthetics offer new ways of working with performer presence, representation and inquiry into spectatorship, he does not essentially break away from the use of literary- based dramatic form in his continued use of a 'theatre of stories' or 'Fabel-Theater' (33). Lehmann moves beyond the binary of dramatic/epic to outline how practitioners in the late 1880s onwards start to promote 'the autonomisation of theatre' (50), through the impossible work of Stein and Artaud – visionary and unplayable as 'drama' but which foresee later postdramatic realisation in the work of Robert Wilson or Heiner Goebbels.

<sup>34</sup> Literature leads the way, with Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, the Oulipo group (footnote 47) or Georges Perec, who, through the use of mathematical or game theories find other ways to organise writing and thought beyond classical narrative structures. (The well known earlier instance is Tristram Shandy.)

visual arts, and spatial design – Pearson writes using sound and space: ‘How am I going to voice that, spatially?’ (MP1: 17); Baker draws visual food maps. Etchells is a highly experienced creative writer and his prolific writing demonstrates a self-reflexive writing practice which, as I go on to detail, encompasses writing about and as performance, exploring solo and collaborative writing (see Appendix III).

Despite the disciplinary differences outlined above, I have chosen to discuss these practitioners as all working within postdramatic theatre aesthetics, detailed below. They all work in the context of contemporary theatre, and engage fully with the materials that theatre spaces specifically offer: lights, sound, objects, stages and themselves as performers. They deal with the ‘tyrannous economy’ (TE1: 12) of an entertainment industry, its studios and ticket sales and repetitive labour (Ridout, 2006). They have to manage a history of expectation from audiences regularly exposed to the dramas favoured by script-oriented, character-driven theatre and television. The practitioners I interviewed all make new work, which is repeatable and has a performance score, unlike the Happenings or events in performance and Live Art, which are one-off (Lehmann, 2006: 137). They also explore the complex process of different kinds of negotiation with liveness – with moving time and space and people that is the common characteristic shared by theatre, performance and Live Art.

### **Solo devising within a wider performance practice**

Solo devising most usually sits within a wider performance practice, involving the practitioner creating work in other formations like duets, trios



and groups. Although the motivations offered for making solo work were various, one recurrent reason articulated by all the interviewees was directly linked to their ongoing and often better-known work with their group devising practices. They are all either working or have worked in significant theatre companies alongside their solo practices (see Appendix III). The economies of scale, intensity, and increased need for complex production management required in company working contributes to a common theme emerging from the interviews – differently nuanced versions of a desire to ‘escape’, ‘get out’, ‘recover’ and not be ‘drowned’. Etchells discusses this contrast:

A good show for 400 people is a tyrannous economy. I hate it, in a way, so the solo work is a space where I don't have to think about those same questions. I think a lot of the desire to just 'be there as a person' and deal with ideas in a relatively straightforward way, not to be involved in a hugely complicated, theatrical process, those are all escape fantasies really. Getting out of the thing I spend most of my working time doing. So the fact that I would want to keep the solo stuff on the minimal edge of performance makes sense to me.  
(TE1: 12)

His acknowledgement of the desire for minimalism, simplicity and escape is significant for solo working. All performance is involved with issues of spectatorship and event, contract and exchange, whatever the scale. However, this smaller scale at which solo working can operate was repeatedly articulated as a pleasurable and enabling contrast to the group work. Baker's practice up to 2004 primarily involved making solo work, although she collaborated regularly with dramaturg and director, Palona Baloh Brown.<sup>35</sup> She worked with her company Daily Life Ltd. and several collaborators and a co-performer in her larger piece *How To Live*: 'I had got

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<sup>35</sup> I discuss this in Chapter Four, on collaboration in solo devising.

into this increasingly epic grandiose phase of doing these shows, which, because of the very concept of them, like *How to Live*, were all about being on the Barbican main stage' (BB1: 2). However, as a visual artist she had also continued working on her own and returned to it, making several small pieces during her AHRC Fellowship from 2005–2008 at Queen Mary University, London: 'I was virtually doing everything. And I wasn't discussing any of it with someone like Pol. It was a slightly scary, extraordinary feeling of being entirely on my own again. And very liberating. And anarchic' (BB1: 2).

Baker, Etchells and Pearson all associated some small-scale solo working with relative economic simplicity: Etchells implies above that solo work does not carry the same tyranny engendered by large-scale group working. Pearson speaks of being able to make *Bubbling Tom* in response to a clear funding context: Forced Entertainment and the Live Art Development Agency advertised a '*Small Acts of the Millennium Scheme*': 'And I made a small proposal and I got £2,000. They had these relatively small amounts of money to do something'. Baker compares her solo works made in 2008 to the earlier large-scale piece *How to Live*:

These little one off things – what is so exciting about them is that they are so cheap. I like the idea of heading off with a little bag on wheels. With it all in there. Or in a car. It's not the huge scale. It doesn't require any fundraising. It's free. It's liberating. (BB1: 8)<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Again, this is context specific, as Etchells, Pearson and Baker were all also working alongside other funding streams at these times (Pearson and Baker in academia and Etchells through Forced Entertainment's portfolio funding). Also, they were all specifically describing small-scale solo works, not all their solo working. I return to the issue of solo work being perceived as 'cheap' further on (p.92, p.301).

Discussion, consultation and being connected to others are an inevitable part of group devising contexts and essential to the creative process. Viewed in the context of an expanded creative practice, solo working offers the complementary values of independent, non-consultative aloneness, a difference experienced as 'anarchic' by Baker. Pearson also characterised his first solo works, *Whose Idea was the Wind* (1977) and *Deaf Birds* (1978) in terms of size – as 'small-scale story telling'. They were received with surprise, in comparison to his group work: 'most of the work I did, and people knew I was interested in, was quite hard physical stuff' (MP1: 7). He put aside solo work to start up the company Brith Gof in 1981, one of the first large-scale site-specific theatre companies in the UK, but persistently returned to solo work:

I do know how to hang off a rope forty feet in the air; I do know how to run around throwing oil drums around. I have got no idea how to stand in front of twenty people and talk about the death of my father. So that is the challenge. (MP1: 16)

As well as small-scale economies and proximity to the audience, the challenge for Pearson lies in the new and the unknown – performance as testing the performer.<sup>37</sup> He suggested that his solo work was also created in part as a reaction to the increasingly 'inhuman' scope of the group work:

We made the series of big works – *Goodwin, Pax, and Haearn*. And it was about the time of *Haearn* I began to get very uneasy about what we were doing with performers. I think performers assume more often than not that they are carrying the meaning in a theatrical way. Well, in those big shows that was certainly not the case. So the physical performers were only ever part of the architecture of the piece. In any one moment the music might have been carrying the

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<sup>37</sup> *Death in the Family*, was made in 1991, and the private nature of the subject matter, although not new in relation to autobiographical performance in performance art as a whole, was not so widely disseminated in wider culture, being before the advent of the Internet and the 'turn' to life narrative dissemination spread through the blog and reality television.

emotive meaning, not the performers. The audience might be looking at the band. And [so] as a kind of strategy to recover something, I started to think about solo works again. (8)

Solo devising offers him a return to a more human, personal scale of working. Houston revealed the opposite motivation in her early, solo working. For her, it provided a welcome escape from personal signification, used frequently in the devising processes with DV8. She countered this in her solo *Haunted*:

a lot of the language was in the third person. It was using that 'legalese' talk to distance myself. 'She walked towards, she does this' and that was in direct reaction to *Strange Fish* that had been so emotionally inside itself. I felt like I had got a bit drowned in that somehow. (WH1: 7)<sup>38</sup>

In Houston's practice and use of third personing, *impersonal* solo performance is enacted. Solo working, frequently associated with confessional work<sup>39</sup> is not intrinsically laminated to personal narratives. I explore how these practitioners work further with undoing this assumption, which I call working 'beyond the self', in Chapter Two.

Etchells mentioned several times that the solitary nature of the solo devising space allows him to engage in activities he particularly enjoys, especially nonverbal creative processing. Contemplation, as extended thinking without interruption from others becomes possible: 'one is able to think through or follow many different kinds of internal logics or thought processes. Because Wendy is not there pretending to be a cheerleader and

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<sup>38</sup> *Strange Fish* (1992) was a piece of physical theatre conceived and directed by Lloyd Newson with Houston, Charnock and several other performers which toured Europe and was made into a film in the same year.

<sup>39</sup> Baker is well aware of this association: 'that was always my terror, with *Drawing on a Mother's Experience*, when it took off, that somebody would say 'the smack of the confessional' (BB1: 13).

messing you up' (TE2: 31). Not needing to speak is frequently articulated as one of the great pleasures of solo working, increasing access to other extended kinds of creative thinking.

Solo devising allows for individual creative agency, with the expression of signatured working. For Houston, this is a unique time of 'total authorship' (WH pers. comm.), for Pearson, a moment of enjoyable artistic 'statement-in-action'<sup>40</sup> a kind of refresher: 'So it is the mode within which you have to stand by your art, the *sine qua non* [...] without which, nothing' (MP1: 21).

All these practitioners discussed the inherently pleasurable nature of working alone with particular artistic forms, as a motivating factor in and of itself. For Houston, this most usually involves working with movement: 'there were days I would come in and just want to move and make movement because I like doing it and it has got no other function (WH1: 19)'. Etchells enjoys writing: 'The thing I associate it with is working on fiction. That for me is probably the work I like doing better than anything else' (TE1: 14). Baker affirms: 'I like doing drawings on my own' (BB1: 10). Solo working, while not involving an 'other' in terms of a person, does involve 'others' in terms of a continual relationship with the disciplines and creative forms they have worked with professionally for many years.

This is, however, enjoyment that operates beyond simple narcissism. Expert solo devising allows for crafted precision: 'to work at a level of detail', there

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<sup>40</sup> I have borrowed the phrase 'statement-in-action' from its use at Dartington College of Arts, where it described an undergraduate module in which students often worked alone and made solo work as a kind of personal manifesto, unique within a course whose emphasis was primarily on group devised work.

being 'no leakage' (MP1: 30). It involves sustained, repetitive working: 'doing stuff until it finds its place' (WH1: 8). Charnock draws on precise, honed, vocal and physical technique, achieved from hours of repetitive, daily practise, so that when he is improvising in performance, he can be 'absolutely in control and out of control at the same time' (NC1: 5). In this context, Baker's 'liking' typifies an impressive, sustained and low key expression of intent, fuelled by a long-term working relationship with craft. This drive to make detailed, solo work over long careers suggests a sense of vocation, defined by Richard Sennett as 'a lifetime commitment to quality-driven work'; Plato's 'arete' in *The Republic* (380 BC) which is an 'aiming for and achieving of excellence and fulfilling one's potential' (2006, 12). The individuality of this statement is expanded in the context of performance, where 'potency' is deeply connected to it being a live art, performed with an audience who are co-present. All of the interviewees repeatedly spoke of their motivations for making work as inexorably linked to a desire to connect with their audiences in meaningful, relevant ways. Baker summarises this attitude clearly: 'It is less focused on making but more about what you are communicating. What is this about and who am I saying this to and how? And how effectively does this communicate?' (BB1: 10). They use monologue, audience address and an opening up of authorship to collaborators, including their audiences, to facilitate different kinds of connection. I discuss this further in relation to solo postdramatic working (p.76), the practitioners' work with performance personae (p.128), and the multiple kinds of collaborations they invite from their audiences (p.277).

Many of the motivations which distinguished solo devising as an enjoyable part of a wider creative practice for these practitioners were also, at other times in the interviews, offered as issues which the solo practitioner would need to 'find ways to offset' (TE1: 4).

The solitary nature of solo devising is linked to the danger of creating an overly subjective piece of work, which Baker calls 'self indulgence'. She spoke of guarding against this through continual self-interrogation: 'Why am I doing this, what is this about?' (BB1: 13) Etchells also recognised that the danger of not having to argue about work also meant losing the safety net of 'collective scrutiny' (TE1: 13) as a monitoring system.

These co-existing, opposite possibilities: of precision and overwork; of enjoyable solitude and trapped self-enclosure; of lack of discussion or welcome silence; of endless time for work and unproductive overwork suggest a continuing negotiation is at play in solo practice. This is perhaps one of the many reasons why solo practitioners also tend to work within other formations in their practices, also enacting a much needed escape into group devising.<sup>41</sup>

## The notion of 'the postdramatic'

The practitioners' discourses about solo theatre-making and my own discussion of solo devising is aligned to 'postdramatic' theatre practice, a term I have already used a number of times, citing Lehmann's *Postdramatic*

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<sup>41</sup> These concerns are explored further in Chapter Three, where I analyse the interviewees' reflection on their solo devising strategies and processes in more detail.

*Theatre* as a key source. Broadly speaking, Lehmann (2006) uses this term to encompass new, experimental theatre practices which have developed since the 1970s, and which put to use the multiple materials available to the theatre of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, working beyond the limiting primacy of the dramatic text (21). He is one of the few thinkers to include some discussion, although this is very brief, of solo experimental work (125-129).

He identifies some characteristics which suggest that solo practice has a useful role to play in wider discussions of postdramatic practice, and there is also much in his book that can inform a discussion of solo devising. This is in spite of the fact that his concern is mainly with the performed work, and says little about its creation, whether devised, written or made in a number of other ways. Underlying the notion of the postdramatic is the sense of deliberately and knowingly doing and 'undoing' many established theatre practices and conventions and this is a recurring feature of solo devised practice.

My interviewees were chosen specifically for their shared commitment to experimentation, working to create new definitions of what theatre can be or do. Pearson works in the forefront of site-specific performance, Etchells of performance writing practices, Bobby Baker of visual and performance art work exploring mental health, Charnock of dance-theatre practice and Houstoun of interdisciplinary work in dance, writing and film. Lehmann (2006) provides a genealogy of the provenance of postdramatic work, as I have already outlined (p.63). He rationalises his use of the term



'postdramatic', as opposed to 'postmodern', as a necessary change of terminology rather than a change of the work they purport to describe. He argues that postdramatic work should be so called as it *unravels* the form of dramatic theatre, working critically in relation to it, as opposed to rejecting modernism and its forms and working practices (26). The postdramatic is also delineated by a focus on the audience and their potential agency as participants: 'theatrical communication not primarily as a confrontation with the audience but as the production of situations for the self-interrogation, self-exploration, self-awareness of all participants' (105). This differs, he argues, from a characterisation of the postmodern audience as simply a disinterested spectator (186). Etchells directly named this focus as aligned to his own: 'this postdramatic thing – where the drama moves to being a 'drama' about the relation with the audience' (TE2: 18).

This helped me differentiate between two approaches to solo practice, one of which, the 'postdramatic', I did want to explore, and one of which I did not. For example, I am not discussing the making of dramatic solos: plays for one actor which take on different forms, like biographical representations of famous individual's lives, virtuosic monodramas which showcase the skill of the individual performer or 'monopolylogues', where one person plays multiple characters.<sup>42</sup>

The study of solo postdramatic approaches offered an opportunity to examine particular kinds of experimental working within new theatre

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<sup>42</sup> There are numerous examples of each of these kinds of work listed in Young, J. 1989. *Acting Solo: The Art of One Man Shows*. London, Apollo Press. More recent well known examples include Simon Callow in Peter Ackroyd's *The Mystery of Charles Dickens* (2012).

practice, read through the more particular focus on solo practice, differently elaborated by the interviewees. It also allowed me to start to examine and name these expert 'not lost but not yet found' (Melrose, 2007: 1) practices as solo devising. It suggested that in creating an exchange between my detailed, specific interview material on solo devising and Lehmann's more generalised framework, it might be possible to extend thinking about the postdramatic to include a more developed, nuanced discussion of solo postdramatic practice.

Postdramatic and solo postdramatic concerns include the emphases outlined in the following paragraphs.

There is a move away from dramatic representation, replaced by an exploration of the many signifying possibilities that 'the materiality of performance' (4) can offer when liberated from the need to carry plot or character. Materiality in this case means for example Charnock and Houstoun's moving bodies, Etchells's words, the use and importance of multiple kinds of sound, Baker's Meringue Ladies, food, drawings, boxes, the importance of light and music for Houstoun, and the work with space and place for Pearson. These are, at times, given as much importance as the solo performer in the work.

The theatre as a live performance situation is explored self-reflexively; its particular conditions as a place of engagement and entertainment are included as part of the content of the work. In solo postdramatic practice, this includes foregrounding issues particularly relevant to the solo situation itself, revolving centrally around the problems and possibilities of the lone

deviser and performer. The interviewees for example find ways to undo the idea of the monologue through the use of 'multi vocal montage' (p.144), or explore how performance power can be circulated beyond a limited attribution to the virtuosic 'star' act.

The performer is not present as a character: 'The central theatrical sign, the actor's body, refuses to serve signification' (Lehmann, 2006: 95). Instead, their presence is manifested in a range of modes: in these interviews as unreliable narrators (p.130), different personae, or as 'energetics', dynamising the performance (p.137). Physical working is explored for what it can present, not represent, liberated into what Lehmann terms 'auto-sufficient physicality' (2006: 94). This has specific implications for solo working, which includes autobiographical working as well as problematising the idea of the personal (and of coherent subjectivities), or the practitioner as reliable or singular physical presence.

Lehmann names several other postdramatic compositional methods that are also articulated in the interviews and articulated as solo devising strategies, including: theatre as event/situation (p.279), 'musicalisation' (p.219), 'parataxis' (p.242), 'simultaneity' (p.235) and the use of different kinds of 'sign density' (p.128), in rehearsal and performance. These are explored later in relation to specific practitioner examples.

In postdramatic work, the relationship between the audience and performer(s) is frequently given more importance than interpersonal relationships between the characters in the work: 'theatre brings into play

its real event-ness for or against an audience, it discovers its capacity to be [...] a provocative situation for all participants' (106). Solo performance has a long history of creating a live connection in the theatre with the audience. This connection is persistently sought after in postdramatic group practice, which as Lehmann affirms, makes frequent use of monologue (2006: 127). In fact, he centralises the 'monologue' as 'a basic model of theatre' (128), which moves the performance situation from a 'dramatic event' to a 'live theatrical encounter' (ibid.) between performer and audience. This is carried out along a dimension in the theatre, which Lehmann characterises as the 'theatron', which he initially identifies as an axis of communication connecting audience and performer.

### **Solo postdramatic working**

Although brief, Lehmann's writing on solo postdramatic work further supports my enquiry through briefly mentioning two important aspects of solo working; the monologue and 'the theatron'.

For solo performance, the monologue works as a fundamental communicative device, and has a long history of varied application and usage. It has been used across dramatic and postdramatic and popular and experimental theatre. As a spoken form, the monologue has grown from being a speech,<sup>43</sup> to a scene (E. Phillips, 1696). It is uttered by one person and either addressed to characters within a performance or (as if) directly to an audience. From 1849 onwards, its usage was extended to describe whole performances carried out by a single person, with the address

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<sup>43</sup> This is a spoken aloud list called the 'Monologue Recreative' from the book *The Complaynt of Scotland* (1550).

directed towards the audience being of primary importance (OED, monologue, *n.*). Lehmann reminds us:

theatrical discourse has always been doubly addressed: it is at the same time directed *intra-scenically* i.e. at the interlocutors in the play and *extra-scenically* at the theatron. (2006: 127)

Solo work has persistently used monologue on this extra-scenic axis as a main form of communication with an audience, and has tended to privilege 'direct address', when an audience is [as though] directly spoken to by a performer engaging in a version of a live encounter (2006: 127).<sup>44</sup>

Lehmann somewhat broadly situates his discussion of solo postdramatic performance as being different versions of 'monologue' (127), which he lists in brief categories. Included are 'translations' or 'adaptations' of text-based literary works, multiple role monologues, 'innovative solos', autobiographical monologues and 'radical solo performance'.<sup>45</sup> These examples are useful in including scripted performance within postdramatic solo work, although they raise several questions which Lehmann does not have the space to elaborate on.<sup>46</sup> In this research, I use the terms

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<sup>44</sup> Solo performers do speak directly to audience members in stand up comedy, site-specific work or certain kinds of performance art in which they are in close proximity (as in Pearson's *Bubbling Tom* for example). However, a frequent form of address in indoor theatre spaces is one in which they are speaking 'as if' directly to an audience without necessarily individualising or directing the monologue at one person in particular. As I will argue in Chapter Four, this allows the audience members to engage with the work in a different way to a 'face-to-face' encounter.

<sup>45</sup> Examples include works like Jutta Lampe's *Orlando* (Virginia Woolf) (1989); Robert Wilson's *Hamlet A Monologue* (1994); and Klaus Michael Gruber's *Faust* (1992). Different to this is the actor performing multiple roles, like Edith Clever in *Penthesilea* or Marisa Fabbri in Euripides *Bacchae* (1979). He further names other monologic work as the 'innovative solos' (125) by Jan Fabre and the 'direct political address' of Robert Lepage *The Needle and the Opium, 1992, Four Hours In Chatila (Genet)* (1992). He offers as 'autobiographical' the monologue in Jan Lauwers (*Schade/Schade*), 1992 and describes Ron Vawter's solo, *Flaming Creatures/Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* (1992), as 'extreme' and radical performance'.

<sup>46</sup> In this passage, Lehmann equates all solo work with using monologue, although he is then forced to create a neologism, 'monology', to allow for non-word based solo performance. As I suggest later, I prefer instead to use the term 'devised' solo work, which allows for multiple kinds of solo signification beyond the verbal. Lehmann also applies the adjectives 'innovative' and 'radical' to solo work without specifying what he means by these terms. Finally, his discussion of performance

postdramatic to signal approaches which work beyond a dramatic model of theatre presentation and devising to explore different disciplinary approaches to the way it is made. I use the term 'solo' as a wider category term, within which the speech device of monologue is used and challenged. An obvious effect of there only being one person speaking in solo performance is that live dialogue does not occur with other performers in the space. Lehmann calls this 'intra-scenic communication' and highlights how in solo work this is minimal compared to a speaking that is directed toward the audience, 'extra-scenic communication':

All the different varieties of monologue and apostrophe to the audience, including solo performance, have in common that the intra-scenic axis recedes compared to the theatron axis. (ibid.)

He names the literal pathway between audience and 'the stage' (127) the 'theatron axis', and acknowledges that this extends the Greek concept of the 'theatron', which indicated only the audience's seeing space (127).

Lehmann does not detail why he extends it in this way, but I find it useful for the following reason. Postdramatic performance foregrounds the possibility of relational activity between its performers and audiences. Conceptualising the theatron from an audience space where people mainly *look* to signify the space between the audience, the performer and the work being made suggests the possibility of a more interactive relationship between all of them. This is 'a theatre that is no longer spectatorial but instead is a social situation' (106). Use of the theatron occurs in group

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art tends to be very generalised, consigning all work in this category to a concern with 'self-transformation', citing Almhöfer (1986: 44). Baker's work clearly refutes this. Elinor Fuchs also takes issue with his overall incorporation of the term 'performance' into theatre (2008: 178-183).

devised work, however, in solo practice, it forms the main avenue for 'social' interaction to take place and hence is frequently used. All of the interviewees revealed different uses of monologic working, and the theatron, which I will go on to explore in relation to how they undo notions of themselves as central, virtuosic performance presences (Chapter Two), receive audience feedback (Chapter Three) and invite specific kinds of audience collaboration (Chapter Four). This ranges from inviting imaginative thinking, to co-creating aspects of the work, to co-performing in the event itself.

In analysing this varied usage of address throughout the course of my research, I also re-examined Lehmann's terminology and differentiation of 'intra-scenic' and 'extra-scenic' communication. It became even clearer why the theatron axis was a useful term to indicate this communication pathway between audience and performer, as opposed to 'extra-scenic'.

In *Downtime*, Etchells has his back to the audience, as he is focused on translating the large image of himself thinking into spoken words. He and the audience face the screen; and he is another kind of spectator (of 'himself'). In one sense, this is intra-scenic communication – Etchells exploring a 'self', himself with the audience also part of the 'scene', and therefore 'intra-scenic' communication does occur. Baker also presents 'Bobby Baker' to the audience in her signature introduction – again, setting into play several communicating selves. Lehmann's communicative model suggests one is either 'in' or 'out' of the 'scene', but in the five practitioners' formulation of how their work communicates, the scenic boundary is fluid,

changeable and also frequently inclusive of the audience. Pearson makes installed work in *The Man Who Ate His Boots* and the audio tour, *Bubbling Tom*; and Baker delivers meringues in a golf cart in *Mad Meringues*. I find it more useful when discussing solo postdramatic practice to work from Lehmann's characterisation of theatre as 'situation', not scene, in which different kinds of communication pathways occur:

In postdramatic theatre, the theatre situation is not simply added to the autonomous reality of the dramatic fiction in order to animate it. Rather the theatre situation as such becomes *a matrix within whose energy lines the elements of the scenic fictions inscribe themselves*. (128; my italics)

The theatre space as a moving web of energy lines, attention, foci, thinking, objects, pictures, feelings, laughs and breaths makes sense of the kind of physical experience I have when going to 'see' someone's work. Performer, audience and the work itself are all involved, and are being read, made and unmade. The solo practice discussed in this research stretches the boundaries of what 'the scene' is in the first place. In the site work of Mike Pearson, for example, the 'scene' is an entire village (Hibaldstow in *Bubbling Tom*), or five miles of landscape (*The First Five Miles*).<sup>47</sup> I will continue to use Lehmann's terminology for this axis of communication, the theatron, throughout this research, while at the same time not being concerned about whether it speaks of being inside or outside a 'scene'.

## A solo devising economy

To facilitate a particular meta-reading of the practitioner interview material, I conceptualised a single structural framework within which to speak about

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<sup>47</sup> A vast extension of the theatron occurs in Phillippe Petit's work, *Man on Wire* (1974), where the audience gazes up at the performer, who travels along a high wire stretched between the Twin Towers in New York.



solo devising and the solo performance context. I have called this framework 'a solo devising economy'. It foregrounds the idea of a system of dynamic working processes, relevant to this enquiry into the *practice* of solo devising. As a term it was originally applied to the context of household management (OED, *economy, n.1*), a small-scale economy of resources, expenditure and exchanges, which involves a simultaneous organising of multiple activities and relations. This is relevant to solo working, which can also be small scale and requires the skill of consistent and dexterous managing – of one's own working, collaborative relationships and working and performing contexts. I do not aim to suggest that this is a definitive paradigm, but rather more simply that it has been useful for me to imagine a wider, multiple and connected and dynamic working space, with the aim of making more evident the differences between solo and group devising practices. It should be borne in mind that any generalisations in this conceptualisation are meant to be suggestive, rather than definitive.

The term 'solo devising economy' seems useful for a propositional, virtual space which contains a varying set of conditions – social, financial, material, artistic and relational – that an individual practitioner interacts with when working solo. It also immediately and usefully signals that as opposed to being individual, which the term solo frequently implies, it is one of shared, workings, connected activities, dynamic relationships and exchanges. It also implies labour, which devising, as a set of ways to make performance, entails and is 'bloody hard' as Houston reminds us (WH1: 10).

The term 'practitioner economy' (2006: 100) is also used by Melrose in her repeated call to shift the discussion of performance-making from the perspective of the spectator to that of the practitioner. She offers several categories by which it can be articulated and analysed, which is further explored in Chapter Three. Etchells also uses it to describe a piece of work: 'what the extremes of it as an economy are, what its pleasures are, what its pains are and also working out the weight of things' (TE1: 9). Both examples suggest working, dynamic systems.<sup>48</sup>

## **Characteristics of a solo devising economy**

### Disciplinary contexts

Practitioners work in relation to the specific arts contexts with which they have been affiliated, in their training or professional practice, such as live and visual arts, dance, writing and physical theatre. Each is a 'complex disciplinary system' (Melrose, 2011: 4) with particular languages, aesthetics, geographical locations and histories, which are negotiated and elaborated by its practitioners in different ways. Solo performance practice, if more widely written about and recognised as a context of performance practice could provide a second disciplinary reference point for all solo practitioners, as solo practice includes a wide range of popular and experimental kinds of

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<sup>48</sup> The term 'economy' is more widely applied to systems of very different scale and reach, from the small scale of a house or town to the organisation of global resources and specific kinds of governance. As an analogy, it is also widely used, as in Freud's conception of the human mind as a 'psychic economy' (1966 [1895]: 334). This wide spectrum of application is reflected in recent writings on performance, including for example discussion of 'cultural economies' (Tucker/Abramson, 2007), 'Brechtian economies' (Becker, 2010) or the very specific 'economy of the beard' (Johnstone, 2005) of seventeenth century drama. This last representation, of personal grooming, symbolised specific meanings related to court, commercial and patriarchal economies. It is interesting to me as it involves a very tangible material 'thing' which nonetheless in its materiality holds or encapsulates important ideas, politics and relationships of the time. In the economy of solo devising, I will similarly argue that the apparently small and obvious difference of the individual as distinct from the group can have far-reaching ramifications.

working. A third disciplinary context is also experimental solo theatre practice, including both scripted and non-scripted performance, recently discussed within the notion of postdramatic practice, which is the main aesthetic framework in which I situate my analysis of solo devising and the practitioners' interview material.

### The solo deviser

An individual practitioner as creative maker holds the centre of a solo devising economy, responsible for the overall conceptual and practical realisation of the work, in its making and performance. Most usually, they make and perform the work themselves, as is the case with the solo practice discussed in my sample group. To avoid repetition, I will use the word 'deviser' to indicate solo deviser/performer, unless otherwise stated. Devisers work alone, in solitude, and also with others, in different kinds of collaborative relationships. They are the in-house manager, in rehearsal and performance: 'It was essentially always my vision and always my work but with an unquantifiable contribution from her' (BB1: 22). Baker describes her functionality as solo deviser ('my vision') while simultaneously affirming the large contribution made by her main collaborator, Palona Baloh Brown. Etchells uses a more pragmatic language to signal his role, 'me as a gathering mechanism' (TE1: 5), which still reveals the centrality of his invitation as defining the work. They are involved in every stage of the work, as devisers and performers, although Etchells, Charnock and Houstoun have all devised solo work for other people to perform as well.

The raw material of production in a solo devising economy emerges always at least in part from the devisers themselves. Solo devised work engages strongly with the sensibility of the solo deviser and the work is always in some sense 'autographic' – a kind of self-writing, if not always autobiographic – a writing about their lives. This differentiation is explored in Chapter Two, which I call working 'about, from and beyond the self'. I explore how the practitioners interviewed reveal a self-reflexivity in which they play with creating and performing multiple versions of themselves, and turn this play into performance material.

Solo devisers source their skills from what they are capable of doing, drawing from their experience, practice and expertise or from what they choose to learn. Most solo practitioners are multi-skilled, and this is usually needed to sustain the audience's interest in the work. It gives a particular signature to their work, but this can also be a constraint to experimentation, working alone and in repeated ways. Solo devisers need to employ particular skills and strategies to work beyond their own patterns. Richard Sennett identifies some important expert processes, skills and dispositions manifest in the work of expert craftspeople, and I examine their relevance and applicability to the practitioner interview material, to draw out how expertise is particularly manifest in solo devising activity. This is detailed further on in this chapter (p.95).

### Solo devising activities

I use the term *devising* in this research as a collective term for creative processes used to produce new theatre work, when this does not start from

a script. I have clustered these activities within general category terms: research, the generation of material, composition, collaboration, and performance. These form the focal points of the discussion of Chapter Three. These include processes common to group and solo devising. There are however two central differences between solo and group devising activities, the consequences of which raise a series of specific issues or challenges within each process or activity. This is that the conceptualisation and ongoing vision of the piece of work is the responsibility of the solo deviser. The other is that all of the other activities tend to be carried out and managed by the solo deviser as well – and at times, these activities need to happen simultaneously. I discuss this below as ‘orchestration’.

*Research:* Although the word ‘research’, with its scientific or academic provenance, is not necessarily always explicitly identified as part of devising processes, the activity of exploration and its attendant frame of mind, curiosity, is prevalent. Practitioners reveal frequent examples of gathering new information, very important for solo devisers to enable them to widen their resource base, which is inevitably limited to one person’s knowledge but which also needs to be widely applied across different roles. Both devising and the related activity of improvisation are also investigative, open-ended creative activities, which generate performance material in different ways. They raise challenges for the solo worker in requiring simultaneous immersion and outside perspective on what is being made. ‘Even if you are being baseline, you still need to keep your eye on people. There is no one else doing it’ (WH1: 9). A research process requiring complete handover of control is not possible for solo work: ‘You tend to be

always in control one way or another even if you are pretending not to be' (ibid.), and this is an issue for performance research processes like improvisation which require working with open-ended enquiry, the unexpected or the unknown. The framing of the devising process or improvisation becomes important for solo devisers – controlled experiments with set parameters which paradoxically allow the deviser to exceed them, or be exceeded by them (p.182, p.288).

Alongside research as an activity for gathering knowledge and open-ended, confounding enquiry, solo devisers are also able to indulge particular obsessions, with, as Pearson puts it, 'no slippage' (MP1: 3). They can single-mindedly pursue, investigate and return to highly specific research questions through working with the making of performance as a research process and to do this across several pieces of work. Pearson repeatedly asks explicit, connected questions across his works, related to scale, for example: 'could we make landscape work with one performer?' He investigates this through making *The First Five Miles*, after which the question changes to, 'How might we reproduce some of those landscape experiences from that work – how might we reproduce them in a studio? In a black box?' (MP1: 12). This question is tested in the piece made in the same year, *The Man Who Ate His Boots*, which offers one performed 'answer' to this through using multiple mediated film images.

*Generation of material:* The solo practitioner is accompanied by, as it were, their 'familiar', the 'other' in the room which is their arts practice, often multi-disciplinary in nature. They generate material using their discipline-specific expertise, working with bodies, objects, words, places and space,

various media and technologies, sound and actions. They work with practices of improvisation, creative thinking, and specific intuitive-expert knowledges. The nature of a solo practice in particular is that it needs to be multi-modal in working across various media. Material can also be generated through nonverbal processing, and uninterrupted, solitary thinking. Baker confirms that: 'A lot of those sorts of ideas happen when I am on my own in the kitchen or... actually it is usually in the kitchen' (BB1: 7). In the absence of conversational traffic or multiple thought streams, significant attention can be given to the practitioners' reading of their own thoughts, impulses and intuitive knowledges; Etchells speaks of enjoying being able to 'follow internal logics or thought processes' (TE2: 31).

*Composition:* The solo practitioner controls the shaping of the work as a whole. The personal signature of the practitioner can be inscribed as much in the performance modes, ordering, choice of transitions, tone, texture and weave of the work as in the content. As postdramatic solo work, there are usually several levels of material being engaged in simultaneously.

*Orchestration:* Devising does not unfold in a neat, linear pattern. All devisers work with research, material generation and composition throughout a devising process and often allocate a specific role of dramaturg or director to someone either within or external to the company. Solo devisers most commonly need to switch between these activities without losing a compositional sense of the whole. I describe this particular activity as 'orchestration', with the sense of multiple lines of activity occurring simultaneously, and accentuated or diminished as determined by

the practitioner. At the same time, they also hold a continual (if evolving) vision of the whole piece within them. Orchestration occurs in many different contexts within a solo devising economy, including artistic, social and practical ones.

*Performing:* The intended outcome of all the activities involved in most solo devising is performance, and usually the solo deviser is also the performer of the work – in one sense they *are* the work. The imagined outcome affects the devising process, and at times, this process is intentionally not finished at the point of performance. The performance platform can be used as a testing ground for what is known as 'scratch performance' (work-in-progress) or may be composed intentionally as exploratory processes which unfold in the real time of the performed live event. Etchells fails to translate his thinking into words for the audience in *Downtime*; Pearson has no end for *Bubbling Tom* but simply plans to stop before 'it gets dark' (MP2: 19). It is in these terms that performing is discussed as one activity within a solo devising economy.

*Collaboration:* While inclusion of collaboration may seem like a contradiction in terms, in fact an element of collaboration is a common part of solo devising. Collaboration usually signifies working together, in at least two different ways: ensemble working, where decisions are taken together (Goulish, 2007, Etchells 1999); or working with others in roles (Bicat & Baldwin & Barker, 2002; Roznowski and Domer, 2009). Solo devising involves the latter, with overall conceptual authorship or vision still remaining with the one person. Collaboration is not a consensually agreed



singular activity, however, and these solo devisers speak of engaging with others in a variety of roles, like the expert dramaturg, or interested friend, and at different times during the overall devising trajectory of a piece of work. Equally, different models of collaboration are engaged with, including consensual contribution, collaboration as collision and collaboration as 'self-confounding'. I identify in Chapter Four how these solo devisers practise their own form of eremitage, creating performance wildernesses or deserts which they then have to navigate and at times endure, in performance.

### Relationship to audience

In a solo devising economy, production, distribution and consumption are not necessarily singular or separated activities, but engage a more relational dynamic of exchange, which pluralises the roles individuals take on when engaging in it as both devisers and audiences. As described, the relationship in solo performance between performer and audience is particularly intense, conducted through the use of monologue and the theatron. The interviewees all spoke of making work which allowed for gaps and space in performance, through which they could invite a wide spectrum of audience engagement ranging from dreaming to editing to interrupting to physical participation in the event. This allows authorial power and agency to circulate, introducing performance politics which is discussed further below.

### Working environment

The working environment within a solo devising economy is an elastic one. Rehearsal or practise times and spaces can be varied, with only one

schedule to initially organise, although clearly this is in relation to other boundaries such as professional deadlines or personal commitments. In my interviews, practitioners speak of working in studios, at home, in kitchens, on their bicycles, in cars, while out shopping, walking, and even while in hospital. Solo devisers also frequently characterise working in 'their head' as a familiar rehearsal venue – there is not necessarily a need to translate thinking into words and so a high degree of nonverbal working and processing can occur. A solo devising economy thus admits a wide spectrum of working environments: tangible and mental.

The atmosphere of the solo devising economy emerges as intense, risky and often extreme – a lot is at stake. The practitioner works alone and yet in preparation for facing an audience. They are exposed and vulnerable, as a deviser and performer and yet, in choosing to work alone, also signal confidence. The expectation of a level of virtuosity and the possibility of failure are written into the proposition of solo devising and performing, a kind of testing which can act as a draw for its practitioners.

### Energy, flow, dynamics

As I shall illustrate in later chapters, the solo devising economy affords great pleasure and struggle, risk and reward to its practitioners, in terms of rehearsal, performance and organisational activities. It involves hard work – 'challenge' is Pearson's recurring motif – on every level from creative to administrative working. It invokes extreme experiences in its energies and conditions: Charnock confirms 'When I make a solo I like to completely immerse myself in the whole thing – no distraction. I like it to be total'

(NC1: 14) and yet he also needs the 'voice in my head that said, "ooh for God's sake get on with it"' (19). It's small scale allows for fast-paced working: Baker describes her small scale piece *Ballistic Buns* (2005): 'It was kind of on the edge of chaos but it wasn't. It was completely wonderful' (BB1: 3). Alternatively, for Etchells, solitude offers a calm, uninterrupted environment: 'You literally do have the space to work with what you are working with' (TE2: 31). Solitary working allows the practitioner to focus, but they also need to maintain a diffuse attention, to manage all the other activities happening simultaneously. Analysing the practitioner statements about motivation, organisation and diverse uses of their attention prompted my thinking that a complex ambiguity of experience seems to be one of the solo devising economy's primary operational dynamics, suggesting that the skill of orchestration, of arranging multiple, simultaneous activities as well as managing and dealing with opposing experiences is a vital aptitude for solo practitioners.

### Solo industry

The economy of solo devising is primarily linked to producing, distributing and presenting solo experimental work, and its practitioners operate within specific financial, organisational and cultural contexts. This affects the making, funding, promotion, distribution and recognition of their work.

The Arts Council England,<sup>49</sup> theatre ticket sales, research councils, universities, festivals and non-profit companies and charities all finance experimental solo performance work. In the UK, management companies

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<sup>49</sup> This is the national development agency for the arts in England, distributing government and Lottery funded money.

like the Live Art Development Agency, Artangel or Artsadmin offer administrative and promotional support for the work of individual artists. Houstoun, Baker and Charnock are all associated artists with Artsadmin, for example. There are also several festival platforms, like *InBetweenTime* in Bristol, *Fierce* in Birmingham, *Fix* in Belfast, *Sensitive Skin* in Nottingham and *SPILL* in Ipswich in 2014, which commission and support practitioners. In the UK, long-term funding can be a major issue facing solo practitioners who are not part of companies. The Arts Council holds a national portfolio of ongoing funding, which only includes companies. Individuals are not able to apply for this, although they can access smaller project-related amounts from Grants for the Arts, research boards and the British Council. While Live Art has received considerable support in terms of funding, platforms for work, festivals and pedagogical training environments in universities (Klein & Heddon, 2012), this has not focused on solo practice.

The commercial valuing of solo work can also be problematic, which either may not be perceived as 'good value' for an evening's entertainment (one person, and often one hour or under in length) or alternatively, as 'cheaper' because of an assumption of lone practice.<sup>50</sup> The effect of this can be identified at least in part by the fact that none of my interviewees identified themselves as working exclusively solo. Like most practitioners, they negotiate working in a variety of different contexts and make use of multiple streams of income in order to make and perform work and sustain

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<sup>50</sup> Bryony Kimmings, a 'mid'-career solo practitioner, wrote a recent blog in which she itemised the cost of performing a piece of small-scale work, which although not solo, included only herself and her niece. The cost of it was not matched in any way by the fee paid by the theatre; in fact she says that theatres often expect practitioners to be applying for and receive top-up funding from the Arts Council. See [thebryonykimmings.tumblr.com/post/67660917680/you-show-me-yours](http://thebryonykimmings.tumblr.com/post/67660917680/you-show-me-yours)

a creative life over time. The difficulty of choosing to remain an independent solo artist, financially, was revealed by Houstoun's response to my last question, inviting her own question: 'how to finance a coherent creative life' (WH1: 19); and this was in spite of her long experience and full career as a well-known dancer, choreographer and physical theatre practitioner (WH1: 19). Of all the interviewees, she was the only practitioner not allied to a larger company or organisation, or leading her own company. It is evident from my small sample that solo practitioners most usually need to connect to wider networks to sustain their practice.

### The politics of solo devising

The choice to work solo, in the collaborative discipline of theatre practice, invites a discussion of the politics of solo working. Solo devising, involving individual invention or performance-making can attract different ideological assumptions in theatre to those made about solo artists or dancers. As well as the shared ones: of genius or 'originality', 'going solo' in theatre can be viewed as being concerned with display or as self-indulgent.

As discussed, some of these ideological associations date back to Renaissance developments of the individual artist and into late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic discourses about innate genius and divine inspiration, in particular writers and thinkers of the time.<sup>51</sup> Poststructuralist and postmodern thinking has since problematised ideas of originality, arguing for the inter-connected nature of creativity. Sennett (2008) discusses in

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<sup>51</sup> As Higgins (2005) comments, there was unprecedented interest in the topic of genius and creative thinking, in the Romantic work of Shelley, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley and Austen and its counter-tales in the Gothic novels of Anne Radcliffe and Shelley.

detail the different perceptions attached to the idea of 'art' and 'craft', arguing against the notion of a binary of forms and instead inviting consideration of the way that expertise or skill is developed through patient practise, creating 'good work' in a variety of domains: 'Craftsmanship cuts a far wider swathe than skilled, manual labour: it serves the computer programmer, the doctor, and the artist' (2008: 9). I intentionally apply a materialist language, of 'labour', 'economy', 'work' to explore solo devising as a craft, re-introducing the discussion of individual expertise and its relationship to repeated professional practice and working over time. This grounding of expertise in practised skills and dispositions not only demystifies notions of inherent talent but also sheds light on individual vocation. Personal motivations for working solo articulated by my sample group revolved around enjoyments of particularity, detail, individual working on the small scale that solo devising allows – an enjoyment of crafting with precision, as opposed to spectacular display or self-promotion

The consistent omission of solo devising from discussions of postdramatic performance-making misses the possibility of engaging with the political issues raised in this practice, about the relationship between the individual and the group, and about authorship and ownership of intellectual property in relation to collaborative working. These themes are evident in the practical issues like the challenge of accurately crediting roles between Baker and Baloh Brown (p.275) and in the artistic practices of undoing monologic speaking and singular authorship, and instead working with multi-vocal montage, as evident in Etchells and Houstoun's practices. In this study, 'going solo' does reveal practitioners enjoying the pleasure of

working with individual arts practices, where deeply held, individual beliefs can be pursued, described by Houstoun as 'personal manifesto' (WH1: 15). At the same time, these solo devisers also work with the collaboration and consensual engagement of other people, in making and performance contexts. This is not work which focuses on political topics but rather problematises the politics of relationships. The stakes are high as solo work commonly gives a significant degree of visibility and centrality to the solo performer, as Pearson identifies: 'One of the delights of solo performance and one of the terrifying things is that you are completely in charge' (MP2: 12). Solo devisers instead displace the centrality of their individual roles: Etchells changes from author to editor in *Instructions For Forgetting* by acting as a 'collecting agency' (TE1: 7) for other people's stories; Pearson speaks of his audio work *Carrlands* as offering choice to the audience to download and use files on site or at home – one example of 'responsibility transferring to the spectator' (MP2: 1). Charnock occupies the opposite end of this spectrum in relation to the sharing of activity or attention created in performance. He intentionally remains at the centre of the work, virtuosically entertaining while using the performance power he is given to provoke, inspire and harass an audience. Through different means, offering a kind of exquisite irritation, he also invites debate about power, responsibility and action in his work.

## Expert crafting: processes, skills and dispositions

In analysing these practitioner theories or statements, Richard Sennett's work proved particularly useful. Writing from the tradition of American pragmatism, *The Craftsman* (2008) is his first book in a trio he calls "the

*homo faber* project", drawing on the ancient idea of Man as his or her own maker – a maker of life through concrete practices' (2012: X).<sup>52</sup> Although Sennett discusses ideas derived from the different context of design and the consequent making of tangible things as opposed to intangible performances, he himself suggests that connections can be made between these realms: 'all techniques contain expressive implications' (2008: 290) and his work includes much that is pertinent to devising. His central delineation of *Homo faber* and the skills and attitudes that enable expert, skillful making are relevant to my analysis of what solo devising expertise consists of. The craftspeople he discusses work individually and alongside others, which is useful for this study of solo working. And finally his connection of skilled working to a political practice based in ethical behaviour is also useful for a discussion of the particular kind of politics emerging from these solo devisers' work (p.146, p.302).

Sennett's case studies range from the design of the Stradivarius violin to the titanium walls of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, children's parks in Amsterdam to Diderot's *Encyclopaedia*. He specifically offers three observed processes as repeatedly manifest in his study of the working of successful and skilled craft makers – 'localising', 'questioning' and opening up – which I also observed as mobilised within my interviewees' articulations about their solo making.

Localising involves 'making a matter concrete' (277) and is a kind of 'power to specify where something important is happening' (278). In devising

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<sup>52</sup> Sennett uses both the singular Man to include man and woman and 'his and her' to be more inclusive. I will use both terms when possible, but follow his usage when directly citing his words.



contexts, this can translate as the ability to give disciplinary form to ideas or themes, and to also make precise decisions about making work that communicates and is relevant (usable) to the audience it is made for and with. I read Etchells's precision work with words as a form of localising: 'you know that there is a certain something in that combination of words, in that rhythm and that tone of voice that conjure something quite vivid. You know that it takes people to another place' (TE1: 16). This is also true for how these practitioners work with precise movement, (Houstoun and Charnock) tone (Pearson) or object (Baker). It is also true of the multiple decisions made when generating material through improvisation, for example, where localising means being able to recognise when specific material chanced upon is important, generative and can usefully be developed. Localising, applied to solo devising involves making work which is relevant to an audience. Sennett writes of expert craftspeople locating 'specifically where a material, a practice or a problem matters' (287). In performance, this question of what 'matters' is decided by artist and audience, and knowing this when making is part of an expert solo deviser's skill base. For example, Houstoun summarises her role as an artist to be to 'localise' her response to the world around her: 'an ongoing negotiation, trying to understand what is happening' (WH1: 11). Houstoun translates what is occurring in the wider cultural context, ('ongoing negotiation') and is able to make creative work from this.

Sennett's second term, 'questioning', implies a basic curiosity and a desire 'to investigate the locale' (279). He describes this as manifest through an ongoing process of problem-solving and problem-finding, and as continuous.

He locates curiosity as a fundamental attitudinal drive, described physiologically as 'dwelling in an incipient state: the pondering brain is considering its circuit options' (279). Resolution and decision is suspended. One can draw clear parallels with devising as a process of making through posing questions, and more specifically in the different activities which are engaged with in solo devising practices. These include research processes based on the reiteration of 'problems', where 'obsession' is allowed and the opportunity that solo working allows to return repeatedly to those questions. The use of experiment and improvisation as techniques, which generate material also work through open-ended questioning. Sennett also identifies specific techniques of resisting closure and working with ambiguity (231), complexity (225) and resistance (215), which allow for this continuous questioning state to be fostered when devising.

Another way to frame curious questioning is to have the ability to 'play': to suspend rational thinking, and engage in open-ended, curious exploration of the local environment and what it might contain. While some pre-determined shaping of the work does take place, within these frameworks the work develops through processes of experiment, improvisation and a testing which is not pre-determined, and such an approach requires the ability to fail, resist closure and let go of material. I observed this process of questioning operate in different ways, but present in all the practitioners' motivations and working processes of performance-making.

Sennett's third critical ability is the 'opening up' of a problem, which draws, he argues, on being able to shift between domains of activity and

knowledge: 'shifting one's sphere of habit to another. So elemental is this ability that its importance is often slighted' (279). According to him, 'tacit' knowledge and rational decision making are all-important processes used by craftspeople to facilitate working with a problem. Tacit knowledge, introduced and written about by Michael Polanyi (1958, 1967), is pertinent to this enquiry into solo creativity as it describes personal knowledge arrived at through working, connected to traditions of knowledge. A different nuance of this definition was later developed which connected it more to intuitive practices, signifying knowledge which is primarily inexpressible in physical practice (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). Sennett applies this interpretation: 'people know how to do something but they cannot put what they know into words' (2008: 94). My interviewees repeatedly spoke of their making processes as drawing on embodied skill developed through experience, in which they include being guided by intuitive and rational knowledges. This ability to shift roles is vital for the solo deviser, who needs to be maker, director, dramaturg, designer, writer and performer.

Sennett also identifies numerous dispositions and practical skills which he observed to be in operation in the working of his expert designers. Dispositional attitudes include curiosity, openness, allowing failure, innocence, managing obsession, resisting closure and allowing ambiguity. Practical skills include making something work, the ability to experiment, let go of material and critique what you have made, translate making from head to hand, make more complex, create a staged process, the ability to collaborate and work with resistance. Listed in this way, the aforementioned

etymological meaning of expertise as being about trying and testing out (p.25), as highlighted by Melrose (2011: 11) gathers detail and further nuance. I will discuss one example in detail and return to others when writing about specific practitioner examples over the next three chapters.

Sennett observes expert designers working with different kinds of resistance and difficulty. He describes 'resistance' as occurring externally, for example in the knot in a piece of wood or finding mud in the foundations of a building, which, when encountered, need to be worked with and around. Importantly, for this study, he also speaks of working with self-created resistance: 'we make things difficult for ourselves. We do so because easy and lean solutions often conceal complexity' (222). He illustrates what he means through detailing the work of Frank Gehry, who designed the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. The location was complex, surrounded by roads and requiring a flexible yet strong material for building around obstacles. Aesthetically he wanted a material which would break up the light reflected on the building, a quilted metal, but could not use copper as it was toxic, or steel, because it did not reflect the light in the way he wanted. After much work requiring a re-design of the rollers to make the sheets of metal, he used rolled titanium of a third of a millimetre thick. The process required him to rethink his attitude to structure, stability and strength – the thin titanium proving to be more flexible and durable than granite, which deteriorates with pollution. The difficulties he encountered made him rethink nothing less than 'the nature of soundness' (225).

Choosing to devise solo, as opposed to working in a group, or working with other kinds of solo practice, is to choose a difficult kind of making. Pearson demonstrated this: 'There is nothing else, just you and that thing to be delivered. And if it is appalling, then the only person you have to blame, in a way, is you' (MP1: 7). Why would someone choose to work alone, have to engage in multiple skilled working, negotiate doubt and suspicion and choose to be responsible for the entire project? Over the next three chapters, I explore how these practitioners negotiate the knots and pragmatic difficulties of working alone (loneliness, loss of perspective, needing multiple skills), deploying different strategies of working (engaging oneself in conversation, trusting intuitive and expert knowledge, managing and inviting collaboration) which, through working processes of negotiation, listening, disruption, failure and testing, suggest a rethinking of the very nature of 'one-ness' and creative processing itself.

Sennett's approach stresses the inter-connection of creative making and thinking: 'all skills, even the most abstract, begin as bodily practices [...] technical understanding develops through the powers of the imagination' (10). Makers in design and solo performance have to use multiple creative techniques, located in the body, mind, and imagination. Sennett also stresses how 'good' working translates into 'good' interpersonal relating: 'Both the difficulties and possibilities of making things well apply to making human relationships' (289). Solo devising involves making a well-crafted piece of performance and part of that crafting relies on the relationships it works with and through. In solo devising, making an effective piece of work is intrinsically related to making effective relationships with people. I

discuss this in relation to how these interviewees work with themselves, with other collaborators and with their audiences.

## Devising

### Nomenclature

In the UK, making new theatre that does not originate from a pre-existing script is most often known as devising, emerging from practices often connected to the politicised collective theatre-making and ensemble work prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s. In the USA, the term 'collaborative creation' was and is much more frequently used (Heddon, 2006: 2), devising only being used or applied to the work there in the last decade; (Harvey and Allain, 2013: 77, Bailes, 2010: 89). In France, the term 'création collective' (Bradby, 1984: 142) is the only phrase available. Heddon points out the different nuances of meanings contained in these terms: notably for this research conceding that the word devising does not necessarily suggest more than one person doing it, whereas the terms 'collaborative' or 'collective' commonly suggest a group activity: 'devised performance does not have to involve collaborators' (3). However, these terms, 'devised' and 'collaborative' (co-labour), are still almost exclusively associated with group working. Mermikides and Smart (2010), for example, despite quoting and relying on Heddon's (2008) ideas, can boldly write: 'devising, though, is a group activity and one that contests the model of the singular creative artist' (1). Radosavljević (2013: 62) considers the term to be out-dated, using 'Theatre-Making' in her book title and advising a 'departure' from the word devising due to its link with ensemble working.

However, she argues that this is because it is considered to be opposed to text-based work, or working with writers, which is confusing for international practitioners who frequently work with devising processes and text. Her argument is not with devising being an assumed group practice. Similarly, Parsons assumes the adjective in her book, titled *Group Devised Theatre* (2010) to also define the practice: 'Devised Theatre refers to the process of creative collaboration by a group of performers' (8). However, as I will go on to argue, although these and other generic works on devising primarily focus on groups who devise, there is nothing in their writing about the creative processes carried out, or indeed in the politics contained therein, which necessarily excludes the possibility of addressing the solo deviser. Radosavljević concludes her initial discussion of devising by arguing that the binary of text/performance is not the main issue at stake with devised theatre, but 'the notion of shifting authority' (82). As already discussed, authority, individuality and its displacement are part of the work carried out by the solo devisers studied in this thesis.

The meaning of the word 'devise', as applied to theatre practice, most commonly includes describing work which engages with design, planning or conceptualising and practical making or invention (OED, devise, v.). Harvey and Lavender (2010) emphasise the latter process in their book title '*Making Contemporary Theatre*' (my italics) in which they discuss international rehearsal processes. They do however write that all of the work is 'devised and globally produced' (11). I read their choice of title as related to an awareness of geographical differences in nomenclature, given the internationalism of their case studies (Robert Lepage, Sidi Larbi

Cherkaoui, New York City Players and Blowback Theatre), rather than the authors wanting to only discuss pragmatic doing (making) over thinking or planning (devising). The groups in these case studies reveal persistent conceptual activity as part of their making of theatre (10, 109, 140, 212).

## Definition

Although practitioners were engaged in devising and limited writing about it from late in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s in the UK, it was not until 1994 that Alison Oddey began to define it in writing:

Devising can start from anything. It is determined and defined by a group of people who set up an initial framework or structure to explore and experiment with ideas, images, concepts, themes or specific stimuli that might include music, text, objects, paintings or movement. A devised theatrical performance originates with the group while making the performance, rather than starting from a play text that someone else has written. (1)

For Oddey, in its early stages, devising was characterised by group authorship taking place in rehearsal and an open, interdisciplinary making process. She stressed the conscious politics of this kind of theatre-making where authorial and directorial power and how the work was conceptualised and shaped were shared among the group rather than remaining under the control of a playwright or director. Historically, the culture that gave rise to group devising in Euro-American performance had strong connections to the protest culture of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, connected to specific global, cultural crises. These were politically complex and it is not possible to do justice to them in this limited space. But one of their effects was to create conditions for an upsurge in groups working together, which underlined the power of the collective and were imbued with beliefs about democracy,



freedom, non-hierarchical structure and participation for all. This was in opposition in the theatre to practices where the authority to make decisions rested with managers, directors and authors and to a professionalisation of the practice that suggested only an elite could make art. In Britain, devising originally became part of a practice associated with ideas of cultural democracy, linked to the growth of community theatre groups, theatre in education and mainstream professional political theatre practice.<sup>53</sup>

However, at the time of writing this first book on devising, Oddey was already acknowledging that devising's original links with oppositional and democratic politics were changing. In particular, she noted that its practitioners were again taking on specific roles as opposed to the co-operative, ensemble method of working and living common to its initiators.

Heddon and Milling, although writing on devising over twelve years later in 2006, still maintain Oddey's original definition of a working process which begins without a script; they offer as definition: 'creating performance from scratch' (3). However, Steven Graham and Steven Hoggett, co-directors of the physical theatre company Frantic Assembly, do not agree that a piece of work starts from nothing, in rehearsal, but rather locate its genesis with the production team: 'It may take years for an idea to get into a rehearsal room and before this it has been batted back and forth between the directors, and presented to producers and other collaborators' (2009: 5). Harvie also suggests that devising is 'a method of performance development that starts

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<sup>53</sup> Examples of UK-based political companies include Agitprop Street Players/Red Ladder (1968); CAST (1967); the Bradford Art College Theatre Group (1971); John McGrath and 7: 84 (1971); Women's Theatre Group (1975); Monstrous Regiment (1975); Siren Theatre (1979); Gay Sweatshop (1975); Graeae (1980); and Split Britches (1980).

from an idea or concept rather than a play text' (2010: 2). Radosavljević argues that although devising has come to be associated with non-text based working, increasingly companies like Kneehigh, Complicite, Frantic Assembly and Punchdrunk are working with adaptation *and* devising in creating their performance work (82). Although the interviewees do not discuss working with adaptations in their solo practices, they do often work from known beginnings: Charnock with 'huge big themes like life and death and love and God' (NC1: 18); Pearson and Etchells pose a series of compositional questions across their works (p.162).

Heddon and Milling, along with later writers on devising focus on discussing the plurality of practices and processes that devising incorporates: it is 'best understood as a set of strategies' (2) – or as Govan, Nicholson and Normington (2007) stress, a set of activities involving 'the practice of generating, shaping and editing new material into an original performance' (6). Guy Claxton (2006) also shies away from defining any creative process as a 'set of well defined and linearly arranged stages' (in Bannerman 2006: 66), but opts for 'a number of dimensions along which people may vary' (ibid.). Mermikides and Smart (2010) abandon any attempt at generic definitions of devising, instead again preferring to examine concrete examples of practice through eight case studies about different devising processes. They also include discussion of its gradual historical shift, from radical practice in the 1960s to 'orthodoxy' in the 1990s, noting its widespread use by theatre companies who have crossed into mainstream

venues and funding in the UK and Europe and its teaching in syllabuses in school and university curriculums.<sup>54</sup>

Several other books discuss the work of specific companies and are collaborations between practitioners and scholars, so offering more detail about creative processes including devising. These include Graham and Hoggett (2014), Lavery and Williams (2011), Wetherall and Brown (2007), and Goulish and Bottoms (2007). There is also a wealth of material which addresses live and performance art, and which includes discussion of a wide range of solo practitioners' work, also from critical and practice-based perspectives (Jones & Heathfield, 2012; Hill & Paris, 2004; Svich, 2003, Heathfield & Etchells, 2000).<sup>55</sup> They are a useful resource in highlighting the wider context of solo performance makers who make and articulate working practices across art, performance and theatre. The focus tends to be on discussing the work made as opposed to the making processes, but there is some inclusion of practitioners' texts, process notes and interviews with solo practitioners about their making. These works do not use the term 'devising' to describe the creative processes explored within them, either by

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<sup>54</sup> This trajectory is perhaps not surprising. In the final chapter of his book *Avant-Garde Theatre: 1892-1992* (1993: 215), Christopher Innes documents how this move towards assimilation of radical practice is historically common. This does not necessarily mean it has to lose its political efficacy, only that how it operates and for whom, has changed and will continue to do so.

<sup>55</sup> There are also collections such as the Critical Performance Series, where academic Gabrielle Cody co-writes with Annie Sprinkle *Hardcore from the Heart: the Pleasures, Profits and Politics of Creative Sexual Expression – Annie Sprinkle Solo* (2001). The aim of this series is to conduct a dialogue, where academic discourse is elucidated and performance artists' texts published. Another series published by *Performance Art Journal* is called 'Art and Performance', which includes Deborah Jowitt editing a volume on Meredith Monk (2011) and Moira Roth editing Rachel Rosenthal in *Rachel Rosenthal* (1997). Jowitt collects together diverse writings from Monk, including journal entries, rehearsal notes, a mission statement, 'process notes' on works like *Portable* (1966), and essay writings from both Monk and other academics. Roth's book on Rosenthal includes a number of extended interviews with her, as well as critical and historical essays. These writings offer a small amount of discussion of the practitioner's making processes.

the scholars or practitioners themselves, but frequently suggest engagement with many strategies and processes associated with it.

The long lasting association of devising as inevitably linked to group practice, particularly in the UK, is understandable because of the strength of the original collective political ideologies out of which it arose. Ultimately, however, this is not inscribed into its etymology or working processes. What have endured as fundamental features of devised work are the insistence on creating at least some new materials and the inclusion of a wide diversity of approaches, activities which my interviewees also engage in. I will examine more closely the specific kinds of approaches outlined.

### Creative processes in devising

Central making processes that Oddey introduced in relation to devising practices continue to be revisited in later writings which specifically focus on devising as a topic. On a broad level these include improvisation, research, discussion, collaboration, and an interdisciplinary use of materials. They are applied to a number of different contexts. Bicat and Baldwin (2002) write about how devising involves different collaborative relationships between a number of specific roles, including performer, director, designer, composer and stage management. Heddon and Milling (2006) analyse devising within different contemporary performance genres, including for example devising with visual performance, physical performance, postmodern performance and political performance amongst others. Govan et al (2007) choose to focus their argument on how devising occurs in relation to engagement with different theatre materials and contexts: place, space, body and virtual

bodies. In all of these cases, there is a notable lack of study of solo working or European companies.

Books which address 'création collective' include David Bradby's *Modern French Drama 1940-1990* (1984), *Mise en Scène – French Theatre Now* (1997) and *Le Théâtre en France de 1968 à 2000* (2007), as well as David Williams's *Collaborative Theatre: Le Théâtre du Soleil* (1999). These books offer detailed case study work, the discussion of practices and issues arising from the particular constituency of the group, its location, interests, who the devisers are, who their audiences are and the forms they are choosing to work with.

More recent written work also focuses on case studies of particular companies, including deliberation of making processes as well as performed works. These are written by people who attend, and at times participate in the rehearsal processes themselves, as dramaturgs, witnesses and writers (Williams & Lavery, 2011; Lavender and Harvie, 2010). This is participatory working, as opposed to reading backwards from the observed performed work, which Melrose calls a partial reading, (2011: 3). Lavender and Harvie's intention to address a wide spectrum of work is evident in their aim to reveal 'what happens in rehearsal in the making of significant contemporary theatre' (1), and their collection includes writing on eleven groups who devise, drawn from Europe, the USA and the UK. Detailed devising activities are observed and documented through the witnessing and 'case study' approach, allowing for a more specific analysis of compositional processes such as 'undoing dance' in the work of Elevator

Repair Service (Bailes, 89), 'drawing in time' in Sidi Larbi performances (Cope, 57), or 'making words heard' in the work of Complicité (Alexander, 59). However, the omission of the study of solo 'rehearsal' processes is notable.

A companion book of rehearsal processes from 'significant contemporary solo theatre makers' might include for example the texturing of presence of Marina Abramovic, the recipe painting of Bobby Baker, the writing on the floor of Wendy Houstoun or the verbal self-confounding of Etchells. The absence of such work occurs for aesthetic, practical and ideological reasons which I map throughout this research. To summarise, these include associations of contemporary solo work with performance art, which places solo postdramatic theatre and its making into collections which have an art rather than theatre focus; or conversely the association of solo work with scripted monodramas (verbal, autobiographical, one act 'plays'), and therefore its rehearsal processes not being of relevance to contemporary postdramatic discussions. Equally, solo working is often perceived as individual, whereas my interviewees reveal an engagement with collaborators at various stages in their devising processes p.251).

Elaine Aston and Gerry Harris (2008) are among the first academics to collect together, in *performance practice and process: contemporary [women] practitioners (sic)* (2008), several case studies of solo contemporary performance and theatre-makers. They include discussion of how these practitioners devise work with their primary chosen mediums: Bobby Baker with performance art (21), SuAndi with performance poetry

(66), Vayu Naidu with storytelling (141). Their primary focus is on artists who are engaged with 'gender resistant practice' (1). The high proportion of women working solo within this category is for them a highly relevant issue but ultimately only briefly mentioned and not the focus of the book.

They also include discussion of one issue particularly relevant for solo making, namely the lack of what they call a 'support system' but do not engage in any detailed discussion of the many kinds of collaborative working and support that solo devisers can have access to and regularly use. Nonetheless, Aston and Harris's book is very useful in discussing some workshop and devising processes of a number of specific solo practitioners.

Guy Claxton offers a particularly relevant model for discussing solo devising practices in relation to the use of different kinds of attention. He creates a conceptual, three-dimensional box called the 'Glide Space of Creativity' (in Bannerman, 2008: 67), which contains three different dimensions of attention. He describes these as concerned with focus (diffuse and concentrated); direction (outward or inward); and interaction (solitary and sociable). Different 'mental modes' can be described by combining specific aspects of each of these dimensions. The 'mental modes' he lists include scrutinising, group studying, hard thinking, arguing, contemplating, group chatting, reverie/dreaming and dialogue/reflective conversation. Claxton's taxonomy is relevant for this research in that it maps out the solo, as well as group deviser's mental activities. His list of 'mental modes' echoes and extends my observations about a high level of contemplative, reflective thinking carried out by the solo practitioners (p.210. p.225).

I have selected some of the more generic and recurrent activities as intentionally broad categories in which to explore and apply the specific ways these practitioners work with them as solo making processes and strategies in Chapter Three. These include, for example, 'improvising, editing, writing, designing, structuring, choreographing and rehearsing' (Heddon, 2006: 9); and 'playing, editing, rehearsing, researching, designing, writing, scoring, choreographing, discussion and debate' (Govan, Nicholson & Normington, 2007: 7). Claxton's work has offered support in adding to these the different kinds of creative thinking which emerged as important in the interviews, including nonverbal processing and intuitive working.

I have also found the term 'shaping' to be an appropriate way to describe the malleable, multi-dimensional working that needs to occur in the compositional process, as have others, including Heddon:

the practice of generating, shaping and editing material into an original performance remains a central dynamic of devised performance. (2006: 6)

and Mermikides:

generation of initial ideas; exploration and development of ideas; shaping of material into a structured piece; performance and production; reflection. (2010: 22)

From the above definitions, I make the following observations:

- a) Devising developed historically as a making practice connected to beliefs about creative potential of all people, and was linked to democratic politics and group working. However, there is nothing inherent in it as a set of creative theatre-making practices that



excludes solo devising from being considered as one generative context out of which new theatre work is made.

- b) In writings on devising, some grouping into discipline-specific making processes (such as writing, choreographing, designing for example) and more generic processes involving discussion, composition and improvisation are mentioned. Given the plurality and diversity of practices within these latter generic categories, they only become meaningful when written about in relation to specific companies or case studies. I will therefore apply them to my delineation of solo devising, in particular relation to the five interviewees' solo devising processes explored throughout the thesis.
- c) Performance is a creative process within devising. Mermikides's definition includes the acknowledgement that when the work is an event- or site-based piece, it is further created through the 'event' of performance. Both Pearson's solo work in *The First Five Miles* and *Bubbling Tom* and Etchells's in *Downtime* and *Words and Pictures* demonstrate examples of making through performance. I have ordered Chapter Three into these headings, including exploration, material generation, composition and performance.
- d) Solo devising also includes collaborative working, but like devising, is not perceived to engage with it. I examine in Chapter Four the ways in which collaboration occurs as part of solo devising. 'Group' pieces of work are also, with the use of the Internet, being created by solo makers working remotely: alone, but connected. Examples include Tim Etchells and Adrian Heathfield's *The Long Relay* (2008) and Barbara Campbell's durational writing project *1001 Nights Cast*

(2008).<sup>56</sup> The solo writer engages in both solo and group composing processes, offering in but not in the shared space of a rehearsal room. Making takes place instead in the virtual space of the Internet.

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<sup>56</sup> Campbell's work skilfully highlights specifically the particularities of the 'solo' performance economy: inviting in multiple authors, yet including her singular performances of a live reading (her mouth only visible via live feed), incorporating performance remains through archiving. The question of authorship in Campbell's work is destabilised and pluralised, with Campbell nonetheless maintaining a very particular role as a solo performer (as well as inviter and trigger).

## Chapter Two: Doing and undoing notions of the 'self'

In the previous chapter I discussed the complexity of 'solo' as a term. 'Here I take up the theme of 'self' as a related and similarly multi-layered proposition.<sup>57</sup> Notions of the self are highly complex on cultural, psychological, political and historical levels and here, I can do no more than touch upon some of the salient issues that pertain to solo devising practice.

Solo postdramatic devising most frequently includes the individual as a creator and a performer of the work: the deviser as both presence and 'present' in front of an audience.<sup>58</sup> Solo work, with just the one performer, can frame an exploration of presence in particular ways, to explore and problematise individuality, notions of selfhood and the co-presence of the audience as individuals and group. It is for this reason that I have introduced the expression and titled this chapter 'doing and undoing notions of the self'. This coincides with the wider cultural and theoretical challenge to the idea of individuality that has been an important feature of poststructuralist thought.

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<sup>57</sup> A full genealogy of constructions of the self is beyond the scope of this enquiry. A useful mapping of key configurations is carried out by Linda Anderson in *Autobiography (2010)*, including the work of St Augustine, Descartes, Rousseau, Freud, Barthes and through to poststructuralist thinking.

<sup>58</sup> Postdramatic theatre, as Lehmann reminds us, is a 'theatre of the present' (143), of the live theatre situation and the presence and co-presence of performers and audience. Presence itself is understood as a process, 'something that happens', not as a fixed state of being, which Lehmann reminds us is illusory. Presence, like the present, is in transition, disappearing and has a relationship to death, 'an absence, as an already leaving' (144). Although Peggy Phelan is not cited, her work specifying theatre as working with 'presence' and its necessary ephemerality – always being in process in the liveness of the moment (1993, 1997) – is clearly relevant. Her idea of liveness as a defining characteristic of theatre has been contested in writings about the use of technology and documentation in performance (Auslander, 2006; Schneider, 2001; Jones, 1997). However, as Lehmann demonstrates, her concept of live presence as an important part of theatre work still holds, and these solo devisers explore the nature of it in diverse ways.

The interviewees in this study work with identity as a set of processes, creating and deconstructing version of self. Charnock's work is rooted in the personal: 'All of the other solos were about this person, Nigel Charnock, making something' as well as aiming 'to get out of the way' (NC1: 9). Houstoun reads Etchells's performer presence as more visible through an authoring process where he absents himself, when she speaks about his solos *Instructions for Forgetting* and *In the Event*: 'There is something about those formats that I think expose the individual in a multiple way that I think is really interesting and is more about solo than one person getting up and doing a solo' (WH1: 18). Etchells suggested Eva Meyer Keller's self-representation in her solo installation *Death is Certain* (2002) is admirable precisely for being open to definition by her audience, as opposed to being obviously self-defined. She performs her presence as 'a kind of blankness, a refusal, which means that as a viewer you are very active' (TE1: 15).

This conversation about the solo performer who is present and yet intentionally absent characterises one of a number of ambiguities that continued to emerge throughout this analysis of solo devising. These are also present in group devised work but are not necessarily as obvious, due to the particular defining feature of solo practice involving a 'oneness' which is also 'not one'. Ambiguity is perhaps commonly perceived as a kind of behaviour which is open to multiple kinds of interpretations, although there are many levels at which it can be discussed and different ways that it operates. Literary critic William Empson has written a seminal text on it, in

which he defines seven types of ambiguity.<sup>59</sup> In solo devising, ambiguity can be discerned in relation to the creation of multiple performer presence(s), the contradictory skills required, paradoxical creative activities needing to be engaged in, the temporal, spatial and sonic challenges of the solo devising working environment, the extreme performance dynamics and multiple audiences' perceptions of what solo performance involves and consists of.

David George (1999) takes up this notion of ambiguity in postmodern performance theory and reminds us of how 'duplicity' has always been at play in a variety of performance forms. A shifting between different states is not new – he cites Richard Schechner's argument that performer training is based on 'permitting the performer to act in between identities [...] a paradigm of liminality' (Schechner, 1983: 189). George defines ambiguity as being where 'two possibilities co-exist in an unresolved dialectical tension', (72) and he sees it as operating on many levels within performance systems, including in performance, rehearsal, the material performed, the forms worked with and the audience experience. He draws on a wide range of examples, including the co-existence of dualities like the actor's self and the role performed, the play of identifications within this by actors like Monroe or Madonna or the interventions of directors like Stanislavski into Chekhov's writing, to allow for difference between what is said and done. He sees Noh Theatre as a strong example of multiple

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<sup>59</sup> His contents page lists them as chapter headings, summarised as: 1. When a detail is effective in several ways at once. 2. Two or more meanings are resolved into one. 3. Two apparently unconnected meanings are given at once. 4. Alternative meanings combine to make a complex state of mind apparent. 5. A fortunate confusion, when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing. 6. A contradictory or irrelevant idea, forcing the reader to invent connections. 7. Full contraction, marking a division in the author's mind. (Empsom, 2004: vi).

ambiguities: the performer works with a stamping of the feet and a quiet upper body (physical), a young girl is played by an old man whose jowls are visible underneath the mask (visual), the sound of the performance makes clear the stillness in it (dynamic) (1999: 76). He also names the latter 'basic' ontological ambiguities in performance, where multiple times and spaces are at play: 'all performance creates a here which is not 'here', a now which is not 'now', restlessly slicing time and space into layers of difference' (74). An audience is equally experienced at participating in 'spectatorial' ambiguity, familiar with negotiating between at least two worlds.

George identifies two main types of ambiguous working: simultaneous and successive. An example of successive working includes Olivier's description of Marilyn Monroe as having 'the extraordinary gift of being able to suggest one moment that she is the naughtiest little thing and the next that she is perfectly innocent'.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, Japanese Noh performance is experienced as offering simultaneous, paradoxical ambiguity: 'In Silla, in the dead of the night, the sun shines brightly (Zeami, describing the supreme Noh performance)' (ibid.). Put in another way, ambiguity works as one and then the other, or simultaneously as one and the other.

What is at stake in the use of ambiguity, in solo devising in particular? What affect might it have? George suggests that ambiguity can be used as a 'tool' in performance, undoing dualistic thinking based on the privileging of one state over another, and instead deploying 'the radical and fundamental

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<sup>60</sup> Commonly known as the Madonna/whore binary, another reductive fantasy.

creation of difference' (76). Multiple dualities are not resolved, but are instead suspended, left unresolved, a tension created which George identifies as a potential source of enjoyment for performers and audiences: 'Unresolved dualisms arouse us most intellectually and emotionally' (77). This develops the idea of 'entertainment' as easy spectacle to be consumed into a response requiring the holding together (*entre-tenir*) or entwinement of opposing meanings or experiences, which leaves 'contradictions gapingly open', in a 'static dynamic' of concentrated energy described by Zeami as 'flower moments' (*ibid.*) What is at stake and questioned in solo devising is the very nature of individuality in relation to the group and an invitation to audiences to participate in this exploration. In this chapter, I explore this in relation to how these solo devisers create ambiguous representations of themselves in performance.

Pearson (2001, 2006), Etchells (1999) and Baker (2008) all also contend with issues of identity and self in their writing. Pearson discusses performance as a set of multiple practices, 'elusive', 'in between' and 'temporary' (2001: 15), the past as unstable, contested and plural, and archaeology (his original training) as a kind of *poiesis* rather than an uncovering of original 'truth'.

In *Certain Fragments* (1999), Etchells contrasts his students' model of their authorial selves as derived from single, authentic voices and his company's work with incoherent selves, stolen and sampled: 'a collection of texts, quotations, strategies and accidental speakings' (101) which are refashioned through writing. Similarly he offers his narrative 'I' as a site

rather than an essential authorial being: 'a space in which collisions take place' (102). Again, this has implications for how he works and constructs versions of himself in his solo performance. In the many writings and essays by and about Baker, her performance persona as 'Bobby Baker', with multiple, layered, conflicting selves, is repeatedly discussed (Heddon, 2008: 40, Harris 1999: 137).

All the interviewees create layered representations of performed selfhood, and devise within a particular framework of ideas about identity and self. This is revealed in the way they speak of working with themselves in performance, which I will contextualise in terms of performance and poststructuralist thinking.

### Strategies for making: 'about', 'with' and 'beyond' self.

Below I have chosen to examine separately a number of ways in which the issue of self is addressed in the interviewees' practices.<sup>61</sup> Solo performance is commonly perceived as sourcing work from life experience and personal memory, as Houston acknowledges: 'I always find that with solo – people always think they are confessional and deeply autobiographical' (WH1: 5). My interest here is how the traditional idea of autobiography is explored and deconstructed in several of the solo interviewees' work. They also create imagined or adopted 'persona', as nuanced versions of themselves. This is what I describe as working 'about self'. In working 'with self' I explore how these devisers create versions of their own shifting performer presences, in

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<sup>61</sup> While I have chosen to separate these ways of working out for discursive purposes, I do not mean to suggest that these are always carried out as separate working processes. The devising process can often entail working on these in simultaneous ways.



particular in relation to physical presence, intangible energy, and aging physicality. They also work 'beyond self', with material that is outside the compass of their immediate lives: self in relation to otherness. This includes working with other people's materials, gained through strategies of collaboration and audience engagement.

### **'About' self: re-thinking autobiography**

Autobiography, derived from Greek as '*auton*', 'self', *bios*, 'life' and *graphein*, 'to write', literally translates as 'self-life-writing'. It is another widely debated and contested term. As Miller & Carver (2003:18) outline, as a literary genre, the influential, conventional model of what this entailed was offered by Georges Gusdorf, in his *Conditions and limits of autobiography* (1956). He posits the autobiographer as male, whose work involves a process of 'objectively' investigating and representing himself as a coherent, stable, authoritative, self. The singular, essential self has been variously contested by poststructuralist, feminist and postcolonial writers,<sup>62</sup> offering instead relational, contingent, multiple selves in process, with implications for autobiographical master narratives.<sup>63</sup> This is as true for solo devisers as

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<sup>62</sup> Post-structuralist, feminist and post-colonial discourses champion plurality of the self: the politics of multiplicity, co-existence and contradiction. They offer discussions of selfhood as increasingly complex, defined by presence and absence (the citational and deconstructed self of Derrida), the relational self of Lacan, the performed self of Butler, the sliding, in-process self of Helen Cixous: 'She comes in, comes in between herself, me and you, between the other me where one is always infinitely more than one and more than me without the fear of ever reaching our limit [...] She thrills in our becoming' (1976: 264). Women's identities, for Cixous, are both one and more than one, made up and made over, as identities are for these solo practitioners. Deconstruction is also subject to revision by feminist and post-colonial critique, as potentially further re-inscribing absence into already 'absent' populations, of women, ethnic minorities and other marginalised people: 'You must have a self before you can afford to deconstruct it' (Jouve, 1991: 7). See also Irigaray, 1977; Lionnet, 1989; Minh- Ha, 1989.

<sup>63</sup> Caren Kaplan (in Smith & Watson, 1998) uses Jacques Derrida's 'law of genre' to write that autoethnographic work, which works with individual autobiographical exploration in relation to wider questions of cultural identity challenges this master autobiographical genre by engaging in discourses of a plural 'I' – instead of discourses of individual authorship it offers discourses of situation, a 'politics of location' (208).

for authors, in respect of their representations of themselves and their experiences in performance.

There are many useful accounts of the shifting conceptions of autobiography in performance, and how it constructs and performs notions of the individual self in relation to wider political and social concerns. Smith and Watson (1998, 2002) provide two comprehensive edited collections of writings about autobiography and performance, including a very useful mapping out of the main issues and processes engaged in by its practitioners. They summarise the two recurrent issues around autobiographical work: an ever present need to defend its practitioners against accusations of narcissism,<sup>64</sup> and a commonly held assumption of autobiography working with straightforward representation based on mimesis – a mirroring of ‘real’ lives. Instead, they suggest discussing it as ‘life narrative’ (8), to foreground the ‘made’ aspect of this genre, the ‘strong fictioning’ which Spivak (in Landry and MacLean, 1996: 28) also suggests is in operation in any re-telling of history. Smith and Watson also offer an expansive description of what autobiographical narratives can do in performance, including ‘negotiating the past, reflecting on identity and critiquing cultural norms and narratives’ (21). This is affected by the autobiographical deviser engaging in five identified ‘processes’ (23): memory, experience, identity, embodiment and audience and performer agency. The practitioner works with creative acts of memory – this act of remembering is historically located and partial. Experience is the material

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<sup>64</sup> Una Chaudhuri characterises the oblique nature of this inherent judgment, when introducing her edited collection of performance texts by Rachel Rosenthal, describing her as working with autobiography but ‘the least narcissistic, least sentimental of performers’ (Rosenthal, & Chaudhuri, 2001: 43).

out of which the subject and work is created. The notion of identity and self are also worked with, often revealed as fragmented and in process. The body is also focused on, as an important site of cultural identity, gendered inscription and a marker of sexual difference.

Heddon (2008) points to the performative function of this genre of work, connecting personal narrative with wider political concerns (8). Carlson (2004) discusses the importance of autobiographical performance to early feminist performance art with its emphasis on personal, political monologues – again Baker’s work arises from this context. Langellier specifies the process-based battle that this kind of work enacts in the live performance space: ‘personal narrative is a site where the social is articulated, structured and struggled over’ (128). The personal does not equate with a non-social, singular representation of ‘the self’, as Bobby Baker’s work exemplifies.<sup>65</sup>

Numerous other scholars have also discussed this engagement in autobiographical work.<sup>66</sup> Post-colonial writers like Minh Ha, Spivak and Spickard offer further clear rationales for the need to continue this struggle to articulate personal, political narratives, especially for marginalised people: ‘Most single racial identities are given. For multiracial people you

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<sup>65</sup> There are several collections of solo monologues by artists representing particular ‘communities of interest’. Examples include Hughes & Roman (1998), including the queer work of Ron Vawter, Tim Miller, Carmelita Tropicana; Leonora Champagne (1990) and the feminist texts of Karen Finley and Holly Hughes; Bonney (2000) and the work by Danny Hoch, Whoopi Goldberg, Lisa Kron, Marga Gomez and Robbie McCauley. These text based works are an important part of solo performance and Live Art work, despite often being separated from this genre. They intentionally work to connect personal narratives with the collective concerns of groups of marginalised people, and are political in naming, problematising and disseminating information about people whose access to wider platforms can be limited.

<sup>66</sup> For example, McDonald in Swindells, (ed.) 1995: 187-195); Warner in Barrett, 2007: 95; Heathfield in Barrett, 2007: 83, 135; McClean-Hopkins in Gale & Gardner, 2004: 239.

live your racial narrative by creating it' (Spickard, 2001: 93).

Autobiographical methodologies are also used to write into historical record the lived (but overlooked) experience of marginalised people. Langellier further identifies the ambiguous nature of personal narrative methodology in that in drawing attention to its basis in lived experience it simultaneously draws attention to its status as 'story': 'We distinguish between the self and others of the performance (narrator and audience) and the self and others 'in' the story (narrator and characters)' (128).

Keith Bryant Alexander's concept of 'audiencing' (2000: 97) can be applied and extended as a model to describe audience and performer interaction in autobiographical work. He discusses how his memories and lived experiences are triggered by viewing autobiographical performance (ibid.) and draws on Elyse Pineau's formulation of the double action of autobiographical working, to support its wider occurrence as an audience activity: 'By activating a kind of doubling mirror such performances reciprocally authorise the identity constructions of both performer and audience' (1992: 111). Pineau frames autobiographical work as acting as 'magnifying glass', intensifying the performer's personal detailed life experience and also a refracting mirror, offering the audience the chance to reflect on their own experience.

The five practitioners revealed different degrees of autobiographical focus in their work. Baker and Charnock prioritise it: 'it's always personal, it's always autobiographical, it always comes from me' (NC1: 12). Baker sources her work from her lived experience: 'I realised that it was

impossible to squeeze myself into this 'mold' of the artist. I could not be like other artists, I could only be myself. Therefore my work could only focus on my own internal world' (2007: 26). Pearson offered a combined personal and more research-oriented reason for starting his trilogy *A Death in the Family* (1991). He spoke of wanting to explore autobiographical material that was 'low key but told very personal things, which you wouldn't perhaps expect to hear in a theatrical context. Now this is all very familiar, but in 1992 it was not' (MP1: 11). This mode – the familiar, intimate form of address – is continued in his guided tour around his birth village of Hibaldstow, in *Bubbling Tom*.

Charnock spoke of repeatedly mining 'self as source':

In the end you are in a room for a long time. And you are reflecting about yourself and it is great. For me anyway it is really good therapy. Because you are looking at yourself all the time, you are returning to yourself. (NC1: 20)

He offers here one particular model of solo performance, where he locates the work as explicitly personal and unashamedly drawn from his perspective. Although there is a repeated 'looking at yourself' going on, the way he spoke of it differed from what might be seen as narcissistic self-absorption. He suggests that there is a durational and confrontational aspect to solo making, a chosen solitude that forces self-knowledge and a process of self-learning and development. At the same time, the issues he works with are connected to wider, shared ones:

It's always huge themes like life and death and love and God [...] If solo is about anything, it is about those things – me in relationship to my death and what I believe in and what I see other people doing [...] It is personal, it's small, in the end, but it is about big things. (NC1: 18)

Charnock spoke of 'running on anger', (26) wanting an audience to share responsibility in these larger issues. His chosen performance methodology for creating connection, based on intense physicality and verbal provocation, is not measurable in terms of its efficacy and no monographs exist to describe his work. Tony Kushner, in the introduction to USA performance artist Tim Miller's collection of solo monologues, *body blows: six performances* (2002), describes his work in terms that invoke comparison with Charnock's: 'self-declaring, self-critical, self-analytical, self-celebrating in the full throated Whitmanic mode [...] democratically, expansively self celebrating' (x). Charnock harangues, Miller does not; however, as makers, they both intended to invite people to think about the work and the issues in it, rooted in the personal.

Baker also repeatedly uses her personal life as a series of starting points from which to connect with wider cultural and social issues. This included earlier working with motherhood in *Drawing on a Mother's Experience*; the realm of domestic life in *Kitchen Show, How to Shop* (1993); women's position in artistic working environments in *Angels* – all politically charged areas of debate.

*Bubbling Tom* took place on the streets of Pearson's home village. He gathered textual materials through interviews with family and people who knew him, writing memories of his own and looking at photographs and relocating himself to those places. He wrote the central text based on this research, layered memories of the village as a seven-year-old boy and with a strong awareness of being sensitive to the audience make-up:

I had no idea whether anybody would come from the outside at all, even though we did advertise it. I assumed my audience would be a village audience and so I pitched it accordingly. And I made sure that I could embrace the largest amount of people who might show up. So of course banging on about family matters for two hours was not going to be helpful, so I always had to push it out. (MP1: 15)

'Pushing it out' meant creating a layered text and working to combine autobiographical, biographical and other poetic or historical texts he found to be relevant. This practice opened up the diversity of material normally included in a guidebook or tour, to include records of everyday people as well as famous lives. He was aiming for multi-layered material, which connected personally and publically: 'maybe you can make a text in a performance where there are various layers of understanding about what is being said, so you never exclude anyone, but there are moments of real personal resonance' (MP1: 15). These making processes used material based on personal experience as starting points, but also staged a multiple, inclusive remembering which in Pearson's case included the memories of a village community.

Family death as a theme was included in the work of Houstoun, Baker and Pearson. Houstoun detailed learning and re-performing the specific movement of her dying mother's hand, as a personal process of 'trying to understand it – or get to grips with it' [and to] 'relay a particular event... an implacable rhythm' (WH1: 15). Understanding is created through rehearsal as re-enactment, a precise, choreographic attention to detail, exploring the physicality of death. This is re-performed without accompanying commentary. Pearson's opening line in *A Death in The Family* (1991) was: 'My mother heard a gasp and then decided my father was dead'. Personal

material is addressed directly and again communicated in detail. Again, the formal attributes of Pearson's father's death are focused on, rather than Pearson's specific feelings. In this way, an audience is invited to remember their own feelings about similar experiences and given space without the weight of the author's own feelings present. In *Box Story* (2001), Baker uses an under-stated mode of delivery to reveal the shocking story of her father's death by drowning while on a family seaside picnic. She allows the affect of this to circulate with her audience, not speaking but instead painting the Colman's mustard they had taken on the picnic onto her map. Lehmann (2006) identifies postdramatic theatre as often disrupting conventions of sign 'density', giving either too much or too little information, referring to this as a deliberate aesthetic of 'plethora and deprivation' (90) in relation to what is being represented. This 'strategy of refusal [...] aims to provoke the spectator's own imagination to become active on the basis of little raw material to work with' (Lehmann, 2006: 90). The rituals of death in relation to close family usually involve expressions of emotion; here we are repeatedly 'deprived' of hearing about these performers' feelings; they are withheld. Lehmann describes a 'coldness that is hard to bear' (94) in the often formal focus of postdramatic work. It does not pay undue attention to the portrayal of human psychology, to which audiences exposed to dramatic work are often accustomed. This is perhaps less intentional 'coldness' but more a creation of space for audiences to engage in their own remembering.

### Performing Selves: the use of personae

The relationship between the theatre practitioner and the subject they perform as is a complex one, relevant to the wider field of theatre and



performance. Different performance theorists offer models to differentiate between the kinds of behaviour that occur onstage. Michael Kirby (1987) describes a 'continuum' (4) of acting from 'non-matrixed performing' (stagehands) to acting (5). The spectrum is primarily differentiated in that acting, whether 'received', 'simple' or 'complex', involves physical, emotional or imaginative 'pretense' (7), whereas performing, as he defines it, does not. Simple acting entails that the 'performers are themselves, they are not portraying characters' (7). But they are, on some level, acting. Simple acting, which includes 'the desire to communicate', is differentiated from complex acting in that the latter involves creating fiction. He places dance as outside 'acting' (3). Most solo devisers fall between simple acting and the non-matrixed end, what he terms the 'symbolised matrix' as they all introduce versions of themselves, and have a desire to communicate but these versions are performed – they are not 'real'.

Heddon (in Barrett & Baker, 2007) and Griffin (in Gale & Gardner, 2004) offer further differentiation between performer and performed subject by introducing a third person – 'the performer, the performing self and the performed self' (Griffin, 156) and Heddon, writing about Bobby Baker's *Box Story*, discusses three 'persona' (233) being performed: 'Bobby Baker', the performing Baker and the artist Baker. What is useful about this is their differentiation between the persona of Bobby Baker (like the persona of a chatty genial Etchells) and the performing Baker or Etchells. These former personae are close to the performing Etchells or Baker but are also variations and versions of them, used for different functions. So the chatty Etchells relaxes an audience, the awkward Baker unsettles her audience –

different from the performer Baker who deploys version of herself to suit the work. This usage is different from Carlson's description of 'persona' performance, 'self-exploratory' work, but not autobiographical, and more concerned with performing mythical, fantasy characters.

Etchells identified his solos as 'text based', rather than physically focused, tracing his solo performance work as developing from his writing:

I think there was already for me several of the pieces that I had written about FE's [Forced Entertainment's] work or ideas around that work that were quite solo performances. They used autobiographical material, they were very much about staging an 'I', positioning an 'I' in relation to the other material. (TE1: 3)

He described as a recurrent interest his making work that presents both 'a degree of ordinary' but is also 'highly contrived and strategised and thought about and deliberate' (TE2: 15) and this ambiguity is revealed in his portrayal of his own personae: 'establishing a basic kind of presence and shifting the register of that up and down in certain ways whilst not hopefully damaging the integrity of the initial proposition' (TE2: 33). Etchells the deviser is clearly orchestrating here, working with a 'rhythm' where the emergence of the soloist is part of the wider compositional work, rather than the presentation of a full character.

He is also working with simultaneous representations of himself, the 'register' suggesting co-existing paradoxical versions. These include a low-key, minimal, pedestrian persona: 'Tim Etchells – the bloke who goes and gets a newspaper from the shop' (TE2: 31) or 'Mr. Genial Chatty Bloke' (TE2: 19) in *Instructions for Forgetting*, the jovial narrator talking to the

audience and being disarmingly trustworthy in recounting the story of how these puzzling video materials he will be showing came to be in front of them. The deceptive simplicity of this, akin to Houstoun's statement about working to 'simply' be on stage is deliberately revealed as an illusion. Other versions of himself are exposed, like the controlling father, forcing his son Miles to sit through Henry Selick's film adaptation of Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* (1996) just to please him: 'You are not presented with a single rounded view of a person. It is much more about cracks and contradictions and layers' (TE1: 15). Etchells does not offer any resolution to this contradictory, ambiguous representation of himself, in interview or in performance. What is at stake here is that the reliability, authority and power of the performing solo narrator, and what he narrates, is undermined, inviting the audience to remain alert and question his version of events.

The work and its relationship to the audience take precedence, with Etchells's role as deviser servicing this connection. In *Downtime*, he further formalises this 'service' role by reading notes while sitting with his back to the audience, (which he continued to do in the later extended version, *Words and Pictures* in 2005). Another way to frame this is to say that Etchells was here presenting his making process as performance, and working in it as a deviser rather than a fixed character. It is autobiographical work, 'digging deep' but not being 'hugely confessional' (TE1: 3). The primary material is his filmed head, and his attempt to capture and relate his thoughts - but what is revealed is more about what he calls the 'preposterous process' (TE1: 2) of trying to represent a person's purportedly true or real thoughts. An analogy with lyric poetry may clarify

this further. Etchells voices a 'lyric I', a self talking *out of self, as self*, but not *about self*. The Etchells persona is intentionally an ambiguous one:

"Do they like me, do they trust me and do they care about any of this and about me?" That is all a topic isn't it? That is in all the work. I think it is often true in terms of solo work. The likeable and not likeable is quite high in the mix. (TE2: 18)

For Charnock, liking and not-liking is also engaged with. His ability to entertain is driving factor in making solo work: 'It really is a performance, it's a show, it's entertainment and I love entertaining people' (NC1: 17). Yet Charnock also 'intertwines' precise physical movement, giving an audience visual pleasure with verbal insults, and does this repeatedly.

In *Frank*, his improvisation-based solo performed many times between 2002 and 2007, he adopted a high status, high-energy persona as preacher and provocateur. He used frequent direct address and changed small details to include comment on the people and geography of where he is that night, stock repertoire for 'rock star' mode, designed to make an audience feel particularly addressed, not generic. Yet he moved between shifting attitudes: 'And it's terribly sharp and right on, American musical type stuff, but also you are sort of making fun of it at the same time and you are also taking it seriously and enjoying it' (NC2: 13). He performed physical ease, a similar 'casual' status to Etchells's low-key narrator, which masked physical rigour and precision:

So you have this thing inside that is so in control and absolutely spot on and your hand has to be there and like this and at the same time it should look like it is kind of completely relaxed [...] And finding that is really, really difficult. (NC2: 13)

This is expert skill: physical control co-existing with ease and 'relaxed' physical presentation, often the signpost of the highly adept practitioner. His physical performance presence, accompanied by oratory preaching, moves towards the 'ambiguous' physicality suggested by Lehmann as one dynamic of a 'tragic' as well as hilarious and enjoyably ecstatic configuration: 'Dance-theatre uncovers the buried traces of physicality' (2006: 96).<sup>67</sup> Charnock described performing physical ease while also performing a narrator who berates, insults and frequently patronises his audience: 'you are like this and you are like this and we are like this and actually it's all a fucking joke – so stop it. Stop trying to make your life work' (NC1: 25). When watching the piece, as an audience member, I was provoked to admire and dislike him within the same performance. This is a clear example of being able to 'entertain' as a mutual holding together of two energetic states: physical ease and extreme and ever present verbal anger. Charnock's 'entertainment' is again of the ambiguous kind, intentionally creating physically conflicting signs, and working as an elusive persona, but in a very different way to Houstoun.

Baker offers several versions of herself connected to wider cultural groups: 'It is accepting I am middle-aged and middle-class and white, I live in Islington, I come from the suburbs. That is who I am. You are who you are, with your experience' (BB1: 14). The work is not simply 'about' her life:

Why am I doing this, what is this about? [...] I don't know if anyone will relate to it – that is the risk. But I am not actually doing it in this

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<sup>67</sup> Ladrón de Guevara in Pitches & Popat (2011) also characterises the 'ecstatic' body in performance as an ambiguous one; of action and engagement through the fleshy senses, in the world and a simultaneous necessarily fragmented experience of this body, and its continual disappearance (27).

instance because I just want to tell a story about my childhood. There is a motivating force for it. So that's just the way I am. It's all about myself. I don't/can't go much further than that because I don't work in another way. (BB1: 13)

But in social conversation, as in her performed work, Baker does precisely 'go further' in creating multiple, ironic versions of herself: 'It's comic, you know. Who are you? I think it is just a part of the natural way one communicates. I get into a group of people and the way I communicate is like giving a speech' (BB1: 15). She is modeling an engagement with the performativity of selfhood, which she enacts here through verbal means in everyday life, as well as in the theatre. In her aforementioned signature beginning, of monologic speaking directed towards the audience, where she signals herself as present, she tempts the audience with whom she could, or should, have been, according to a gendered and sexual performance politics whereby an audience frequently assumes the soloist to be a man. She proceeds to emphatically perform the choice of being a woman, for which she requires her own presence:

'it is essentially about stepping outside the way work is traditionally made and finding a way of communicating things that don't quite fit other forms. When you talk about wanting to express something that makes you very angry. How would you do that otherwise? You could make a documentary, you could write a novel, you could write a play but there is something about your feelings, yourself, that requires you to physically do it yourself.' (14)

Harris (2008: 193) discusses how Baker works with a layering of 'identifications' (which I am calling selves) on top of each other (abject and silent woman, defiant sensual female, Christian supplicant) as opposed to presenting them as dialectical. This is equally true of how she spoke above about working with herself as a source of the work, drawing attention to the

performed, shifting false, awkward and gloriously physical aspects of performed selfhood. The relation between these personae, the way that they are composed in the work, can be thought of as 'one plus many others', not 'one as opposed to another'.

### **Working 'with' self: presence and physicality**

Postdramatic solo devisers, freed from having to represent a character, are able to work with a spectrum of performed versions of themselves. Some of these can be linked more closely to the practitioner's life and experiences. Some of these can arise from the live performance situation itself, with the performer's presence, including bodily presence as a key dimension of the multiplicity of selves that are in play. The work may, in fact, be wholly or partly about the moment of performance itself. This approach to self-representation has a particular specificity, depending on the disciplinary background of the performer.

Houstoun is clear about her choice to not work with autobiographical material, which can be understood as related at least in part to her working within the discipline of dance, with its traditions of working out of a wide variety of source materials. However, she acknowledged as inevitable the way an audience will tend to conflate solo work as necessarily *about* the self: 'people always think they are confessional and autobiographical and yes, probably everything is, because you came up with it, but I don't set out with that as my principle' (WH1: 15). She speaks of developing movement sequences in *Haunted* by using her ability to change physical energy states. She demonstrated this in interview, showing me her physical

transition from 'diffuse' to 'directed': 'when people get a bit serious. That feels to me like going in a line' (WH2: 10). This 'shape shifting' can also be named as a working with the 'self', in this case, physical self, and yet is not necessarily 'about' herself. Houstoun's moving body does not have to represent a character or the meaning of a story or plot, but rather is present simply as itself. Lehmann describes this engagement of physical performer presence, independent from the demands of plot or essential autobiographical narrative, as 'auto-sufficient physicality' (2006: 94). The performer's body is centred in the work, as physical entity and moving, gestural being. There are a range of potential states of physicality explored, including 'presence', 'vibrancy', 'ecstasy', 'deviancy' and 'pain' (95). Houstoun revealed repeated experiments in exploring different kinds of physical and energetic presence in her solo work:

I remember feeling: 'This is really comfortable and it is not often you get to feel really comfortable, on stage [...]. There is something I did with the leg. Really getting it in the right place. (WH1: 14)

This articulates a precise and expert physical writing of the performer's body into the work, without the work being 'about' Houstoun. She identified her later piece, *48 Almost Love Lyrics* (2004), as another extended enquiry into presence:

With *48 Love Lyrics* I can remember reading Deborah Hay quite a lot, about ways she framed questions around the body [...] How it was done was more important than what it was, in some sense. It was an approach, just how I was on stage, almost disconnected from any other material.

MD And what was that?

WH Just being very present and keeping your hands off of every other thing. Just that activity. (WH1: 12)



In Kirby's terms, as discussed above, Houston is not involved in acting in this physical work; she aims towards a hopeful idealism of being 'present' in the performance. As Lehmann points out, within a dance context, this aim might be less challenging, with its history of moving away from narrative (modern dance) and psychological orientation (postmodern dance) (2006: 96), but within theatre, with its enduring inheritance of dramatic representation, 'keeping your hands off' narrative or psychological representation is perhaps more testing.

In fact, Houston talked of not conceiving of herself as a tangible, entity. When I asked specific questions about her decisions on 'costume' she laughed: 'clothes on what? I am someone based on energy' (WH2: 10).<sup>68</sup> Envisaging of herself as energetic presence links with how she also spoke of ordering her work, composing through the use of different energetic dynamics, rather than plot development (p.241). Lehmann has also referred to this formal working as a kind of 'energetic theatre' (2006: 37).

This is a term he draws from Jean François Lyotard, which is a useful tool for identifying a key feature of physical devising which works not with creating meaning so much as 'forces, intensities, present affects' (Lyotard, 1997: 287). For Lehmann, energetic theatre works beyond representing material signs and gestures to intangible, other places which 'offer themselves as an effect of flux, an innervation or a rage' (38). He characterises such theatre as concerned with 'shock and pain' (ibid.) quoting precedence in the work of Artaud 'with his call for "being like

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<sup>68</sup> I made a deliberate decision in the interviews, at times, to use the language of 'drama' as a provocation to explore what framing ideas in this way could elicit, in interview. Houston later writes of herself as 'Some body and no body' (in Pitches and Popat, 2011: 33).

victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames” (ibid.), and the critical thinking of Adorno: ‘art makes a gesture-like grab for reality, only to draw back violently’ (ibid.).

Houstoun however offered a very different dynamic of energetic physical working, in relation to her bodily presence and physical devising than the extreme, dramatic conceptualisations suggested by Lehmann, Artaud, Lyotard and Adorno. She linked her formulation of herself as energy with her inability to be captured in photographs, where she is portrayed as always ‘slightly blurry’ (ibid.): too diffuse and changeable to be captured on film. This is opposed to dancers who ‘make lines or shapes’ (ibid.). She speaks of her choreographic intent as involved not so much with a dynamic of ‘grabbing’ and ‘violent withdrawing’ but rather of refusing to engage in a potentially limiting movement dynamic of extremity, preferring instead the more choreographically suggestive, ‘keeping her hands off every other thing’, and her particular engagement and enjoyment with formal physical and spatial concerns of where her leg or body is, ‘really getting it in the right place’ (ibid.).

Houstoun’s physical devising persistently refuses physical ‘heroics’ which one could argue are in danger of replacing dramatic representation with physical melodrama, in aesthetics of gendered extremity. Instead, she offers her performed physical presence as ambiguous: working hard to be present yet at the same disembodied (‘clothes on what?’) – continually on the move and unfixable. Charnock, as a performer presence, is the ‘making lines’ type of dancer that Houstoun places as her opposite. Yet he also

works with very precise physicality, for itself and not in order to represent character or script. The function of the movement in his improvised solo *Frank* is not illustrative, or serving the performer's emotion. It does however, demonstrate the extreme physical aesthetics discussed above. According to Charnock, he dances for the joy and precision of doing it: 'It's just what it is – it's just being. It's just aliveness' (NC1: 7).

Baker's devising offers a different kind of physical working, characterised as aiming to shock and disturb: as abject (Heathfield, 2007; Harris, 2007; Warner, 1998), being 'cast off, rejected [...] degraded and humiliated' (Barrett, 2008: 13). Baker the deviser forces Baker the performer to engage in numerous uncomfortable acts: 'things I don't want to do. Like the anchovies. Putting the anchovies into my mouth, I think "Oh I don't want to do that". But actually when you look back on it, it is the solution' (BB1:8). As well as this voluntary suffering, Barrett notes that Baker works with a redemptive physicality. Personal narrative can suggest celebratory actions: 'the performance of possibilities' (D. Soyini Madison in Lionett, 1999: 130). Baker spoke of collaborating with Polona Baloh Brown in *How to Shop* and her physical devising:

I remember with the stomach – splashing foam and being pregnant. I had got this obsession and the image had come from smelling my father's shaving soap. It was very phallic. And we got this idea of using spray foam. And I remember being in her garden [...] and me being pregnant [...]. We tried it out in the garden and we both had to come in and rest. We were so astonished with what we had made. It was a joy that used to happen. (BB1: 24)

Baker enjoys the sensuality of working with touch, smell and her female pregnant body-in-motion. Brown and Baker also combine this with materials

that potentially clash uncomfortably – Baker’s father and his phallic objects, dominant smells, and the subsequent use of spurting shaving foam that covers her pregnant body. Yet she speaks of this in interview as joyous intuitive working, with an interest in what is made, rather than what it ‘means’. She uses physical work, actions which seem to deviate, humiliate, and result in her being covered in food, (*Drawing on a Mother’s Experience* and *Table Occasions*) or foam, as above, to create precise, expert artworks. In this way, she offers a layered, contradictory and ultimately ambiguous working with physical actions and physical presence that combines extreme states of ‘vibrancy’ and ‘ecstasy’ with ‘deviancy’ and ‘pain’ (95).

Pearson has always worked with intensive physical presence, carrying out long distance walking in *The First Five Miles*; physical challenges in the early *La Leçon D’Anatomie* (1974), involving high tension and a ‘set of very precise physical actions’ (MP1: 11); suspending himself from a rope in what he describes as a solo *and* duet, *Angelus* (1994) with saxophonist Peter Brötzmann. At the time of interview in 2008, he was in the position of being asked to re-perform some highly physical work made with RAT theatre, which he had devised in the 1970s. While this was not solo work, it is relevant as it reveals a questioning about working with multiple versions of the physical self – the older and younger artist and his different physical bodies. Pearson was faced with the possibility of performing a role he created for his younger self. He reflected on what this might produce, were he to contend with the material in his sixties:

MP: I don’t know whether I can only present or think about all that past work in quotation marks, so when I am doing it, I am doing it ironically.

MD: You are quoting yourself, or a younger version of yourself.  
MP: That is it precisely. Because I think there might be quite a foolishness to see me attempt those things [...] looking like an aged Lothario. (MP1: 23)

Phrased in a different way, Pearson is wondering in what way he can perform multiple versions of himself. He tellingly offers as a comparative example a performance he witnessed, while studying with Kanzeo Hideo, head of the Kanze family, renowned performers of Noh drama. While being multiply populated on stage, Noh is in fact very relevant to a discussion of solo performance as it can be likened to a monodrama centered around one individual: 'The chief performer, the *shite*, is the only person you are supposed to be paying attention to. He is the supreme performer – everyone else provides backing' (MP: 22). Pearson gives the same example of ambiguous working as George:

What is extraordinary about it is that the *shite*, the main performer, performs into old age, even though they may be performing young women. So they wear a mask and you can see triple chins underneath, even a beard [...] With quaking voices and nevertheless, or even because of this combination, this beautiful young mask and this aged performer can create deep, deep poignancy about the human condition. (MP1: 22)

This is not performed impersonation, but the performance of youthful woman *and* aging *shite* – both ages and genders performed simultaneously, and visibly present. Numerically this translates to a one plus one but does not equal two. It is perhaps in this numerical and paradoxical ambiguity that one answer to Pearson's earlier question about how to perform different physical versions of himself lies. Once again I can reframe Pearson's question about performance remains to ask 'what can be done with the remains of past physicalities?' Age/youth, man/woman, beauty

/triple chin are all evident, *not* needing to be treated ironically but simply allowed to 'not add up'. Pearson can work with multiple, co-existing physical selves. Others agree that performance works to a different numerical economy: Lin Hixson writes about the 'remains' of one of Goat Island's performances as "'1 + 1 = 3 or more" afterimages of a performance'.<sup>69</sup> She in turn is citing Edward Tufte:

Effective layering of information is often difficult. An omnipresent, yet subtle, design issue is involved. The various elements collected together interact, creating non-information patterns and textures simply through their combined presence. Josef Albers describes this visual effect as  $1 + 1 = 3$  or more. (Tufte, 1991: 53)

Pearson can deploy his older physical self, performing 'as if' younger, where physical ability intentionally does not equate. The affect of this paradoxical old-young self, trying to carry out hard work, raises poignant questions about age and ability within the performance and with the audience.

### **Working 'beyond' self**

At one level, this section deals with the self as it exists in relation to the world at large. It deals with performance material that addresses the wider concerns and interests of the solo deviser – their commitments that also define them as artists. At another level, the discussion is concerned with performance material which is outside and beyond these personal concerns. This might be part of a strategy where the deviser deliberately makes themselves into a conduit for the voices and concerns of others. Or it can be part of a strategy to open a creative space for the audience.

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<sup>69</sup> Goat Island was a Chicago based performance group run by a group of core artists including Lyn Hixson and Matthew Goulish from 1987-2009.

## Self in relation to the wider world – issues and interests

This is clearly a very broad theme in terms of how it manifests for the performers discussed. It is included here in order to make clear that the work of these performers does not rotate purely around themselves. On the contrary their concerns are extremely wide. The issue of self *in relation* to other things is the focus here and it may be worth reiterating that complete freedom of choice to focus upon a specific topic or issue is one of the appeals of solo practice. The interviewees all involve issues beyond themselves. Charnock discusses the changing status of ‘messages’ in his work:

Years ago, if people had asked me is there a message in your show or are you trying to get across something? I would say ‘Oh no there is no message because there are no answers. It’s just mainly making the audience think about things or giving them a choice or perspective or whatever’. Now I say, ‘absolutely, there is a message’. (NC1: 25)

His later focus was concerned with large, existential questions – he spoke of the sub-text in *Frank* as performing the possibility of ‘non-dualism’ in relation to how to live.<sup>70</sup>

Houstoun identified her work as based on strong personal belief:

I remember Gary saying ages ago – oh it’s like a manifesto, a personal manifesto and I think there is something in the nature of that in my work – trying to assert what I believe. Making a stand for

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<sup>70</sup> Charnock discussed his ongoing study of the philosophy and practice of non-dualism, through the work of Tony Parsons and his ‘Open Secret’ sessions. This work is based on the thinking and practice of the Vedanta schools of Indian philosophy, in particular the teachings of Advaita. This literally means non-dualism in Sanskrit. See for example <http://www.advaita-vedanta.org/avhp/>. Charnock was exploring non-dualism and the inter-connectedness of Parson’s teachings and philosophy in his performance work, and critiqued, for example the inadequacy of such binaries as absence/presence, being/non-being, here/there, me/you.

stupidity and standing up for things which I think, are very important. Being able to mouth off if you fancy it and look a bit ugly. (WH1: 15)

She values 'making a stand' for the marginal and the unpopular. Baker questions what women's traditional 'domains' are and what can occur in them. Both Pearson and Etchells continually work with interests related to theatre and performance itself, clearly manifest in the books they have written on the subjects (see Appendix III) and in the way they use their solo devising to explore a number of dramaturgical questions p.162). As well as working with personal narrative, they all work with materials connected to wider cultural questions and this also includes incorporating other voices into their work, in rehearsal and performance.

#### The voice of others: multi-vocal montage

For Pearson, Etchells and Houstoun, solo working also offers the opportunity literally to collect and stage the voices of others in the work, in this sense working 'beyond' self. Again, they are clearly present in the work, as the solo performers, but the work is not 'about' them and also not exclusively written *by* them. They include and arrange other people's texts into their work. This is not confusing to the audience, because as solo performers, they connect the work, affording a continuity, as Pearson confirmed: 'I began to appreciate as well how solo performance allows you to put anything next to anything [...] there is a coherence simply because there is one person doing it' (MP1: 9).

Etchells spoke of a devising activity that he frequently engages with as 'gathering' other people's materials, and then working them into



performance as a kind of mediator' (TE1: 1). He collected other people's videos and stories (*Instructions For Forgetting*), questions (*In the Event*), and songs and texts (*Wall of Sound*, 2006). Pearson also includes quotations and narratives collected from interview materials, which he composed with in *Bubbling Tom* and *Carrlands*. This avoids the notion of the solo artist as purveyor of their own texts, meanings, or worldview. Rather, either of them can be 'a sort of Benjaminian rag and bone man: someone who samples, rearranges, edits and re-deploys' (Williams, 2011: 20).

Houstoun also articulated an interest in these collecting formats, and portrayed Etchells's role evocatively in this kind of solo work as 'someone who holds something rather than someone who is at the centre of it' (WH1: 18). She also spoke of transmitting verbatim the ideas of people she has interviewed, whose voices she reproduced in *Desert Island Dances*. She listened to them through her headphones and simultaneously re-performed them in the work. This role of conduit allowed this solo work to contain other people's texts, perhaps most familiar in documentary or verbatim theatre format. All of the practitioners were careful to reference these people as authors of the work during the performance.

What makes this different from conventional biographical representations of others is the way Houstoun, Etchells and Pearson exercise a freedom to create shifts between perspectives, sliding between their own voices and the voices of others. In this way, a kind of 'multi-vocal montage' takes place, located within the one performer. This differs from an impressionist, who also 'peoples' work with other voices. These practitioners perform ordinary people rather than known personalities and do not signal attention to their

own skill as mimics. The focus is on the content of what is said – on the work, not the worker. This again is not about human beings on display but rather multiple voices functioning to indicate different layers of perceiving, thinking and articulating, rather than different personalities. Multiple ideas are woven into the work, an intertextuality which allows for the interplay of other people's thinking and dynamises the 'text' in these 'solo' speakings.<sup>71</sup>

### Agency and power: the self, audience and the politics of form

In *Theatre and Politics*, Joe Kelleher (2009) cites the literary scholar Stefan Collini's summary definition of politics as 'the important, inescapable and difficult attempt to determine relations of power in a given space' (Collini, 2004: 67). I include in this work discussion of two ways in which these practitioners work with relations of power and agency: the politics 'in' the work (issue-based content) and the politics 'of' the work, which I will now turn to. This can be called the politics of form.<sup>72</sup> Lehmann characterises this move beyond political content to 'a politics of perception, which could at the same time be called an aesthetic of responsibility' (185).

The way in which these practitioners engage with the issue of self and its deconstruction has political implications for the way they address their solo devising practice. I differentiate this approach from the valuable agit-prop or political theatres that have and continue to exist in devised work (see

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<sup>71</sup> Alexander persuasively discusses the use of intertextuality as a generative method of working in autobiography, (2000: 103) although he is referring more here to an audience's action of weaving their own stories into the performed work, as opposed to the literal use of other stories or writings. What is important here is that the text, in this case the spoken monologue, becomes dynamic and multi-authored. Alexander cites the work of Patrick O'Donnell & Robert Con Davis (1989) and Udo J. Hebel (1989) as particularly informative in relation to intertextuality.

<sup>72</sup> For a similar discussion, see also Harvie & Lavender, 2010: 13.

note 22). These practitioners engage in a politics of form, through distributing authorship and performance power (including focus and attention) with collaborators and audiences. Alan Read writes of work that reveals a 'politics of performance that is more modest and slower than the political theatre in whose courageous wake it retreats' (Read, 2008: xi). These practitioners reveal political motivations, which are indeed modest and slow: 'Maybe we are all of us looking for a way that these small things retune or ask a question to people who are watching, that they themselves operate in a slightly different way' (TE1: 16). Houstoun also centralises the importance of devisers to be able to respond 'It's an author's responsibility to speak about being alive now' (WH1: 11). I read in this statement Houstoun's concern and ability to 'localise' and also decipher and maintain a perspective on other actions needed beyond her own impulses – which I read as a social impulse. Etchells identified this formalised approach in the early working of Forced Entertainment. Although referring to group practice, it has relevance to his solo work:

The theatre we dreamed of was concerned with ethics and identity, it was deeply and always political but in embracing the fractious ambiguous landscape (social, cultural, psychic) of the 80s and 90s in Britain, we knew it had to forego the suspect certainties of what other people called political theatre. We worked with a growing confidence that the reliance on intuition, chance, dream, accident and impulse would not banish politics from the work but ensure its veracity. (1999: 19)

Etchells is speaking about a different set of methods for accessing issues related to agency and power within the way work is developed and performed, as much as through what it speaks of. A key activity in the politics of this work is the negotiation of creative openings for the audience – a sharing of authorship, which is intended to offer agency. Speaking as a

writer, Minh-Ha suggests that the act of writing itself can be conceived of as 'an ongoing practice that may be said to be concerned, not with inserting a "me" into language, but with creating an opening where the "me" disappears while "I" [*sic*] endlessly come and go' (1989: 35). This can be applied to how these solo devisers shift the weight of 'me-ness' in their work by allowing openings to occur which the audience and their 'multiple I(s)' are invited to enter.

I have already mentioned that dramatic performance has a history of offering an audience different 'positions' in relation to the speaker – of ally, witness, eavesdropper and psychologist, through use of monologic address. All these roles tend to be responsive rather than creative, however.<sup>73</sup> In this solo work and postdramatic work more generally, the apparent 'singularity' of the monologue is displaced and unraveled, the deviser working in very particular and rigorous ways to create a speaking which opens up more dialogic exchange.

Houstoun described her desire to have an 'ongoing conversation' and 'dialogue' (WH1: 6) with her audience, and her low key, pedestrian, direct address mode can be read as a strategic way to enable this to happen,

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<sup>73</sup> Solo postdramatic practitioners extend this invitation to engage in the work. In 'The Emancipated Spectator' (2007), Rancière invites us in part to think beyond the simplistic binary of physical engagement signifying active participation and the seated listener as somehow passive. He asks us to consider how cerebral activity can be a politically rich, active environment to operate within. The widely held, enduring belief promoted by theatre and development or participatory theatre practitioners like Boal and others that the 'spectator' literally getting onto the stage is a more 'liberated' activity than the seated, actively thinking spectator associated with Brecht's aesthetics, is a false one. Despite it taking firm hold in site-specific, applied and now the increasingly popular 'immersive' theatre, physical activity does not, per se, equate with engagement. The questions posed are: How can we reach, or meet people? How is agency activated in the live event, and what are its economies, politics and conditions? How can power circulate? These practitioners engage with these questions in different ways.

through her more recent work, *50 Acts* and *Keep on Dancing* (both 2009).<sup>74</sup> When asked to describe a favourite moment in his own work, Etchells offered his enjoyment of being able to use monologue as a way to create very particular spaces for his audience:

You know that there is a certain something in that combination of words, in that rhythm and that tone of voice that conjure something quite vivid. You know that it takes people to another place [...] I think there are some moments in the solos where I can look at a paragraph or two paragraphs of it and think, yeah, when you say those words aloud in a room with some people in it, in the right context – something happens. (TE1: 16)

Carefully chosen language, publically uttered, invites audiences to imaginatively space travel – to be taken to ‘other places’.

Pearson similarly described writing long texts for his audio work *Carrlands*, precisely to access and stimulate his audience’s own imaginations:

One of the ambitions in the writing is to mix quite detailed information about the places [...] with instructions to the listener so that they become part performer in the role [...] by trying to imagine things for the participant, and what I hope they begin to do is create imaginary pictures in this landscape. (MP1: 1)

Recorded monologic address, in this instance, serves the listener, not the speaker. The use of monologue and direct address is designed to stimulate an audience’s own imaginative thinking, allowing for an intertextual weaving of their imaginative ideas and Pearson’s, to create what they see and experience during the audio walk.

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<sup>74</sup> Houston’s use of the word ‘dialogue’ demonstrates the non-literal sense of conversation or engagement that these solo devisers aim to initiate with their audiences. She is not requiring audiences to stand up and speak to her but rather she aims to create an ongoing engagement and exchange, between herself, the work and the audience. As ‘dialogue’, in the sense of a conversation between several people, written into this engagement is a give and take, and ongoing improvisation.

The different speaking registers – from the precise, poetic use of language from Etchells, to the informative speaking and gossip of Pearson or the low key conversational mode of Houstoun – are designed to elicit different kinds of creative response from their audiences. Even Charnock's provocative monologic rants, in many ways the epitome of the singular monologic form, are so extreme, and so deftly contradicted by his precise, eloquent movement, that in the confusion, energy, anger and amusement that occurs, a form of generative thinking can be stimulated: 'all of those political questions about power and domination and management of the audience and stuff like that – they are really very clear because it is all located in one person' (TE2: 39). Charnock's overtly stated performance methodology of 'swinging' between the extreme poles of throwing 'grenades' and 'giving them sweets' (NC1: 25) is questionably designed to 'awaken' an audience, through a management style based on bullying and manipulation. Precisely what kind of awakening this effects is not necessarily clear.

## Chapter Three: Solo devising strategies and processes

In this chapter, I will further explore some performance-making strategies and processes which contribute towards a delineation of the particular category of solo practice that I am calling solo devising, with extended reference to the five interviewees thinking about their making. One proviso needs to be made clear at this point. The term 'solo devising' was not explicitly discussed as a making category at the time of interview, although both words were used in different questions I sent out in advance, and asked in person. The proposition and term 'solo devising' emerged in my subsequent analysis and further reading. These practitioners unsurprisingly are, on the whole, more focused on doing than defining their practice,<sup>75</sup> and expressed both a degree of unfamiliarity with considering themselves as 'solo' practitioners (Pearson, Etchells, Baker) and, in Baker's case, had negative associations with the term 'devising':

I have an awful problem because I don't like the word 'devised' at all... I can't stand it actually. [...] Not that I think it's an inappropriate word – but it's very theatrical. It smacks to me of people sitting round in a studio theatre. (BB1: 18)

Baker's 'theatrical' posits a rather limited definition of devising as a studio-based, group practice, concerned with the material artifice or fakery that

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<sup>75</sup> In interview and on their publicity materials, none of these practitioners define themselves as working out of one specific creative area. On her website, Baker writes simply that she is an 'artist' (2014). Etchells writes in his online CV that he works from 'a base in performance into visual arts and fiction' (Etchells, 2014). Houston describes herself as a 'movement/theatre artist' (2010) or as someone who 'creates new movement, text and image work' (2011). Descriptions of Mike Pearson on his two main books include 'a leading theatre artist and performance studies scholar' (Pearson, 2006). Nigel Charnock, on his British Council website states that 'Nigel Charnock's work is about "performance" in the widest sense' (2010).

that environment can be seen to offer. Her historical position, as a solo performance artist working with everyday domestic activities in performance contexts like schools and kitchens, as well as studios, clearly differs from this narrow conceptualisation of devised theatre practice. Devising includes diverse practices, including planning and discussion, which can entail 'sitting around'. Yet Baker also repeatedly reveals, in her discussion of how she makes, a recurrent tendency to conceptualise and plan: 'I tend to make things thinking about it for years' (BB1: 9).

As previously discussed, performance art, Live Art and contemporary theatre have moved closer together as experimental practices (p.58) and, like Harvie, (2010), I have found the term 'devising' to be a useful collective term to describe a number of diverse approaches to experimental performance and theatre-making across these five practices, whilst I am also attentive to their differences. My primary concern here is with exploring and expanding upon the richness of strategies and processes in operation within solo postdramatic devising. I will go on to examine in more detail how all of these practitioners, including Baker, speak of making solo work in ways which reveal rigorous planning and conceptualising, thinking as well as doing, and with a sophisticated engagement with all the materials that theatre practice has to offer.

I have organised discussion of specific strategies and processes of solo devising into some broad categories, responding to Melrose's call:

to identify what might be called practitioner theories of knowledge, practitioner presuppositions, practitioner performance-making processes, practitioner ways of seeing, practitioner research



processes, practitioner modes of evaluation and the intuitive-analytical operations of practitioner expertise (2006: 98).

Her repeated use of the word 'practitioner' suggests the potential to re-think the connected category terms, like theory, research or analytical practice in the light of this specification, and I explore this further by focusing on solo practitioner research and theories, presuppositions, performance-making processes and expert intuitive-analytical working.

I have arranged this discussion into the broad headings of *exploration, generation of material, composition and performance*. These distinctions are not absolute but rather inter-connected, not linear in realisation but co-existing. They are not 'stages' created to suggest one category develops sequentially from the other but co-exist within a solo practice, as 'stratigraphic' processes (Pearson, 2001: 24). Stratigraphy is a term Pearson applies to refer to layered, compositional working, which I discuss in more depth in the next section on composition (p.235). Exploration, generation of material, composition and performance are all mined for their potential at different times in different people's practices. They contain further distinct kinds of activity within them, which I discuss, but in order to devise a piece of theatre, these practitioners and my survey of the writings about devising do reveal recurrent engagement with these broader processes. They therefore form the architecture for this chapter.

In offering particular practitioner examples, I have selected what is said, in interview, in relation to making solo work and have analysed and expanded upon this, writing in relation to my developing ideas about solo devising. I

do, however, where relevant, mention the 'unspoken' as part of these practitioner discourses. If these interviewees do not *explicitly* speak of a creative process, like improvisation or intuitive thinking, I do not take this to mean that it is not present in their practice. The opposite truth could be that it is so much an active part of their practice as to be taken for granted. I understand Melrose's category of 'practitioner presupposition' to include this idea – for example, that intuition is incorporated into their working in such a way that they do not feel the need to verbalise it. Unspoken assumptions could be said to be particularly operative in solo working, which includes a high proportion of nonverbalised working. I have touched on these unspoken areas, where relevant, while primarily focusing my analysis on what was spoken aloud, in interview.

## Exploration: Forms of practitioner research

Melrose identifies the need to consider further 'practitioner research processes' and I was curious to reflect on how they might be formulated as part of a solo devising process and what, if anything, is revealed as particular about solo deviser research processes. I had a sense that in the interviews, the word 'research' was in fact rarely used. To verify this, I searched for the word in the ten interviews. It appeared only 19 times, used twice by myself and eight times by Mike Pearson, who is based in a university and whose devised work includes a strong academic research remit. His background in archaeology might also assume research to be part of the 'excavatory' activity of most of his exploratory practices. Out of about 200,000 words, however, this is scarce usage. This lack of the use of

the word research in these interviews is a clear example of a 'practitioner presupposition' in operation: that good performance-making necessarily requires engaging in processes of diverse experiments. In the interviews, attention is focused on describing this experimental doing, as opposed to naming it. This 'trying' that defines expert practice further reveals that the process of struggle is itself generative, as much as the achievement of an outcome.

Pearson describes the question contained in his well-known site and radio work *The First Five Miles* as 'an attempt to make a big scale work using only one performer' (MP1: 13). The helicopter, meant to light his solo walk across five miles of dark landscape at Myndd Bach fails to turn up, creating 'a fairly miserable experience all around' (ibid.). Yet this work and question prompt another question about bringing landscape into studio work in the piece made in the same year, *The Man Who Ate His Boots*, a work he discusses in *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001). In fact, these solo practitioners at times further frame these questions and struggle as substantive ingredients of the live performance itself (see below).

For these makers, devising solo allows for questions and obsessions to be pursued in particular and specific detail. Charnock spoke directly of his highly individual quest:

'One of the reasons I do solos as well is I am having a conversation with the audience and saying this is me and this is what I have found out [...] I have always been kind of searching for this kind of truth or God or who I am or [...] enlightenment or awakening.' (NC1: 22)

Questions posed by the work can be either explicit or implicit, broad or specific and can link from one piece to another. The interviewees' approaches to exploration and research at the beginning of their devising processes are arranged below under four headings, with an identification of which practitioners spoke frequently about these processes in interview.

1. Individual learning as a research process. This consists of the processes of informal finding out or training needed for the work (all practitioners).
2. Information gathering. This works through sourcing new materials and interacting with people through interview, discussion, questionnaire (all practitioners).
3. 'Immersive research'. This works through accessing practitioner intuition (Baker); immersion in the world (Charnock, Houstoun) and the work (Houstoun, Baker, Etchells); correct reading of material when it arrives (Baker).
4. Starting with explicit questions. This often results in a chain of questioning, embodied in the work, where one exploration of a question leads to another (Sennett's 'problem finding and problem solving' 2008: 26). I chose to write about two of the practitioners who revealed evidence of this process the most in interview, namely Pearson and Etchells.

## **Individual learning as a research process**

All of these practitioners spoke of making solo work which allowed them to pursue individual and particular personal, political or artistic interests.

Throughout their devising processes, they need to expand their resource base, to be able to follow these interests beyond what is already known, and be open to gaining new information and skills.

Despite being highly experienced, they all articulated commitments to being continuous learners, gathering skills and information through processes of reading, discussion, observation and trial and error, which were relevant to the work being created at the time. Charnock increased his knowledge of flamenco dance by watching a documentary on it, in order to obtain the right spirit and physical choreography for his work on *Frank*. Pearson learned what it was like to play the saxophone in public and learned that he lacked the requisite skills to take this into his performance work. Baker learned about clinical psychology. Houstoun learned about dramaturgical process from Etchells, and he learned about making transitions through shifts of physical energy from Houstoun. The resource base of the solo deviser is expanded at the start of the process and throughout the work.

## **Information gathering**

The interviewees discussed two main kinds of information gathering used in and for their work, activities that also take place in the learning referred to in the previous section. These include gathering the kind of information, which informs the practitioner and adds to their knowledge. This could be about family history – Baker and Pearson spoke of journeying to places and

people associated with home to collect information for *Ballistic Buns* (Baker) and *Bubbling Tom* and *Carrlands* (Pearson). It also includes adding to knowledge about a specific topic, such as the detailed information obtained by Baker about Cognitive Behavioural Therapy from clinical psychologist Richard Hallam, or the data about visitor figures, tendencies or needs that Pearson collected from the archaeologists he worked with, including 'correspondents, so-called disciplinary experts – archaeologists, geographers' (MP1: 2). This is information which remains unaltered but informs the practitioners' thinking and is applied in different ways to performance. For example, in his audio walk *Carrlands*, Pearson had a series of conversations with archaeologist John Barrett, which he translated into compositional ideas on 'trying to provide the visitor with interpretive tools' (MP1: 3) rather than overloading them with information.

The practitioners also gathered research materials from wider sources, which are included in the work. They 'investigate the locale' (Sennett, 2008: 279), valuing everyday experience and knowledge. Houstoun interviewed and recorded her students in her workshop for *48 Almost Love Lyrics*. Etchells spoke of working as a 'gathering mechanism' (TE1: 2) for materials obtained from colleagues, friends, artists and family, in *Instructions for Forgetting* and *In the Event*. Pearson collected information about the River Ancholme in North Lincolnshire by asking highly specific questions ('So what was it like in the winter of 1947?' and 'Did you find any bog oak?'), addressed to people intimately connected to the area, and described as a kind of 'questionnairing' (4).

In these instances, solo performance research and performance-making engage in a type of connective, social and political practice, by validating a wide range of people's 'expert' experience and memories. Ethical issues of authorship are involved, as Houstoun acknowledges:

I am always struck how Tim can set up these really interesting ways of soliciting material from people but in a way that doesn't feel like leaning on people too heavily. I think it is very hard to come up with constructs without feeling that you are just preying on people.  
(WH1: 18)

Solo devisers, if they want to open up the work to multiple perspectives, which in a sense group devising always allows, have to be particularly skilled at managing other people's information, negotiating ethical questions of value and credit.<sup>76</sup>

### **Immersive research**

Two different kinds of immersion are discussed in this interview material, which I would describe as immersion in the world and immersion in the working process, both with research intentions.

Charnock spoke of an intuitive immersion in a chosen environment, requiring what Claxton articulates as a 'diffuse', rather than 'concentrated' focus of attention (67):

Before any solo, there is a lot of sponge work that goes on. I go quiet months before I go into the studio. I read a lot and I watch a lot of television. I tend to not go to the theatre, to look at things that are in the same field as what I am about to do. I do a lot of other things; I

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<sup>76</sup> This is in some ways the opposite to the accusation of self-indulgence in autobiography – the 'group fame' syndrome familiar in documentary and reality television work, whereby you can obtain specific, detailed information from the general public for free and essentially manipulate it in the way you like. For an exploration of this, see the work of the artist, Phil Collins

go to exhibitions and I read the newspapers, I go to films and I read books [...]. I just open my arms and look around the place and see what comes in. (NC1: 12)

He obtains the 'as yet unknown' by making himself available to materials 'coming in' and then is able to 'localise', in the way Sennett writes about, identifying when the relevant starting material has arrived. This is also reminiscent of Chris Bannerman and the ResCen artists' agreement that beginning a creative process involves searching for an unknown 'emergent premise' (2006: 15). To find this source material, the first act of creation, for them can in fact entail fostering the conditions out of which this unknown premise can emerge.<sup>77</sup> This also echoes Nancy Stark Smith's proposition that 'the first move is into sensation' (Dey, 1998: 56).<sup>78</sup>

Charnock carries out this 'first move' by allowing himself to be porous and semi-permeable, so that aesthetic concerns, images or actions in the world can pass through and into him. He embodies Stark Smith's suggestion, physically opening up the senses. These research materials are a combination of what can be found, obtained, sent or invited, and also ones that are in the immediate environment.

All of these practitioners work from and through an ongoing, expertly active curiosity:

WH: I am never really sure what research is [...], it's like a long slow making to me – you are always trying to make something. I don't

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<sup>77</sup> Bannerman writes of how the ResCen artists agree that the emergent premise can be a concern, a concept or a physical entity and it has the paradoxical nature of being new and yet needing to be recognised as important by the artist (2006:15).

<sup>78</sup> Smith, who is a co-founder and teacher of Contact Improvisation offered this as an opening statement in a 1995 workshop at Bates Dance Festival, Maine, USA.



think there is such a thing as not trying to make. In some way or another. (WH1: 3)

Houstoun exemplifies how making is a continual questing process. Both devising and improvisation operate as open-ended enquiries, including 'what if' tactics as primary method. Improvisation as a creative practice deals in real time with the unforeseen (OED, L. *improvisus*, *v.*). Devising, in contrast, is a process of forming a plan or design through heuristic means (i.e. through doing it rather than through devising a plan in a separate medium such as script, notation or design). They do differ in practice, the most obvious difference being that improvisation is often used as a method within a devising process, for generating new material, whereas devising is a broader term to signify a wide variety of methods, including ones which are also opposite to improvisation, like conceptualisation and planning.

However, as heuristic processes, they share a concern with doing which trains responsiveness, openness and presence: 'Where you are in a particular state and you can let something much more baseline happen' (WH1: 9), as Houstoun suggests. Expert invention can require a rhythm of slowness, as much as the efficient speed that is perhaps more frequently associated with experienced knowing. All of these practitioners speak of carrying out this rhythm of slow working at times, suspending decision making in favour of considering, reflecting and weighing up; suggestive of the creative and skilled 'pondering' which is advocated by Sennett (2008: 279) as an important part of expert making.

## **Starting with explicit questions**

All of these practitioners revealed an interest and a curiosity about what theatre can be and do, but in Pearson's and Etchells's cases, this is explicitly discussed in their writings and more evident throughout their interviews. Questions were articulated in relation to dramaturgy, which were then explored through the making and performing process itself.

This questioning process can be maintained across several consecutive pieces of work, akin to the exploratory recycling that is common in postdramatic practice.<sup>79</sup> In solo practice, this is perhaps more evident due to the vision of the work belonging to one person. I have chosen in this section to draw out this particular line of connection between several of Etchells's and Pearson's works. In the light of this, I have included more explicit detail about the performed works, as it is necessary to refer to them in relation to the discussion of questions raised and 'answered' across works. For Pearson, as it relates to several of his pieces, I do this throughout the discussion. For Etchells, I detail the work and then discuss the linked questioning. I also explore what this particular method of dramaturgical research offers to the particular discussion of solo devised practice.

As a full-time academic, Pearson's creative practice is funded in part as research activity and he affirmed that self-reflexivity is required of him, in order to fit a scholarly research remit: 'it's supposedly asking questions about what this kind of work might do' (MP1: 5). In the terms previously

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<sup>79</sup> See also Heddon's discussion of recycling in the work of Third Angel, The Wooster Group and Goat Island (2006: 199), Williams on Lone Twin (2011: 20) or Bailes on 'repurposing' in Harvie & Lavender, 2010: 86.

outlined (p.18) for describing practice in an academic context, his solo devising operates as 'practice as research' and he is very experienced at explicitly articulating questions arising from or directing practice, in the works themselves and in his scholarly writing (see Appendix III). However, this writing is not concerned with the context of *solo* devised practice. In this sense, the questions are Pearson's but they also arise from the particular issues that a solo devising economy of working creates. These include questions about the kinds of skills needed for one performer, how to work with monologue, autobiographical material, formal questions about the weight of different materials in relation to the solo performer, and about finding theatre materials which connect to audience and performer.

In Pearson's account of his solo working over thirty years, the way he speaks of his practice evokes the 'experimental rhythm' of problem-finding, problem-solving and further problem-finding which Sennett (2008: 26) observes to be a central method of 'questioning'. This is, as I have discussed, one of three key markers indicating the operation of expertise, which can be honed by practitioners (2008: 26). Bannerman, speaking of the ResCen practitioners concurs with Sennett: 'It is not just that they develop problem-solving skills, they appear to have fine-tuned the ability to look for interesting problems' (2004: 5). Pearson's devising and performing contexts involve curious, investigative processes; the pieces of work he makes act as creative responses, testing an initial conceptual question he has devised. This temporary 'answer' prompts further questions to be explored, in his next piece of work: 'performative research' in action. He is

able to connect works in this way as a solo deviser as the particular line of investigation can be followed through without compromise.

His early solo works, *Whose Idea was the Wind* and *Deaf Birds*, differed from the previously physical, endurance-based work for which he was better known. Pearson described *Whose Idea was the Wind*:

A tiny show that I did on the top of a table, with an audience sitting really, really close and I just did it with my hands on the table. I used a lot of birds' skulls and bits of birds' wings and feathers and I managed to find a way of supporting them in my hands, so I could create these strange crows, just with my hands. It was a series of stories about birds, mainly from Native American Indian traditions. So you could just see my head and my hands and it was only lit on the table. (MP1: 7)

As part of the research process for *Deaf Birds*, the second of these two pieces, Pearson tested out his music skill by playing an instrument in a church and shopping centre: 'one of the interesting things that I did in that work was I played solo saxophone. I am a terrible saxophone player and I said "I will play the saxophone in this"' (8). Pearson discussed this as realising he had aptitude for 'remembering long blocks of text' (7), but clearly not for public saxophone playing, as I mentioned earlier. He also reveals his skill at being open to challenging his performing self – working in public with something he was not accomplished at – and also reveals a developed self-knowledge that edits out activities which he knows he will not develop further. In the context of solo devising, this demonstrates a use of research as the expansion of a solo practitioner's skills base, notably formal experiment with a kind of storytelling which was then new to Pearson and conveyed through spoken monologue. His exploration of the use of monologue continues across further pieces of work, in relation to both register and content.

In the first of his 'From Memory' trilogy, *A Death in the Family* (1991), Pearson tests out whether he can perform intensely personal material delivered in a formally 'low key' style: speech as 'gossip' which he identifies as 'a family tradition [...] grandma and granddad kept the village shop and the village taxi service' (9). This undoes notions of monologic speech as oratory or self-addressed and instead is dialogic in intent, meant to trigger a more fluid exchange with the audience. In the process of asking this solo-specific question, he discovered 'a big revelation [...] in a text you can wing from this thing to this thing to another to another' (ibid.). The solo performer, as the sole deliverer provides the continuity between varied kinds of textual materials. As is the nature of much devised work, the piece revealed more answers than were asked, and Pearson deftly demonstrated the ability to read the unexpected in what he had produced and went on to apply it to his next piece, *Patagonia* (1992).

In *Patagonia*, Pearson extends this multi-modal textual delivery while asking another related question about form: 'I began to then wonder whether one could transfer that way of talking and performing into material, which was far less personal. How would it be if you could keep that going?' (10). The piece was about the shooting of Huan in Patagonia in 1909, by Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid: 'one of those classic moments in Welsh history'. Pearson dressed as biographical 'other': 'I wore a mask and coat and I had guns and the whole lot' (ibid.). As has been discussed, solo work is presumed to include personal narrative. Pearson's line of enquiry further tested this assumption out, exploring the effect of a personalised tone when it is not linked to personal narrative.

This moves towards dramatic acting, in one sense, where performers habitually work with characters and material not based on themselves. However, it is different when being performed within the disciplinary frame of postdramatic, devised working, with its specific practice conventions. Devising predominantly includes creating personae closer to the performer than to a character – Kirby’s non-matrixed performing or simple acting as opposed to complex acting (p.129). Undoing this lamination of performer and material in this context potentially allows other effects to emerge. I discussed in Chapter Two how highly personal material seems to be delivered by Baker and Pearson in what Lehmann terms a ‘cold’ postdramatic delivery, not revealing emotional connections or psychological feeling, but which I have reframed as making room for audiencing – for the audience to bring their own materials, thoughts and feelings to the situation. Extending Pearson’s question of a performing technique (can a personal tone be used for impersonal material) to a performing function (what is the effect of doing this, on audience or performer) raises other research questions which could be useful for him to further explore. What specific kind of audiencing might be enabled by this approach? Might it involve people being able to engage more fully with material they are not familiar with? How does this approach affect the solo deviser?

Pearson also spoke of a further set of research questions about the assumed scale of theatre work: ‘We are so used to performance work being in the middle distance’ (12); and this area of questioning again has specific implications for solo working. It started with *Dead Man’s Shoes* (1997), the

beginning of his collaborative relationship with Mike Brookes.<sup>80</sup> Pearson continued to use 'block text' – monologue – and a set of precise physical actions, but now shared a small studio space with a forty-foot long projection screen, on which seven projections were continually showing over 700 images. The audience and performer were 'jammed in' (12), unable to see the whole image or space and only seeing the performer in profile at times. This visual and spatial 'jam' recalls Lehmann's 'aesthetics of plethora' (2006: 90), the crowd or proliferative excess of theatrical materials offered in a postdramatic theatrical space which intentionally overwhelms an audience's potential to create unity or structural coherence in a work.

This work also reveals a characteristically postdramatic 'non-hierarchical use of signs' (86). In this case, it is the visual image, a postdramatic 'theatre of scenography' as Lehmann terms it (93), which carries the meaning, and it is not just language, diction and gesture which are de-throned, but also the solo performer, fragmented and de-centred. Pearson spoke of searching to present a 'physical presence and choreography that is somehow not in conflict with all these images, that might somehow disappear into all these images' (MP1: 12).

This questioning of scale and visibility of solo performer presence was continued in the work on *The First Five Miles*. This was a performance work

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<sup>80</sup> Although I later define his work with Brookes as co-devising, I decided to include the material worked on with him for two reasons. Firstly although strictly outside the research remit of solo conceptual working, it reveals important information about making solo performance, and about connections between solo pieces over time and secondly, it reveals, the differences between solo and co-devised work.

involving live radio broadcast mixed with live feed from Pearson as he walked five miles across Mynydd Bach as the character of Augustus Brackenbury, a Victorian landowner involved in the land enclosure of Ceredigion in West Wales. He and Brookes were testing out the question of 'whether you could make landscape work that didn't reduce it to a backdrop' (13). Pearson was narrating the walk, the narrative of enclosure, placing himself in a position of conduit, audio transmitter and translator of the journey. This time the landscape, as opposed to the visual image, was given the weight of the meaning. The 'unexpected' failure of the helicopter to take off, meant to light the solo performer's journey, effected yet another kind of erasure of the solo performer, even as Pearson located this non-appearance as 'our greatest disappointment' (2001: 144) and unintentional (MP1: 13).

This experimentation provoked a further question about how landscape can be brought indoors, into a small studio, which became *The Man Who Ate His Boots*, a solo 'about four blokes from Lincolnshire' (ibid.). These personae include Mike Pearson, his great grandfather, John Franklin the polar explorer and Augustus Brackenbury (from *The First Five Miles*). The audience were standing in a small space with four small screens, which played looped projections of the polar walk from different viewing angles. Pearson narrated four fifteen-minute monologues about the walk from the four different characters. He decided to use a simultaneous translation system, so the audience each had headsets with his miked voice playing in their ears, while loud music was played in the space. Even when visually obscured, due to low lighting, his voice was ever present and 'inside' the



audience's heads. The solo performer again moves between personae, but changes from being a visual referent to an auditory transmitter.

Scale is once again explored, continuing the investigation of the question of bringing landscape indoors, from the filmed vast scale of territory played through small screens to the individual performer inhabiting an explorer persona, again not always visible but sound-tracking the audience's experience. The performer's voice is connected to the audience through the headphones yet physically unstable – present and absent, proximate and distanced. Here again, the weight of the theatrical materials and the meaning of the work is shifted, from the performer to the sound, provoking 'disorientation' (MP1: 14) and again the audience are required to work at 'audiencing' the material, structuring their experience to walk or move or work out where to place their focus. Yet Pearson identified it as a successful piece of theatre for a municipal theatre audience: 'I am not one for the anecdotes of audiences but I do remember one lady coming up to me and saying, "Well if that is experimental theatre, give us more of it"' (MP1: 14). The performance successfully 'worked' as theatre performance and as performed research.

Etchells, as a writer and director, also revealed a persistent interest in posing compositional questions or problems, which his solo devising can explore over several of his works. His questions are also directed towards contemporary theatre more generally, rather than solo devising in particular. However, as with Pearson, when framed in relation to their own specific solo practices, they have different implications. Etchells asks:

'What does the theatre or performance event constitute? What does it need or not need?' I think we have talked about this before: putting too much theatre in theatre and putting too little theatre in theatre. You are constantly testing what is possible and what is necessary in that frame. (TE2: 26)

Applied to his solo working these questions become more relevant, I would suggest, to issues of performer presence (what does [solo] theatre constitute/need/not need) and the comparative weight of other signifying materials in relation to the performer (too much/too little/enough).

One of Etchells's other main interests lie in exploring the relationship between the audience and the work: 'What is the initial register, contract, framework, expectation or negotiation that you establish with the viewer or the reader? And having done that, what are the ways you can push or manipulate or twist it?' (TE2: 17). Etchells makes explicit the power dynamics inherent in the deviser and audience relationship. Theatre and solo performance offer Etchells the opportunity to stretch the boundaries of a performance where contractual agreement between performer and audience is initiated, only to be 'pushed', 'manipulated' or 'twisted'.

The pieces Etchells discussed were *Instructions for Forgetting* [IFF], *Downtime* and *Words and Pictures*. I will first give a sense of the first two pieces and then discuss them as a set.

*IFF* is in a performance lecture format, which foregrounds the enquiry process in its very form, as Ladnar confirms in his definition: 'the results of an enquiry are presented in a live reading of a prepared text using direct audience address'. He is writing about the work of Lone Twin and what he

calls their 'lecture performance' *On Everest* (1997), but the primary features of the form remain the same. Etchells is working from a prepared text and film, speaking directly to an audience. Richard Lowden who works on stage as a technician plays a number of five-minute filmed extracts Etchells had invited friends to send to him, taken from discarded old video footage. Etchells combines speaking about the way the piece was made, the texts that were sent to him and the texts he wrote for the piece. He starts in a genial, casual mode of delivery, describing to the audience the process of making the piece and of how the video extracts he had been sent were confusing and made no sense. He invited people to send him a set of unrelated stories, which he would use. He plays the video pieces as he further narrates the writing people sent to him. The video extracts and writings switch registers, from political to personal, sexual to tragic, and include one section of 'white noise' – a blank tape. Etchells also reveals other facets of his performed presence, from friendly narrator to cruel father. The connections between pieces are not explained – the viewer is invited to gradually make more and more sense of the work themselves.

*Downtime* consists of a large-scale ten-minute filmed projection of Etchells's face, during which he is located as thinking. He sits facing the screen, with his back to the audience and refers to previously written notes, in which he has attempted to capture what he was thinking from watching and writing down what he thinks he was thinking. In the live situation, he orders and refers to these texts and tries to re-create what he was thinking as the film is played. *Words and Pictures* is an extension of this piece, a series of seven of these ten minute 'thinking pieces' where he plays the film of himself

thinking about a particular topic, and tries 'supposedly' (TE1: 3) to reconstruct what he thought, live, from notes and live interactions.<sup>81</sup>

Etchells described in detail his thinking process in relation to choosing what solo to work on after *IFF*. I cite it at length as it reveals just how he uses performance as an active process of questioning, across his solo pieces:

Having done '*Instructions*' there was an urge to make a sequel to it. I conceived of a number of similar kinds of projects where I would ask for something. I kept developing the initial letter but I wasn't very happy [...] I was very aware of how I dealt with the random material that other people had sent me and I was also very aware of constructing narratives, saying, 'Oh this came from so and so', even before the material for this notional second project had arrived [...] I felt I was already predicting. In the first one I was totally naive. When the videotapes started to arrive, it was scary because I had no idea what this material was or what to do with it, and I thought, 'well I will ask for stories as well'. It was a very real process, trying to figure out what to do with that stuff. And in the sequel to it, it just became too clear that it could already tread the same path and become a set of very worked strategies. And I just didn't really want to do it. So I switched the focus of that second piece and made a video piece instead, in 2000. (TE1: 3)

Etchells's commitment to a 'real' process of working out what to do, his preference for being 'naive' and his avoidance of 'predicting' or 'worked strategies', reveal his commitment to the devising process as one of responsive working out what to do in a given context, rather than a repetition of known techniques or skills. In this sense it echoes the postdramatic concern with performance as live event rather than repeated dramatic representation. He also reveals his ability to manage himself as a

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<sup>81</sup> Although not analysing the solo works, this 'supposedly' is important, because it reveals his working to be concerned precisely with 'truth and lies' as subject matter. His narration can work as both truth and fiction; we cannot know if he was thinking at all. Equally, what he says in his 'thinking out loud' that he may have been thinking simply affords him an opportunity to talk about a precisely focused constellation of thoughts to which he often returns (death or fatherhood, for example).

solo deviser – resisting his desire for the security of repetition. In this he manifests again what Sennett identifies as a characteristic of expert making: ‘an experience that suspends resolution and decision in order to probe’ (279). Etchells’s probing is a ‘figuring out’, a questioning which he extends into his next solo, *Downtime*, a video piece, composed using a completely different process, later extended into the longer work, *Words and Pictures*. As described above, he is alone in the work, looking at himself, trying to write what he was thinking. His is the only voice in the work, as opposed to the multiple stories and video materials of his friends in *IFF*. He described the piece as more ‘private and contemplative whereas actually the other solo [IFF] is much more social’ (ibid.).

Etchells’s devising strategies in these three pieces reveal a characteristic testing out of the extremes of what the performance event can ‘constitute’, and in this case, particularly the solo performance event, even if not framed in this way by him. The devising processes he engages with explore whether a solo can operate with such a weight of material given over to other voices (in writings and video) which are also not dramaturgically connected together by an over-riding authorial narrative. He names this strategy as containing either ‘risk or generosity’ (TE1: 4), and the abundance of authors it posits risks the incoherence of the ‘too much theatre’ he speaks of above. His second solo work switches strategies but examines what the ‘too little theatre in theatre’ (also cited above), in this case solo theatre, might ‘constitute’. He risks being accused of narcissism in *Downtime*, with Etchells the performer staring at Etchells on film – and the topic being his own thinking.

What is specific to solo devising in all four of the exploratory research processes discussed in this section (individual learning, information gathering, immersive and explicit questioning) is the highly detailed and personal nature of the process. While devising itself is open-ended, solo devising can further focus the questions into specific areas, particular geographical places, physical movements and philosophical questions. Each of the practitioners is able to pursue these questions over time, and incorporate them into several pieces of work without the inevitable compromise that group enquiry can produce. They raise issues particularly pertinent to solo work: of scale, autobiographical use of material, individual and collective authorship, audience-performer relationship and performer presence. They also reveal that solo-making can share, along with group devising practices, in being an open-ended, 'problem-posing' kind of performance research practice.

## Generation of material

### **Improvisation**

Improvisation is repeatedly referred to in writings on devising theatre as one central activity used to generate new materials for performance (Heddon, 2006: 2; Govan et al, 2007: 7; Mermikides, 2010: 2; Harvie, 2010: 2), and it is widely used in music, dance and theatre practices. It has much in common with devising, being concerned with creative, new making but is not synonymous with it. I will initially define and distinguish it from solo devising and then explore how it works within solo devising as demonstrated by examples from the solo interviewees. I will then extend this thinking to reflect on what it offers to solo devising and solo practice.

As with devising, practitioners of improvisation resist defining it, leaving a space of potentiality rather than fixing it as a method or practice. Dance practitioner and improviser Louise Steinman reminds us of its Latin root, 'improvisio' meaning 'to not see before' (1986: 77). 'We improvise the moment we cease to know what is going to happen' (Tufnell & Crickmay 1999: 46). Steve Paxton, founder of the experimental dance form Contact Improvisation, also describes it through non-definition: 'Improvisation is a word for something which can't keep a name: if it does stick around long enough to acquire a name it has begun to move towards fixity' (1987: 19).

A making process that requires not knowing, not planning ahead, remaining nameless and mobile seems very suited to solo postdramatic performance practices that involve making work through processes of open-ended questioning and diverse approaches. Charnock describes it as:

a very subtle thing, like tuning in a radio somewhere in Poland. Sometimes you get it and sometimes you don't. It's very delicate and fragile, improvisation. It's about being absolutely out of control and absolutely in control at the same time, absolutely present and absolutely absent. (5)

Taking into account the provisos discussed above, and for the purposes of analysing how it operates within solo devising, I will be using a working definition of improvisation as an exploratory creative practice, which unfolds by drawing on the particular circumstances of the present moment and the multiple resources a practitioner brings, and which can generate material for performance.

Ruth Zaporah, the founder of the body-based improvisational theatre form 'Action Theatre', emphasises presence: 'to relax our attention into the present moment' (1995: xx). Jonathon Burrows suggests that 'Improvisation is a negotiation with the patterns your body is thinking' (2010: 27). Negotiation with oneself is a very relevant for solo devisers who are in continual dialogue with themselves. Both of these definitions also start to specify particular types of unravelling actions that improvisation encourages: undoing the tension of creative thinking habitually concerned with looking forward or backward by focusing on the present. Parallels can be drawn here with Sennett's 'localising' ability, and the skill of focusing on what is important in the immediate environment or area of work.

Improvisation engages with undoing practitioners' 'patterns', and again, for the solo deviser involved in experimental work, drawing on themselves as a primary resource by working with and beyond repetition is highly relevant. Action theatre improvisation exercises 'invite us to inhabit our bodies, deconstruct our normal behaviour and then, notice the details of what we've got' (Zaporah, 1995: xxi). Or put in another way, improvisation opens up the solo deviser to new patterns and new ways to devise.

Improvisation differs from other kinds of making by not centralising the use of a pre-text or design, although using scores of pre-determined structure is also a part of how these solo practitioners can choose to work with it.

Charnock summarises the relevance of improvisation to postdramatic work: 'Why I am doing improvisation is because I am trying to make it as alive as possible, in the moment. Because for me, that is what theatre is about. It is



that moment of liveness' (NC1: 4). A practice that fosters 'aliveness' is clearly relevant to a theatre concerned with performance as a live process, unfolding between the audience and the performer.

Improvisation functions in several different ways within postdramatic theatre or devised work. It is widely used as a method for generating new material, either in rehearsal or performance, as a performance practice in its own right and as an immersive rehearsal and training process for creating a functioning, sensate performer or ensemble.<sup>82</sup> It is also used for personal development, in therapeutic contexts or learning environments associated with creative play; however, this is not the focus of this enquiry.

Devising and improvisation have much in common. They are creative, exploratory practices that can generate new performance material. They work with the practitioner as a sensate, responsive presence and foreground interaction with the present moment and context in which the work is being made as a critical generative activity. But they also have important differences.

On the most general level, improvisation is a particular method of making, whereas devising involves a number of methods, of which improvisation is an important one. As contemporary choreographer/dancer Jonathon Burrows points out: 'Improvisation is one way to find material.

Improvisation is not the only way to find material' (2010: 26). Reading, editing, talking, watching films, telling jokes and thinking are all generative

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<sup>82</sup> For some useful discussions and maps, see Tufnell & Crickmay (1990); Zaporah (1995); Johnston, (1998); Smith & Dean, R. (1997); Halprin (1995).

of performance material but not what would be commonly named as improvising. Improvisation also differs from devising with its main creative activity taking place within a temporal present, whereas devising also includes prospective and retrospective activities like conceptualising and planning or reflection and analysis, all related to making but not the material making process itself.

In these interviews, Charnock and Pearson were alone in explicitly naming improvisation as part of their solo devising practices. I will mainly refer to their discussion to frame it within this enquiry. Baker, Etchells and Houstoun did not name it as part of their working methods, but there are two important provisos that I need to make about this, first.

This lack of explicit naming by the other practitioners is not because they do not use it but is more related to their working out of different disciplinary backgrounds, and the languages used within these. For Charnock and Houstoun, coming from physical theatre and New Dance backgrounds, improvisation is a standard way to find choreographic material. Houstoun describes how she generated work for her solo *Haunted*: 'I think I had a policy of just making thirty seconds a day. It was like – don't even judge what you are doing. I just made movement' (WH1: 6). Charnock, like Houstoun, spoke of beginning in a studio, working physically: 'certainly one thing I will do is start to choreograph something on myself to music or to some text that I had written'. How he 'choreographs' was not specified, like Houstoun, but I interpreted both of these practitioners as speaking about using physical improvisation to obtain this material. Burrows reveals the

same tendency to assume its use when defining choreographic material: 'In dance we often use the word 'material' to describe individual movement or short sequences *found by a process of improvisation*' (2010: 5; my italics).

This is another clear example of a 'practitioner presupposition' at work whereby an activity goes unstated because it is used with such high frequency. For Etchells, his reticence to use the word can be more linked to his engagement with postdramatic theatre practice as opposed to dramatic work: 'For years they couldn't quite bring themselves to use the word "improvising"' (1999: 52), he writes, of Forced Entertainment's devising process. Experimental theatre practitioners can shy away from the term, with its frequent associations with verbal-based comedy and competition, as in the 'Theatresports' of Keith Johnstone or popular television programmes like *Whose Line is it Anyway?*

For Baker coming from fine and performance arts, elements of improvised activity are used within her task-based pieces, without it being necessarily named as such.<sup>83</sup> Baker identifies her theatre-specific associations with it when naming the verbal improvisation she carried out with Sian Stevenson as part of the duet, *A Model Family Pilot* (2008), as a 'new step we had taken of ad-libbing together' (BB1: 18).

Pearson, on the other hand, works with music and theatre and both disciplines have frequent engagement with improvised practices of differing

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<sup>83</sup> Performance art includes the use of task-based work, actions and Happenings, all of which involve planned and structured activity (Carlson, 2004: 105; Allain and Harvie, 2006: 158) but which inevitably also include elements of improvised activity, in relation to timing, tempo, dynamic and management of the audience participation in the work.

kinds. Pearson's collaboration with Peter Brötzmann, a free jazz improviser, will be discussed further below and explains clearly his familiarity and usage of the term. Finally, I was prompted to have a more explicit discussion of improvisation with Charnock as it was a central part of his practice at the time, with his initially improvised solo *Frank* having received an extended life through its popularity and many performances.

The second proviso is that, although not explicitly discussed, Etchells, Baker and Pearson did reveal the use of improvisation as part of the task-based actions they carried out in their live performances. Performance as an unfolding, live event or situation is one arena in which improvisation, devising and Live Art practices clearly move closer together. Etchells, in *Words and Pictures*, works from pre-written texts and pre-recorded film, but chooses the particular ordering of texts in the live moment. This demonstrates a practice of improvisation as 'real time composition' within a devised piece of work, where some of the content of the work has already been made (texts, film) but his decision making, about ordering and sequencing of the spoken words, is made live and publically rather than in rehearsal. This is solo postdramatic theatre as 'situation' or 'theatre as a live event' (Lehmann, 2006: 104), in which Etchells publically performs part of his solo devising process.

The specifically solo context in which this real-time working occurs makes the improvised part of this a relatively straightforward situation. Etchells can simply work with his own impulses, in response to the performance

conditions he has created. There are no other decision makers in the space, creating unexpected actions or situations that he then needs to negotiate. Baker and Pearson also make work where they use improvisation as part of their live practice: Pearson in *Bubbling Tom* and Baker in *Angels*. Both have more complex events to realise than Etchells, involving managing their audiences' decisions as co-performers. They use clear performance scores: Pearson stops at ten points along the guided tour and speaks several long sections of scripted text; Baker unveils the 100 meringue ladies and asks the audience to continue to smile at them for the duration of the ABBA song. Because of the multiple performers in the live event, I consider this work to be solo devised, as it is still conceptually created alone, but performed in a group.

I have chosen to discuss this extension of improvisation practice and working with an audience more fully in the section on devising in performance (p.245), as the activities do overlap. However this overlap also suggests that the use of improvisation as a skill or training for devisers, in immersive, responsive abilities across disciplines, could be very useful to postdramatic theatre practices which use a high level of interaction between audience and performer. This is particularly so for the solo performer, who is alone in managing and performing the public event.

Solo work, as used in real-time composition, foregrounds the issue of 'the score'<sup>84</sup> as applied to improvised practice. By score, I mean any kind of

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<sup>84</sup> For other examples of differing use of scores, see the structured solo work of Julyen Hamilton, or the work of Alan Kaprow, Happenings, the Fluxus artists or Bill Drummond's improvised choral

predetermined structure, which is brought to the creative process in advance. This can include notation, plans, drawings, a set of actions, tasks or intentions. It also allows for a consideration of the solo deviser's body as 'scored', by which I mean patterned by their individual training, skills, experience and disciplinary tendencies. This is important as they rely on themselves as primary resource and how they negotiate and view this patterning is critical to their work. I will take this up again below in relation to Charnock and Houston's different views on physical body patterning, as opportunity and problem.

Pearson regularly works with free jazz improviser<sup>85</sup> Peter Brötzmann: 'one set of works that I do which appears to be a duet but really, it's me desperately doing a solo with whatever he happens to be doing' (MP1: 18). Pearson clearly relishes the enjoyable collaboration that occurs through this collision of improvising practices:

I conceive of a solo performance and then Peter arrives and I know he is going to scrub all over it. I remember we were doing a piece in Germany. I had gone and prepared some William Blake texts, I had some actions already. I was going to cut my shirt to pieces with a Stanley knife; I was going to draw around my body with a piece of chalk, a whole bunch of things. And Pete said, "you know when you do this; I have kind of got this old Thelonus Monk tune in my head" [...]. And he plays it and it is rapturously beautiful. And we rehearse, and it comes to the performance, and does he play it? No, of course not. Why would he ever want to do that? (ibid.)

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work with the17 (sic). Much Live Art practice, concerned with setting up an event, which then takes place in real time, can be viewed as structured improvisation.

<sup>85</sup> The term 'free' is derived from music, namely the 'free jazz' developed in the USA in the 60s. It bases its terminology on the idea that the only rules are the desires of the musicians playing, although one can critique it in a similar way to the idea of the 'real' occurring in performance. Brötzmann is renowned in free music circles, yet as stated, he does use previous knowledge of Pearson, and embodied music skill, which makes the term need qualifying.

Brötzmann does not work with any kind of desire for repetition, or overt musical structure whereas Pearson brings his score of task-based activities to the performed event. Put in another way, the traditions of free jazz meet Live Art practice, with no desire for consensus and a pleasurable, frictional 'scrubbing' ensues. Hence Pearson's description of the work as a 'solo' duet: each practitioner is working with their own tendencies, desires, impulses and embodied skills and disciplines and they elaborate this together.

I pressed Charnock to deliberate in detail on his solo work *Frank*, originally made with a very loose score and intended to be a one-off improvised performance. It is rare for a piece of contemporary solo work to enjoy such a long run. I wanted to explore what effect this extended performance life had on how he worked with it as solo improvisation.

In 2001, Charnock was invited to make a solo commission as part of the Vienna Biennale, celebrating male choreographers and dancers:

I said I'll do a solo but I am not going to rehearse it. So I found music I really liked to dance to and put it in a certain order and then came here actually [The Drill Hall] for about two or three days for three hours a day and I put this music on and I danced to it each day. I just improvised with it, I didn't set anything and that was that.  
(NC1: 1)

He created a music score and then used improvisation (despite saying he was not going to rehearse), to briefly prepare for the live event. He offered his own type of manifesto for improvisation as being rooted in the present, 'new' moment: 'theatre is supposed to be about creativity, not about repetition. And what I see a lot of the time is performers, people and artists just re-presenting something, which to me, is kind of dead' (3). He then

characteristically contradicted himself by speaking of his own ongoing participation in repetitive working. This involved rehearsing voice and dance skills, which will be drawn on in performance; it includes 'hours of doing mundane, practical, obvious things that are right or wrong [...] being in control so that when you go on stage you can forget about all that, but it's still in your body and voice' (7). Vocal and physical technique needs to be embodied at a deep level, structured or scored in the body so it can support and give way to 'play' with what is present. Charnock's training in ballet, contemporary dance and voice is practised and repeated until anchored in somatic memory, which enables him to respond physically and vocally with a specific kind of strength, clarity of line and precision to the demands of an ever-changing performance moment and what he would like to do at the time. This is not, however, straightforward. At a conference on documentation Houstoun argued against the idea that capturing movement is difficult: 'Memory isn't the problem, forgetting is the harder thing' (WH1: 7).<sup>86</sup> Charnock did acknowledge this to be the case with *Frank*, where his performance practice and his performance theory of improvisation had diverged. *Frank* had unavoidably developed into repeated physical and spoken material.

I pushed him further on this in relation to decision making in practised real time composition and he gave two answers: 'it happens without me being there [...] sometimes what happens is that there is that death or release of

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<sup>86</sup> *Mind The Gaps*, 29<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> July 1994 was a three-day conference on performance process and documentation at Lancaster University Theatre Studies Department, with the Centre for Performance Research.



the self, this absence of myself from it all' (NC1: 6).<sup>87</sup> Charnock is describing his experience of not needing to take decisions in performance as an existential one, related to his study and practice of non-dualism. An alternative reading could also suggest that his somatised or 'scored' expert dance and choreographic knowledge is activated in performance, to the extent that decision making could be experienced as occurring without conscious 'thinking' taking place. Its use in this more complex performance situation can also be understood as drawing on not just the embodied training knowledge of the dancer but also the tacit knowledge stored in the conscious and unconscious mind, gained from his professional experience as a performer/choreographer.

Houstoun's concern for not being able to 'forget' is a serious one, in terms of making experimental new physical work. Dance and physical movement require continued training to maintain a responsive body – yet expertise in making, in experimenting and remaining open to curious and new possibilities also requires a lack of patterning which can clash with technical training. How can one forget the score which is remembered physically in the body or voice? Extended to solo devising, what techniques of undoing can be used – to enable a practitioner to improvise in their devising practice and work with the new, and the unexpected?

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<sup>87</sup> As discussed in Chapter Two, this is work based on Advaita, a sub school of the Vedanta School of Hindu philosophy. A useful summary of Advaita can be found in Potter, K. (1981). Experiencing non-duality can be achieved through ongoing and intensive training practices of meditation and study and is different to the everyday experience of most people, who are deemed to be living as separate from divine being and operating in the aforementioned binary forms.

This is where the use of a score in improvisation can be a practical way to undo individual patterns. I am reminded of Jon Hendricks's detailing of different Fluxus scores: 'There are sound scores and graphic scores (which might or might not involve sound). There are recipes for trouble and recipes for solutions. There are in-structure, and event scores' (2008). 'Recipes for trouble' are essential for solo devisers, as Etchells confirms: 'When you are on your own, when it is a solo person there is not anything to knock you off course' (TE2: 26). The improvisation score as recipe, far from not allowing freedom, can, for the solo deviser, generate productive trouble by disrupting patterns of working which are no longer useful.

Improvisation, as a particular creative way of working, seems to make several other offers which are particularly useful to solo devisers. As a practice that involves working in the present moment, it requires solo devisers to immerse themselves in their immediate working context, and be responsive to this, whether in a rehearsal or performance situation. It therefore requires continual practise in drawing on expert skill and continual decision making, to generate material for and in performance.

The practice of improvisation, whether in rehearsal or performance, also requires a practitioner to negotiate a simultaneity of activities. The performer needs to offer material into the process and to have a sense of shaping and managing the whole. This dual perspective remains a continual challenge for solo practitioners, as Houstoun confirms:

You can't just surrender the whole thing. Well you could, but it's very hard to come back from that, on your own. It's performatively very

hard, on your own. So you tend to always be in control, in one way or another, even if you are pretending not to be. (WH1: 10)

The practice improvisation offers is relevant to solo devising practices as a whole, of being immersed in the work and yet also needing to maintain perspective so as to be able to compose and direct it for themselves (albeit not exclusively). Improvisation rehearses this in a simpler, focused way. It also offers a material device, the score, for use in creating interplay between freedom and structure, familiarity and lack of familiarity, which can be an invaluable, flexible tool. The use of different kinds of score allows for an architecture to be in place, even if imaginary and ephemeral, to enable the kinds of temporary 'loss of control' that Houston needs. Sennett speaks of tenement dwellers in New York in the mid-nineteenth century improvising with the steps designed originally as passages on the outside of the buildings, turning them into 'inhabited public space' and precisely working within boundaries: 'Like a jazz musician, a tenement dweller who improvises follows rules' (2008: 236). Imagine a solo deviser in an empty space, with all the choice that offers. Imagine them now in a space with a set of tenement steps – immediately there are levels, resistant materials, and journeys to be taken. For the solo deviser, scores can be dissolvable steps, offering generative structure. Finally, the need for sensitivity and vital, performer presence that improvisation insists upon cannot help but also be useful for the solo postdramatic practitioner. Simply put, it helps them hold the performance space alone.

## **Creative thinking as making**

Different kinds of creative thinking were revealed as being in use by these interviewees, when discussing their solo devising practices. By creative thinking, I mean thought processes which derive from the practitioner's own multiple intelligence sources. Expert, intuitive and analytical thinking, operating separately or together (Melrose, 2006, 2011, Bannerman, 2004) are applied to the making of solo work. Sources include using visual, auditory and physical stimuli and conscious and unconscious materials.

Gregory Ulmer's work on heuristics, 'the branch of logic that treats the art of discovery or invention' (1994: 6), offers a similar combinative definition of creative thinking as 'the interaction of verbal and nonverbal materials and the guidance of analysis by intuition' (140). In this, Ulmer succinctly pairs areas that are commonly separated: logic and invention, and analysis and intuition. His focus is always on how this working is applied to creative processes: the 'mind's hands feeling the composition' (142). Analysis of my sample interviews revealed repeated evidence of this combined approach without it being explicitly offered as a making strategy – another good example of a 'practitioner presupposition' (Melrose, 2006: 98) about creative working. While all devising requires the use of multiple intelligences, in solo devising with an economy based around one person's vision, as maker and performer, engaging in multi-layered kinds of creative thinking is a necessary and much used skill.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> When engaging with thinking as making, in a creative context, the tendency remains to separate mind and body, and conscious and unconscious thought. Mark Johnson in *The Meaning of the Body* (2007) draws on recent experiments in neuroscience to argue that all thinking is embodied and all concepts derive from our physical experience of the world: the mind is not a separate thinking thing.

The interviewees revealed different kinds of thinking as making, what Claxton calls 'mind sets' (Bannerman, 2008: 50) or Melrose 'theoretical practices' (2007: 3). These can be considered as prospective: 'What would happen if...?'; concurrent: 'What is happening?'; and reviewing: 'What happened?'<sup>89</sup> Prospective thinking was suggested when these practitioners discussed activities like conceiving, planning, and mapping. Concurrent thinking included imagining, reverie/musing, dreaming, picturing and image thinking. Retrospective thinking was used when they spoke about engaging in contemplation, reflection and analysis. I will discuss these in relation to specific practitioner examples further on in this chapter. While for the sake of clarity I categorise different modes of thought taking place at different moments, it is always with an understanding of the integrative nature of how they work.

### Intuition and expert intuitive working

Intuition – what it is and how it works is a contested and propositional area of study within creative practice, operating within the same 'not lost but not yet found' (Melrose, 2007: 2) space of solo devising. Its existence is commonly 'known' and yet detailed discussion of it within and practitioner-centred discourses is minimal. An exception to this is the work on intuition and performance creation that the ResCen project at Middlesex continues to carry out, and I will apply and extend ideas drawn from Bannerman, Melrose and Claxton further on in this section when analysing specific practitioner examples. Melrose highlights how discussion of intuition is specifically avoided by many significant performance studies scholars,

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<sup>89</sup> Although this seems to suggest a linearity, in practice, these kinds of thinking are used throughout a devising process, in relation to the material made after each session.

relegated to the realm of the 'unspeakable' or separated out from reflective thought (2006: 100).<sup>90</sup> I therefore need to define some terms I am working with, before engaging more directly with how intuitive working contributes to solo devising through analysing practitioner examples.

Despite being difficult to articulate, Melrose is blunt in her advocacy for its central role in creative practices: 'Let me be absolutely clear here: the operations of expert or 'arts-professional intuitive processes' are fundamental to practitioner expertise, and to expert performance-making processes' (Melrose, 2006: 99). Melrose further argues that the singular word 'intuition' is misleading, and 'misunderstood' replacing it at different times with the plural 'intuitive processes' and 'intuitive operations'. In the following discussion, I use the term 'intuitive working'.

Scholars disagree as to what intuition is, how it works and where it comes from (Agor, 1989; Goldberg, 1983). One useful working definition is offered by Vaughan (1979), who describes it as 'knowing without being able to describe how we know'. This is particularly relevant to this enquiry as it includes the acknowledgement of the difficulty of *speaking* about intuitive processes. Intuitive knowing, as Melrose affirms, is also context-specific and plural: 'multi-dimensional in potential, practice and practitioner-specific, relational in their tight linking to the setups and contexts to which they apply' (2006: 76). Scholars offer different contexts from which to discuss it:

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<sup>90</sup> Melrose reproduces sections of indexes of key performance studies texts by Peggy Phelan (1997), Alan Read (1992), Mike Pearson (2001), Richard Schechner (1997) and Nick Kaye (2000), highlighting how intuition is simply not listed. She suggests this is because of a prioritising of analytical models of knowing above sensing, intuitive ones and the focus in performance studies discourses on speaking about what is made, rather than the process of making (2006: 75).

as 'metaphysical' (Bergson, 1912), in embodied knowledge and feeling (Reber, 89; Polanyi) and in the historic-social realm (Foucault 1977, Bourdieu 1990, Heddon 2006). Melrose gives examples of how it is described through philosophical language, which tends to obscure rather than clarify it as a concept: it remains 'a shadow' (Bergson, 1946: 129), a swirling of dust (132), 'the joy of difference' (Grosz 2005: 35). Melrose's own writing itself is not immune to this tendency, when abstracted from discussing specific examples.<sup>91</sup>

Shirley and Langan Fox (1996), in their article reviewing the major existing literature on intuition include a useful discussion of Bastick and his particularly relevant work on intuition in relation to creativity (1982). He discusses intuitive processing as the initial and central part of creative thinking ('preparation', 'incubation', 'illumination'), followed by logical reasoning ('verification'). His proposition that creative people are distinguished by being able to deftly switch between intuitive and analytical levels of processing is relevant to the discussion of how intuitive working operates as well as being a particularly important skill required by solo deviser, frequently called upon to move between multiple roles.

Ulmer (1994: 7 citing Bastick, 1982: 294) argues how intuitive judgment, working less through inference or cause and effect logic and more through empathy and projection, encourages explanations from a psychoanalytic perspective rather than an inventive one. What this has tended to do, he

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<sup>91</sup> See for example her description of intuitive working as involved in 'play', 'higher plane', 'stores' and a 'ghostly interface zone' (2011: 10).

points out, is generalise intuitive operations, rather than linking it clearly to art-making.

In the interviews, only Bobby Baker directly named different modes of intuitive working as central to her practice: 'I have infinitely more confidence in trusting my intuition massively. And a kind of intellectual confidence' (BB1: 30). She invoked an 'intuitive way' or 'intuitive thing' (BB3: 22) as the reason for making specific artistic choices, like choosing to walk repeatedly over cornflakes in *Box Story*, or to adopting a drag queen Graham Norton-esque persona in order to wear high blue shoes in the same piece (ibid.). She locates this way of working as shaping and defining her individual artistic vision: 'gradually moving towards a point of being much more crisp and clear about what [my work] is. Trusting intuition essentially. That is what it came back to' (BB1: 8). This is a good example of intuitive knowing affecting prospective, concurrent and retrospective thinking, in gradually defining and shaping an artist's signature.

None of the other practitioners named 'intuition' explicitly in interview, but rather repeatedly suggested its use in vocabulary commonly associated with intuitive working, which I detail below. Again this is complex as intuitive language shares the vocabulary of expertise derived from training, and professional experience. Melrose addresses this proximity by replacing discussion of 'intuition' with 'the expert intuitive' (2011, 6) – a change to a concern with skilled working, which I also deploy. It seemed to be most strongly evident when a kind of 'knowing' was articulated without a need for explanation, revealed through information typically derived from feeling,



emotion and sensorial perception. Houstoun reveals what I would read as prospective and concurrent use of intuitive working: 'I have a sense of something that has potential and then over time, a sense of feeling things that could be contained in it' (WH1: 3). Charnock spoke of a devising process where to 'go with the feeling' in the present moment (concurrent thinking) continually led his decision making (NC1: 16). Etchells, on the other hand, spoke of resisting feelings: the 'urge' to make a sequel to his first solo, *Instructions for Forgetting*, which had unfolded with enjoyable uncertainty, forcing him to engage in 'a very real process trying to figure out what to do' (TE1: 2).

Uncertainty, as I discuss in more detail below invites ambiguity and openness into solo devising processes, conditions that are identified as essential for intuitive working to occur. Etchells is quick to decide not to repeat himself, clear to not be too clear. He reveals an unquestioning trust in his decision to do this, to work in the unknown as being the right creative conditions for him. While he does not name it as expert-intuitive decision making, it reveals similar characteristics to that kind of working. Shirley and Langan Fox confirm this: 'Most writers also agree that intuition is characterised by intense confidence in intuitive feeling' (1996: 564).

As I shall go on to discuss, these practitioners reveal throughout the interviews this strong familiarity with accessing their own expert-intuitive experience, and using it in their decision making in their creative work without naming it as based on intuition, or describing how they have done this. This is characteristic both of practitioner-centred intuitive working –

'the expert practitioner has little interest in verbalising all of the evidence used in deriving an intuitive product' (Bastick 1982: 154, cited in Ulmer, 1994: 143) – and also created by the particular environmental conditions of solo devising, where nonverbal working is a frequent occurrence.

With my focus being on solo *making processes*, I choose to discuss *intuitive working* in these discourses on solo devising, which I define here as non-rational, expert, embodied knowing as applied to devising processes. I follow Melrose and Bannerman, who persistently argue that intuitive working operates alongside rational, systematic, compositional work: the 'expert intuitive-analytical' Melrose, (2011) the 'dynamic relationship between intuition and craft' (Bannerman, 2004: 4) and use their writings to focus my discussion on five main areas. These include:

1. Discussion of intuitive knowledges as embodied.
2. The rhythms of intuitive working.
3. Its engagement with conscious and unconscious knowledge.
4. The kinds of conditions it needs for optimal functioning.
5. How intuitive working connects the individual practitioner to the wider complex systems of discipline, profession, culture and society.

**1.** Intuition is described as a kind of knowledge, coming from 'within' the practitioner. It is alternatively described as manifest in sonic, visual or physical forms. So for Pearson, referring to working with large amounts of text in *Carrlands*: 'I get a buzzing voice in my head [...] and the material begins to pile in' (MP1: 17). Baker receives visual images for *Box Story*: 'a

map ... a packet of nuts' (BB1: 32) coming to her when on her bike, in the shops, or 'dreaming them up' (BB1: 16). Charnock also talked often of seeing scenographic images, including the entire set design of *Hell Bent* and the opening and closing scenes of *Resurrection*. Houstoun differs in not being specific as to where her intuitive knowledge about a future piece of work is stored. She 'knows' its form; it is 'pure movement'. I don't know where or how... it's kind of waiting for its right time' (WH1: 7). I read this as intuitive knowledge described in sensory, physical form, as energy, relevant to her primary training and work as a dancer and choreographer. The motif of 'waiting' is also highly significant for intuitive working, reminiscent of a Wordsworthian 'wise passiveness' or Keatsian 'negative capability' (p.201). Practitioner expertise and wisdom across art forms is revealed in a receptive disposition, as opposed to grasping after solutions: in Houstoun's case, she wisely waits for the work to suggest its own making. The different rhythms of intuitive working are discussed in section 2 below. The immediate embodied access to sound, ideas and scenographic solutions is very different to the 'trial and error' approach that all of these practitioners also speak of as an essential part of their devising processes: making through doing, putting materials into different spaces and reflecting upon them (p.178, p.212).

Melrose also suggests that practitioners' bodies work like virtual storehouses, gathering conscious and unconscious expert knowledges gained from experience, practise, training and repeated, professional artistic working. Intuitive knowledge resides:

within the practitioner – emerging in discipline-specific parameters, playing between a perceptual real and a higher plane where expert knowledges are organised and organise. A professional choreographer stores, schematically, not simply the tools of her trade but equally the specifics of her own signature. Stored schematically, they serve as a major compositional tool. (7)

While the example above reveals both the metaphorical ('tools of trade') and metaphysical ('higher planes', 'knowledges are organised and organise') use of language in relation to intuitive working that Melrose accuses others of engaging with, it also contains several important points.

She emphasises the embodied storage of individual and collective expertise, of signature style interacting with wider discipline-specific characteristics. She also hints that intuitive knowledges operate as determined by the practitioner but also equally determine the practitioner. To be more precise, the unconscious stores information, that is known as 'tacit knowledge', arrived at by implicit learning, as theorised by Polanyi (1967), Reber (1989) and Shirley and Langan Fox (1996). Implicit learning is defined as 'the process by which knowledge about the rule-governed complexities of the stimulus environment is acquired independently of conscious attempts to do so' (Shirley and Langan Fox 1996: 571, citing Reber 1989: 219). Implicit learning occurs unconsciously, is stored in our memories and is done so without an intention to learn (Reber 1989). This, importantly, connects tacit knowledge to experience and exposure. Melrose and Sennett, discussing expert practitioners from their respective disciplines of performance and design, share a detailed linking of professional practice, training and repeated doing as critical to the operations of intuitive analytical making.

Importantly, expert-intuitive working, with a ready use of a wealth of tacit knowledge of embodied working, offers solo practitioners one important way of loosening control over their material. Tacit knowledge can create disruption, offer challenges to more conscious processes of working, which in the context of frequent solitary working, allows in surprising or unexpected information. Baker explicitly acknowledges the power this kind of knowledge has over her: 'It arrives out of my unconscious [...]. It's always very surprising. Quite often things I don't want to do. Like the anchovies' (BB1: 8). She reveals her intuitive knowing ('it') to be familiar, 'lovely' and a hard task master, calling her to actions which embarrass or humiliate, but whose decision making she clearly trusts.

**2.** Intuitive rhythms of operation are revealed as including startling moments of illumination and more sustained, slow, unfolding understanding. Baker clearly reflects Ulmer's description of intuitive judgment as working through empathy and projection, in leaps and jumps. She speaks of dramatic, visionary moments occurring: an complete image of a map for *Box Story* arrives in a sonic 'Boom' moment (BB2: 1). This is characteristic, intuitive language, the 'Eureka' moment of knowing, which Baker speaks of as sonic, recurrent and 'always very surprising' (BB1: 7). Less dramatically, Charnock simply 'knows' there had to be a table and chair in *Hell Bent* and that he had to stand on the table (NC1: 20).

Both Charnock and Houstoun also use empathic images when describing starting their devising, and characterise the rhythm of this working as considerably slower. Charnock, as previously mentioned, conceives of

himself as a 'sponge', standing with his arms wide open to receive different kinds of materials, and Houstoun waits for material to signal its readiness, or uses material that 'remains in my memory. And use what surfaces' (WH1: 9). As well as signalling a slower, less dramatic intuitive rhythm of working, it also reveals the solo devisers being determined not to be in conscious control of their devising materials, particularly at the very beginning of their making processes.

Sennett repeatedly speaks about 'intuitive leaps' (2006: 209), suggesting fast, one-off moments, but also offers a step-by-step description of what this can entail in inventive processes. He breaks the process down into what he defines as four particular stages that the maker goes through: 'reformatting', which he identifies as a kind of 'breaking the mould'; establishing adjacency ('two unlike domains are brought together'); dredging up 'tacit knowledge' with an accompanying feeling of surprise or wonder; and having an awareness of the unresolved nature of the experience. This last is summarised as 'there is more work to be done' (2009: 212). This staged, intuitive working can also be identified as being articulated in these practitioners' accounts of creating performance material, not identical or occurring in the same order but revealing specific stages of intuitive operation in play. Houstoun reflects on her collaboration on *Happy Hour* with Etchells, where they worked separately as choreographer and writer respectively:

And then one day I think he was around and throwing them both together and they completely fitted, and it was quite uncanny how they or it felt like the punctuation of one was made for the fitted speech of the other and it was really – one of those very quick things that happened. (WH1: 8)

They decided to collaborate for the first time ('reformatting') and brought together written and choreographed materials, which had been separately generated ('unlikely domains brought together'). They revealed the use of tacit knowledge in accessing and generating relevant material alone and then being able to fit them together, quickly and with an 'uncanny' ('sense of surprise or wonder') ease.

Baker also referred to intuition as part of a much longer compositional process revealing how intuitive working can interact with a rigorous, creative process over time:

So it's a kind of thinking around from every angle and thinking what would the elements be, and the most enjoyable bit is thinking, 'I don't know so I am not going to think about it now. I am just going to put it away in my head', and then 'Ping' hopefully it just pops out and you look at it and you think, 'No, I don't know' – and you put it away again and you go on until you find a solution. (BB1: 7)

She reveals a confidence in the interplay between rational thinking ('from every angle') and in an internal, unconscious processing of ideas – an open unknown terrain allowed to exist in which intuitive process can readily occur. This echoes Goldberg's work on intuitive processing again, in which he suggests that a kind of 'incubation' (1989:24) can occur in the mind, whereby work is carried out on several different levels at once, with conscious attention being able to be switched on and off, as Baker suggests. Etchells also switches between ways of working:

In the case of 'Instructions' where people were sending in stories on video tapes, I would just read this bit by so and so and this by so and so and see what that felt like and then put it in another sequence and try them and see what they felt like. (TE1: 9)

He moves between different activities: gaining knowledge repeatedly through feeling and also through crafting ('reading', 'doing', 'trying'). Baker and Etchells are two very different practitioners with different ways of talking about making and intuition. Etchells is the practised director and writer on group devising and performance, conceptually focused and firmly rooted in theatre and performance working, and Baker the practised solo and visual artist. They do, however, reveal a shared fluency, directly in Baker's case and more indirectly in Etchells's, in working with the combinative skill sets of 'expert-intuitive-analytical' (Melrose, 2006: 99). Furthermore: 'conscious calculation and intuitive recognition appear to both have a hand in this – a partnership of the conscious body of knowledge and the intuitive insight which is so vital to their professional practice' (5).

In a solo devising economy, the solo deviser is particularly used to operating between sensory, experiential, intuitive practices and rational, analytical practices, requiring 'orchestration' (p.228) where these different kinds of working need to be brought forward, or diminished, or be suspended for a time. Put in another way, solo devisers are subject and object of the work and this straddling of several roles is discussed as exhilarating and problematic (). Combined expert intuitive-analytical working, for solo practitioners, is a much practised necessity.

**3.** Intuitive working includes processing unconscious and conscious processes of knowledge and my sample group reveals this as customary practice. Charnock's research process relies on knowing that an internal, experienced processing will take place:



Over the years I trust something to... I think, 'Why am I reading this novel, it's got nothing to do with what the solo is going to be about. I should be researching, I should be...' Now I just think, 'Ooh you liked the look of the cover and you just read the review', and then usually somehow it comes out in the solo. That is how I prepare. (NC1: 12)

Charnock describes his creative processing not as a step-by-step cause and effect advance but more unconscious and nonverbal. He is receptive to receiving the result, which 'comes out' in his working, but not in a determined pre-ordained way. What is important in this is that Charnock does not discuss this as unusual or remarkable. It is assumed that this is effective solo working for him without the need to label it. Baker was explicit in discussing unconscious and nonverbal working:

It is just having a set of ideas or a feeling about something and it arrives. It arrives and it arrives out of my unconscious or the setting. So I don't really bother about it actually. But it is really lovely. (BB1: 7)

In speaking about the gap between discourse and making, Etchells offers a formulation of 'best practice', which, although not named as intuitive, also shares in its characteristic of mold-breaking, a reformatting of a personal kind: 'It is outside of your frameworks, your patterns. Your actual practice is slightly out of reach of the discourse' (TE1: 7). Again, it is accepted that creative working cannot always be rationalised or articulated.

**4.** Intuition needs particular conditions to function, namely uncertainty and lack of closure. Bannerman cites the Romantic poet Keats's discussion of 'negative capability' (1894) as an important example of an artist's definition of the condition out of which creativity is liable to occur: 'a state in which

the artist 'is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason' (2004: 5).

Baker thinks along similar lines: 'I just don't understand where things come from' (BB1: 7). All of the interviewees, established experts in their respective disciplines, spoke repeatedly of not knowing, and working with 'questioning' as fundamental creative processes. I had a strong sense that they used suggestion rather than statement when speaking about their working. To test this in a small way, I checked on the frequency of their usage of a number of verbs to suggest definite decision making or more open-ended enquiry, using the Thesaurus on Microsoft Word for Mac 2011:

try	247
question	150
suppose	113
wonder	70
decide	57
found	45
guess	39
chose	24
imagine	23

This list suggests a leaning towards open-ended language – Sennett's 'incipient state' of curiosity, which suspends resolution and decision making (2008: 279), indicating a necessary attitudinal openness, in which intuitive working amongst other solo devising modes can flourish.

Openness is also particularly encouraged in solo making processes which do not necessarily require being formulated into spoken discourse in order to occur. Etchells spoke of enjoying the non-discursive nature of solo working: 'It's possible to let things circulate in your head a bit without pinning them down into words or decisions or an argument and you can let something process in the way that these things do' (TE1: 13). While nonverbal processing is not equivalent with intuitive working, the lack of social pressure to converse in solo devising, the ability to act without words, move without explaining, take decisions rapidly would suggest that non-rationalised processing is also likely to occur.

**5.** Intuitive working facilitates a connection between individual, signatored knowledges and wider systemic contexts of specific disciplines, training programmes and professional and pedagogical workings. Melrose (2011) discusses disciplinary expertise as 'complex system and individual elaboration' (2011: 4). The practitioner embodies, negotiates and elaborates discipline-specific knowledges, including individual expert-intuitive working within wider complex systems of work. These include areas like contemporary dance or site specific performance where collective knowledges are gathered and consolidated in professional practice, training and pedagogy. In this, she usefully connects the individual with the wider professional practices in which they work – a move into the cultural and social-historical contexts, which are also importantly linked to any discussion of intuitive working.

Heddon reminds us of Foucault's conceptualisation of intuition as 'sentiment' (1997: 153), not immutable but 'oscillating' and always historically related and located. It remains variable, arising out of a shared *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990: 32). *Habitus* refers to a changing set of environmental, social, artistic, cultural conditions which pattern individuals' knowledge. For a discussion of economies of solo devising, this is very useful, as it insists on the connection between individual and the social, in a relationship of exchange. Brought into the creative process of devising, relying on a moment by moment making within specific temporal, spatial, relational contexts, intuitive working is patterned and renewed, determined and reformulated.

Both intuition and solo devising exist on the edge of current discourses in performance studies, operating but remaining often unspoken. There is a practical necessity to note and argue against such exclusions, against the very establishment of inclusion and exclusion zones in artistic practice and discourse. There are economic consequences involved in solo practice not being recognised as a complex, experimental creative practice worthy of being funded and supported in the future, in academic and professional contexts (p.92, p.253, p.301)

However, I would also suggest that there can be advantages to remaining on the sidelines, as unknown, ghostly workings, virtual practices, in the Deleuze and Guattarian sense of not being bound to a territory (1991: 68), remaining minoritarian: 'There is no becoming-majoritarian; majority is never becoming. All becoming is minoritarian' (106). Solo devising, with its multiple ambiguities, its uncertain status, performs a continual act of becoming, offering to wider solo practice its mobile durability, as an

insistent, unstable practice. My small sample study of five solo makers, who occupy some common areas of practice and even work together, suggest that it is impossible to write a 'how-to manual of solo devising'. This diversity allows for its potential longevity as a set of practices, being adaptable to context. Intuitive working, like solo devising, also operates on the edges of acceptable discourses on devising and performance studies. Combined with the other elusive terms offered so far (solo, devising, improvisation) an uncharted space starts to emerge more fully, within the precise conditions of uncertainty and doubt that Keats identifies as essential for the creative artist to carry on doing their work.

### Image and Imagination

During the course of the interviews, all the practitioners mentioned key images as pivotal to the devising process of particular pieces of work. These include Houston describing the movement of her dying mother's hand in *Desert Island Dances*, Baker receiving an airborne map of the world from her unconscious in *Box Story*, Charnock seeing the black and white set design of *Resurrection*, Pearson visualising carrying a colleague across Cardiff, and Etchells imagining a pile of video tapes which became *Instructions for Forgetting*.

'Images' of this kind seemed to emerge intuitively in the mind of the practitioner. They are concrete and specific rather than abstract and general. As products of the imagination they can take an infinite variety of forms, ranging from visual images, to gestures, to actions, to stories. When Houston described her dying mother's hand movement as offering 'an

implacable rhythm' to the whole of *Desert Island Dances*, she is working from a movement, remembered as an 'image' understood in these terms, to which she then returns to work physically and develop a sequence of material. The essential feature of such 'images' in devising is that they are felt by the practitioner to be resonant and evocative, yet the reason for their felt importance may be inexplicable to the person concerned.

In the interviews the actual word 'image' was not commonly used. More often respondents referred to 'an idea', but the term 'image' seems more evocative of what they described. This particular concept of 'image' has been extensively explored by the writer and psychoanalyst James Hillman (originally setting out from the ideas of Carl Jung). It is not possible within the scope of this small part of the thesis to do justice to Hillman's complex idea of 'image', but the word itself provides a useful tool for identifying a key feature of the devising process. Hillman himself confirms the underlying basis of his thinking on image as follows:

I am working towards a psychology of soul that is based in a psychology of image. Here I am suggesting both a *poetic basis of mind* and a psychology that starts neither in the physiology of the brain, the structure of language, the organisation of society, nor the analysis of behaviour, but in the process of imagination. (1991: 22)

Hillman stresses the personal nature of an image and this is where it connects specifically with solo working. He offers a 'poetic' basis of mind. *Poesis* in ancient Greek means creative production (OED, *poesis, n*) and as I shall argue, the creative making mind finds particular source materials to work with in the solo context: image working which is specific and

signed by the individual practitioner and also elaborated differently in relation to their working out of different disciplinary contexts.

Pearson used conceptual language to describe his 'idea' for a starting point in his devising process: 'Carrying a disabled transgender colleague across Cardiff' (MP1: 32). This idea arises in part from his experience in working with physical theatre and sited performance practice. His 'idea' is however also an image; it has an imagined form, a concrete physicality and task status, as well as being a more intellectual, predictive thought: the action of carrying the transgender colleague across a city.

The way Baker's ideas work as images are clearly related to her background in performance and fine art: 'When I was younger, in the 70s, I would get an idea like I want to dress up. Like a meringue, with a group of meringues' (BB2: 17). She reveals a visually oriented imagination, involving her body, and a foregrounding of visual images as key starting points, without any need for rational processing:

In Waitrose there was this wonderful box. And it had all the ingredients, photographed in rows [...]. It was beautiful and I looked at it and I remember being very excited because I knew it was the answer. I was so absorbed with this idea and every so often it would pop up and I thought: why is this a good idea, what am I going to do with these ingredients? And I was putting my bicycle clips on my ankles and it just went 'boom', this airborne map of the world. It was an extraordinary moment. It was so extraordinary I will never forget it because I knew exactly where I was standing and I could see it as an image. I saw a set of actions really. Making sense of something by mapping it. (BB2: 4)

She responds strongly to the found visual image in her immediate environment, knowing it to be the 'answer' or key to the as-yet unmade

work, without knowing what the question or method to find that answer will be. In doing this, she reveals her confidence and experience in working with visual images, questioning and expert intuitive processing as key solo devising activities, not simply in initial research phases but as a fundamental part of her material-generating practice.

She also reveals a customary ability 'to suspend resolution' and remain in a state of uncertainty, conditions that have been identified as necessary for intuitive processing and for expert creative curiosity which continues to 'probe' the possibilities that this recurring visual image, the box of ingredients, suggests. Probing is revealed as inner dialogue, a speaking to herself, which is a recurrent activity carried out by solo devisers. Intuitive rhythms of working, moving between conscious and unconscious knowledge, allow the information to circulate inside her ('every so often it would pop up'). She thus arrives as an associated image, the 'map of the world', whose form includes the 'set of actions' needed for it to be made.

This is a clear example of the particular vibrancy and functionality of an image to an individual – how it can imprint itself on a person and also suggest a series of further processes to be engaged with from it. This use of image reveals Baker's individual specific disciplinary expertise and also, as Melrose discusses, includes her use of wider 'disciplinary expertise' as a 'complex system' (2), with which she has engaged throughout her career. Encapsulated in her expert working with image, imagination and intuition in this instance is a characteristic working with forms specific to performance



and Live Art practices, namely working with visual images, use of objects and task-based actions (drawing a map, different meringues formations).

Sennett characterises this rhythm of expert working based on questioning as 'action-rest/question-action' (2008: 279), which develops 'complex hand skills' in the expert craftsperson, as opposed to 'mere mechanical activity, which does not develop technique, [and] is simply movement' (279).

Applied and translated into the different work and language of solo devising, I suggest this rhythm of working allows for practitioner expertise to manifest itself through conscious and unconscious levels of working, moving between individual and wider disciplinary knowledges. In solo devising, this typically involves nonverbal, intuitive processing, whereby material is worked on without being discussed or externalised.

Houstoun works with image in a characteristically physical way, revealing also the workings of her wider disciplinary expertise, from dance practice:

In *Desert Island Dances*, the description of the Fantasy Island only came about because of moving a lot and actually thinking about it much more pictorially and then it was condensed down into a verbal thing but I don't think my imagination functions in a purely linguistic way. (WH1: 14)

She offers an inter-related way of working with different kinds of image, which starts from an exploratory physical 'moving a lot', which again I read as her using improvisation. Within the expanded idea of image working I describe above physical improvisation can be re-framed as an exemplary kind of 'physical imagining'.<sup>92</sup> Houstoun speaks of starting with physicality,

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<sup>92</sup> I can offer a specific example of what I am calling 'physical imagining' from my practice and collaborative working with visual artist and writer Chris Crickmay, who introduced me to an

generating 'visual pictures' and then 'condenses' these into verbal activity. Moving initiates her devising processes and generates a wider range of materials out of which words can emerge: 'unless I am moving I won't come up with any ideas for writing anyway' (WH1: 14). I read this as an example of connected, simultaneous, physical thinking into writing.

Image and the connected use of the imagination provide a rich source of starting points for solo devising and evidence practitioners highly individual way of working, whilst also being clearly connected to their professional expertise in specific disciplines. I have focused the discussion on Baker and Houstoun, as they revealed particularly personalised ways of working with visual and physical imagining and intuitive and questioning processes.

### Conceptual Thinking (planning, analysing, contemplating, reflecting)

Different modes of conceptual thinking are used in solo devising.<sup>93</sup> Funding issues can instigate the need to work conceptually, as Pearson indicates:

Concept and structure were the things that we had in place of money. We did not have the wherewithal, like Odin, to rehearse for a year. We had to train ourselves to work on a much more framing level. And then when it came to the moment of enacting it, at least we had those structures to work within. (MP2: 36)<sup>94</sup>

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interdisciplinary exercise which he writes about with Miranda Tufnell in their book *A Widening Field: journeys in the body and improvisation* (2004: 55) and which I was curious to also extend into voice and spoken word. This process of working involves improvising physically, witnessed by another, followed by both mover and witness writing. This further writing is not used to describe what has just happened but is another creative act, writing spontaneously in the moment. Physical movement and written words containing visual images, themes and objects are created in a rehearsal space, all working independently – not representing each other but connected.

<sup>93</sup> Inevitably all of these modes of thinking are also considered in a number of other parts of the thesis. In particular, I have discussed the act of reflection in the section on silence (p.226). Contemplation is discussed as a primary motivating factor in Ch.1 (p.68). Conceptual thinking will also arise again in the section on dramaturgy and composition below.

<sup>94</sup> In the 1970s, Cardiff Lab, with whom Pearson worked, developed a relationship with the company, Odin Teatret, directed by Eugenio Barba. They toured Britain in the 1980s. Pearson acknowledges Barba as an influence on his writing (2001: 187). Odin originated in Norway and relocated to Holstebro in 1966.

Pearson revealed a capacity, self-taught, to *imagine* a detailed process of activity without actually undertaking it. Just short of 'theory', this is a kind of 'proxy practice' aimed at avoiding cost and labour time.<sup>95</sup> One might suggest that the solo context in particular allows for this kind of conceptual planning to take place, without the need for discussion or debate.

Etchells articulates conceptualisation within his work as a form of 'game playing'. It is not open-ended improvised activity but instead operates with specific rules, logics and planned actions.<sup>96</sup> He spoke about *Downtime* and the devising that can occur within a pre-conceived structure:

The strategic bit of thinking [was] given that this was the game; clearly the two extremes are: you give a good account of what you were thinking and at the other end you give no account – and I suppose identifying what the possible extremes of the game are, that is an important part of the process. (TE1: 9)

The 'strategic thinking' offered here by Etchells is also of particular relevance to solo devisers. Working alone, they do not have other devisers to suggest different ways of working. By conceptualising and planning a structure, in this case a 'game,' Etchells has to respond to the original rules, even if his desire may be to return to a more familiar way of working:

'*Instructions* was: I will make a show using the material that they sent me [...]. *Words and Pictures*, it will all be done via these tapes' (TE1: 7). This has similarities to the potential released by working with personal 'scores'

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<sup>95</sup> Baker speaks of doing this kind of conceptualising to keep herself sane. Also Shobhanha Jeyasingh (in Bannerman, 2006: 31) discusses making one piece entirely conceptually, although she locates this more as an example of intuitive material arriving rather than intense concentrated thinking. She still maps it onto paper.

<sup>96</sup> Game structures reveal their formal workings and are thus used frequently in postdramatic theatre work (see note 52 below). Related work in a literary field is the work of Oulipo, the 'Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle', or Workshop of Potential Literature. The group was founded in 1960 by the writers Raymond Queneau and Francois Lionnais and often engaged in using mathematical structures and numbers to compose and frame writing. Well-known members included Italo Calvino and Georges Perec. Etchells cited Perec (1996) as a highly skilled example of working beyond personal concerns in his autobiographical writing.

discussed in the previous section on improvisation. Baker's uses of conceptual, creative thinking were very evident and frequently referenced in her interviews: 'In making live work, mostly it's thinking' (BB1: 19). Her first solo after her career break, *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988), was conceptualised in its entirety before being enacted:

I thought about it for three years, literally just thought about it: it was just in my head. I was working on it, planning it and having gone laboriously about setting it up, as a showcase at the ICA or at the Live Art Forum and New Work Network, I suddenly got a sense that I actually had to try it and I got completely petrified. (BB2: 18)

Baker conceives of her thinking as located in her 'head', a somewhat specific and contested categorisation of where cognition can take place. This forms part of the long historical debate of discourses about the mind and body, which has been briefly discussed (p.188). The slower time frame that Baker speaks of for devising a piece of work can be more widely applicable to solo devisers, where the making process can be stretched, as Baker articulates, over several years. However, the dangers of working only mentally are also particularly relevant to the lone solo practitioner, who does not necessarily need to verbalise and specify her working. The solo practitioners I interviewed revealed well-developed early warning systems against this.

Etchells insists that while conceptualising is important, work can only develop through a heuristic model: 'I would want to get on to doing as soon as possible even in the most crude, rubbish way' (TE1: 10). Expertise lies in enacting what circulates as ideas, images, feelings or physical impulses: 'the dialogue between concrete practices and thinking' (2008: 9) which

Sennett observes as a fundamental skill of the good craftsman. While performance practice is not necessarily concrete in form, there is a difference between mental activity and other kinds of doing that Etchells and Houston identify. Houston cautions against over-rationalising, advising 'clocking off and not harassing the material [...]. You can think that just by sitting down and thinking you are doing work and sometimes you are not.' (WH1: 11). Sennett agrees: 'The good craftsman learns when it is time to stop' (262). The solo deviser needs to continually manage and create their own boundaries around time and space usage.

### **Multiple modes of making and composition**

In the previous chapter, I focused on how solo practitioners negotiate and use themselves as sources in their work, working with and problematising notions of individuality, presence and autobiography. In this chapter I am focussing on their work with 'other' than themselves, with different theatre media and forms, and some of the devising processes that they use to develop work with these 'others'. Postdramatic theatre, liberated from its need to work with dramatic narrative, moves more towards contemporary art and poetry: 'Postdramatic theatre is a theatre of states and of scenically dynamic formulations' (Lehmann, 2006: 69). Freed from the domination of dramatic language, diction and gesture, the multiple signifying systems that are available in the theatre, of light, image, sound, performer's bodies, place and space, can be worked with for their unique and specific communicative possibilities, which can include word or text as one element. This is a 'non-hierarchical use of signs that aims at synaesthetic perception and contradicts the established hierarchy' (86). In solo devising, this allows

practitioners to pursue in detail their specific interests through particular media, and give them central focus in the work. Bobby Baker creates scenic theatre, an example of postdramatic 'visual dramaturgy' (Lehmann, 2006: 93). Work with materials and objects frames how she proceeds in her devising process and is central to the work as theatre event. She described the devising 'key' and performance frame of *Box Story* to be the map of the world; all the objects, monologues and actions in the piece literally and associatively 'draw' it in the theatre space.

Houstoun uses precise choreography in *Desert Island Dances* to re-member and re-enact a parent's dying hand movement, not as an autobiographic telling but as a performed 'documentation': 'it is completely physiological – release and grasp, release and grasp – the memory is completely arrhythmic. There is an implacable rhythm about it in a way that was thematically in the piece' (WH1: 16). Part of a dying process is finely explored and performed as physical action and sonic rhythm, not as a narrative telling. Etchells brings his interest in language and what it can and cannot capture to the fore by making it a central organising principle and theme for *Downtime* and the later *Words and Pictures*.

A return to the use of known media can be perceived to be of particular value to solo devisers. They are the 'familiar' or 'companions' (MP1: 15) that remain with the individual worker. Pearson used these words to describe his reliance on a repeated use of objects to devise physically in his earlier solo works, including *La Leçon d'Anatomie*, *Whole Idea Was the Wind* and *Deaf Birds*. Solitary solo devising does not mean having to work 'alone'.

These practitioners reveal their rehearsal and performance spaces, while empty of the madding crowd, to be full of tangible and intangible media, intimate demons that accompany them in their practice. Of course, they also freely combine media as and where necessary. Houston and Charnock use movement, songs, texts, light, sound and recorded image. Pearson works with texts, objects, recorded sound, recorded image and physical actions. Baker uses objects, film, music, movement, speaking and tasks. Etchells includes the use of written texts, speech, recorded image and music. They all, apart from Charnock, work with different sites as well as theatre spaces.

#### Working successively from one medium into another

Solo devisers also often work in more than one medium as a devising strategy for developing the work and this is different from combining media in the final piece. Here, in the course of working on a piece, ideas are developed in one medium and then taken into another in a series of stages. Each subsequent stage builds on the previous one, not in a linear way, but rather in that the findings are cumulatively included in the devising process as it develops.

In *Bubbling Tom*, Pearson's devising process included 'constructing narrative', 'voicing' [and then] 'placing all of that spatially' (MP1: 17). Similarly, Baker described a development process of making in *Angels*, which moved across media – from sculpting and cooking objects (meringues) to using found music and objects and finally deciding on a series of actions. Etchells's devising process involved a rhythm of switching

between working, which shifted between working with writing and video editing in *Instructions for Forgetting* and *Downtime*, and film and music in *In the Event*. They are not bound by the linear logics of a plot, only by the logics of the work as it emerges.

Using one medium as a frame for working with another

Other devising strategies for developing work include framing their work using other disciplines' languages and principles. Etchells applies theatre dramaturgy for the stage to the organisation of his writing for the page:

'increasingly with the writing, I thought of it in performative terms'.<sup>97</sup>

Houston also spoke of applying a similar shift between forms in her practice, although more in relation to generating material, rather than structuring it.

She devises through 'writing on the floor as opposed to writing on the page' (WH1: 22). They are challenging the assumptions that dramaturgy is only relevant to text-based theatre, and that writing is only applicable to books and paper.

This is akin to Sennett's discussion of the 'domain shift' as a challenging part of the development of form within a crafting process: 'how a tool initially used for one purpose can be applied to another task or how the principle guiding one practice can be applied to quite another activity' (2008: 127). This concept is not literally applicable to performance, as it is based on the material shift of, for example, the right-angled join in physical

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<sup>97</sup> Following Turner and Behrndt (2008), I am using the expanded sense of the term dramaturgy as applied in postdramatic devised theatre, to include both the particular engagement with the overall structuring and logic of a piece of work, and careful attention to the whole theatre event.



objects like cloth, wood-joints and streets. However arguably it is applicable on an associative level, where meanings can be usefully carried over.<sup>98</sup>

Baker uses meringues, which come from the domain of cooking, eating and shopping and are primarily used as desserts, made from white sugar and known for their saccharine sweetness. They have status as an indulgent treat, eaten for pleasure, having no nutritional value as food. These are sculpted into plump 'Ladies', transforming into objects in the theatre and recurrent personae in her solo works. Already a shift has occurred, from the domain of kitchen or shop to theatre, carrying associations of saccharine treat into their new form as theatre object and female persona.

For Baker, working with feminist issues, this meeting of associations is critical in order to make effective performance – her equivalent of a good join between different pieces of wood. She discussed in detail her devising and performance of the event *Angels with me* (p.238). In *Angels*, she uses the connection with sweetness, pleasure, indulgence to celebrate and comment on the idealism of collectivity and celebration and whimsy (the theme of 'angels') that the project and final symposium suggest:

I took the cloth off and there was a gasp and put the light on because they are beautiful – the meringues – when there are a group of them. I had worked out how to make all sorts of black people and mixed race people – I am quite excited by the techniques. They were a group of women of the world really. (BB1: 6)

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<sup>98</sup> His example is illuminating – he traces the development of weaving as a making activity, which creates strong materials, from its initial application in the archaic household loom, to make cloth. Strong and flexible cloth is created from the particular action of right-angled weaving of woof and warp threads. This principal of strength and flexibility achieved through right-angle joins, shifts domain to being used as the mortise and tenon joint of shipbuilding – a weaving of wood, and then on again into the efficient design of corners for roads in cities, like the Greek city of Selonius, founded in Sicily in 627 BC. 'Urban fabric' is literalised, as a design feature. (2008: 126)

A face-to-face collision of meanings is staged, where the conference delegates have been invited to stand facing the meringues and are only allowed to stay if they continue smiling for the duration of the song. Utopian ideals of feminist collectivity meet sweetness, angels and ABBA, all incorporated into an action of 'nice' smiling and durational discomfort. A collision of meanings is produced, in an intermedial devising process which enabled successful work to be made – successful as it attracted conflicting feelings, and responses, which Baker wanted. She found it 'exhilarating' and 'cruel'; other feedback included 'bewilderment' and the conference organiser Elaine Aston found it 'incredibly moving and sad' (BB1: 6).

The interviewees also seemed deliberately to apply language or adjectives associated with one mode to describe how they might create in another mode. In *Bubbling Tom*, after writing the narrative and learning how to voice it, Pearson asks himself: 'How am I going to voice that, spatially?' (MP1: 17). He is using questioning and reframing as devising strategies, suggesting potential ways forward for his next stage of working on site, in the streets of Hibaldstow. He explores what new material might emerge from analysing place from a vocal perspective.<sup>99</sup> Houstoun retrospectively reflects on her dance-theatre piece *Haunted* as 'sculptural' in relation to the lighting, highlighting how its use significantly changed the nature of the piece and how it was read (WH1: 6).

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<sup>99</sup> If applied, this could involve using constitutive elements in voice work, like tone, pitch, rhythm, dynamic and pause. This is speculative thinking on my part, as Pearson did not answer his own question; however, I am simply suggesting the potential of such a question in practice.

Shifting domains also offers solo devisers another perspective on their work. Standing outside one's own domain, and language of domain, and using another technique or way of thinking opens up potential variations on their own devising strategies. This is useful in the absence of other people to offer in other ways of working with particular disciplines. As Lehmann indicates, when translated into the theatre event, it creates the experience of synaesthetic perception in the audience, where they experience the work as shifting amongst forms, not closed down, encouraging them to remain open, responsive and to keep an 'evenly hovering attention' (87).

### 'Musicalisation'

These practitioners most clearly revealed a synaesthetic way of working in how they referred to music when speaking about how they devised. I am not concerned here with the evident role of music in their work, like Charnock's use of soundtracks in *Frank*, or Baker's choir in *Box Story*. I am concerned with what Lehmann defines as 'auditory semiotics': when practitioners apply 'their sense of music and rhythm [...] to classical texts' (2006: 91). These practitioners were not using classical texts, but I noticed that they repeatedly revealed a use of music language and compositional structuring for their devising which was similar to a set of activities named 'musicalisation' by Varopolou (1998) and which Lehmann later borrowed (2006: 91).

Houstoun related a lack of interest in making autobiographical work but also suggested that autobiographical elements could be heard, not 'read' in what

she made, through its auditory characteristic – its consistent ‘mood tones’.

(WH1: 16). Pearson also spoke of tone:

I think what I get is a buzzing voice in my head which is the tone that this thing is going to have. And so however disparate the material appears to be, I know it is going to come down to a particular kind of voicing. (MP1: 18)

A sonic prescore determines the throughline of the work, giving it an aural coherence even before it is made. Charnock also uses musicality to compose his improvisation score for *Frank*, varying the structural ordering according to the tempo of each section:

MD: So what you are saying is you arranged it with a notion of composition and the rhythm. You are talking about the rhythm, aren't you?

NC: Yes I am. Light and shade and all the rest of it.

MD: So rhythm for you is used so that you don't get bored with one thing, so that you don't get stuck in one groove.

NC: Yes, people make whole pieces where for thirty minutes or an hour it is one thing. Yeah – for me I don't like the same thing. I don't like to listen to the same kind of music all the time. So I like to listen to some classical music and then some jazz and then some rock.

(NC2: 11)

As well as promoting a dramaturgy of variety and shifting modes and forms, Charnock was aurally composing the score for his physical and spoken improvised material, using a technique of montage based on acoustic rhythms. Pearson confirms how music structure frames his entire solo devising process:

MD: What is interesting to me is hearing your language and the way you talk, you talk very musically actually. You talk about voicing, you talk about ‘buzz’ and you talk about sound, and now you are talking about rhythm, in a way.

MP: Well – funny you should mention that [...]. I am not a frustrated musician but I do actually find that compositional way of thinking about things extremely useful. And I think maybe that has been there from early on. I do see the piece as a composition, whether it be solo work or whatever kind. (21)

This is a clear example of Varopolou's description of 'theatre as music' (1998/2006) – a making involving 'compositional thinking'. 'Musicalisation' in devising is one strong example of how a framing of theatre in the terms of another medium, whether on the level of thinking about it or making, can offer new ways of working. This is carried out by applying other disciplinary conventions, of technique, composition or overall conceptualisation and thus opens up new ways of working which can be useful for the solo deviser.

### Structuring: combining different media as elements of a piece

To provide change and diversity, the solo deviser most usually works at least in part intermedially and the assumption that this switching would occur was another example of Melrose's unstated 'practitioner presuppositions' (2006: 98). They automatically assumed that they would compose intermedially, working with writing, film, dance, objects or choral work, and that this was not surprising or worthy of discussion. Houstoun's work is a very clear example of meaning being derived across theatre's different signification systems. It became obvious from the amount of time and focus given to them in interview that music, sound and light were critical holders of her work's meanings, in addition to her movement work. She described the sound and lighting design from *Haunted* as 'equal participants' (WH1: 6). She also made compositional decisions based on intermedial working. When the piece was extended beyond the original 15 minute commission, she worked over three days at the Laban centre with lighting designer Steve Munn. She spoke with clear enjoyment of the way that compositional decisions came from practical decisions about timing of

light and sound and movement: 'They are more rhythmical and more musical decision making, rather than cause and effect. It is coming out of the action. The pleasure in that' (8). Once again, attention is paid to the multiple strands of material created, and decisions about composition arising from this, rather than from a linear logic of narrative development.

## **Solitude**

The pragmatic working environment of a solo devising economy, in terms of the use of space, time and the solitary nature of the making environment offers ambiguous propositions to the solo deviser. Although this may seem obvious, I agree with Sennett that wisdom can be obtained from an engagement with practical issues:

The argument that I've presented in this book is that the craft of making physical things provides insight into the techniques of experience that can shape our dealings with others [...] material challenges like working with or managing ambiguity are instructive in understanding resistances people harbour to one another or the uncertain boundaries between people. (2008: 289)

With solo working, rehearsal spaces do not necessarily have to be formally arranged, or booked, as they often do when working in a group. There is also no need to schedule rehearsal times around the availability of other people. Houstoun wryly offers: 'You are never late for rehearsals' (Houstoun, pers comm.). In theory at least, this means the solo deviser is free to arrange their own schedule, and place of work.<sup>100</sup> Etchells, Baker and Pearson all referred to frequently working from home. For Etchells, solo devising primarily involved writing, editing, speaking aloud and playing

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<sup>100</sup> This is not to suggest that both life and economic issues do not have an important part in deciding working patterns, only that within their constraints, there is flexibility as a solo practitioner to make more specific decisions about working space and time.

audiovisual materials, all processes he could do 'sitting at home with all the stuff people sent me' (TE1: 11). Baker often referred to working in her kitchen, with found objects, cooking and creative thinking.

This is not always the case, however, and a wide variety of other spaces were chosen for rehearsal. When Charnock affirmed that he made all of his solos in studios, chosen precisely because they were away from home, 'somewhere strange, somewhere foreign' (NC1: 14), this prompted the thought that as a solo deviser, this is also needed, to defamiliarise habituated ways of seeing or being. Economics are also a factor in deciding where to rehearse. Houston spoke of working from commissions, where rehearsal space was linked to this funding, in studios like Chisenhale Dance Space or the Royal Festival Hall in London. Both Charnock and Houston work physically and choreographically so a suitable space in which to move is often a requirement.

Pearson also spoke of working in performance-specific spaces, like the Arena Theatre in Sherburne or the Welsh Folk Museum, as well as non-specific places: while out walking in streets and fields, sitting in cars, or visiting tourist attractions. This is in part related to his working with site-specific projects, and also related to solo practice in particular, where processing of materials and ideas frequently occurs alone (as with Baker's examples). Such work can involve a high degree of conceptual thinking and therefore allows for a particular portability in the working environment.

An extreme example of portability in solo creative practice was revealed in Baker's discussion of making *Ballistic Buns*, created entirely conceptually and as a desperate 'retreat' from an intolerable life situation:

BB: I literally cracked up – packed up. I was ill and there I was stuck in this room, people looking through the window, having the worst time of my whole life, for seven weeks. Trying to 'get out', and so retreating into thinking about ideas was just joyful. And laughing at the ideas. I entirely made that show in that hospital bedroom. That is extraordinary, that I had forgotten that [...]. Even the title: I remember texting it to somebody – *Ballistic Buns* – because my grandfather was a ballistic engineer. (BB1: 11)

Baker activates personal agency by engaging in conceptual, creative thinking when all external autonomy has been taken away, in a solo practice that operates dialectically as both 'retreat' and 'way out'. Torture victims speak of similar, private acts of resistance occurring inside their head or imagination, when they are in situations beyond their control.<sup>101</sup>

The flexibility of solo devising, in terms of its scheduling and working conditions, can also be problematic. Houstoun recalled:

Something I very much remember in *Haunted* – go into the studio and do the work until at least six o' clock – maybe have one half an hour thinking about it but then definitely don't harass it any more until you go in and do it again so that you are not fooling yourself you are doing more work than you are in a way. (WH1: 8)

Overworking can be a hazard when working alone: 'The good craftsman learns when it is time to stop' (Sennett, 2008: 262). Planning is a critical part of managing solo devising, as Charnock suggested:

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<sup>101</sup> Bruno Bettelheim offers a resistant response to being incarcerated in Auschwitz in his turn to his profession, psychoanalysis, and practices analysing the effects of extreme terror on his fellow inmates, to keep himself sane (1991).



I will go into the studio and do my warm up and after that I will look at my menu for the day. Certainly one thing I will do is start to choreograph something on myself to music or to some text that I had written. So I give myself a definite obvious task to do – if I did not have things like that to do I would go into the studio and just feel lost and think ‘oh what shall I do?’ (NC1: 13)

Both Houstoun and Charnock formalise the solo working process through enacting a version of ‘going to the office’ – they define the working space as separate from life space by going to a studio. While as choreographers and dancers, this can be a physical necessity, its use also offers a boundary on a potentially endless rehearsal time. ‘Menus’ or scores for solo practices are as equally applicable to practitioners’ solo performance work as to the organisation of how this work is made. What emerges from these examples is the lack of ritual around solo working, in relation to set times or spaces, which allows for freedom and which also has the potential to overwhelm. Solo devisers need to be skilled at pragmatics, organising their practice, creating structure and planning as a vital component of their work.

Being alone, working in solitude, offers the solo deviser a number of opportunities. As an environment without others in it, it allows for uninterrupted imaginative thinking to take place, as Baker confirms: ‘A lot of those sorts of ideas happen when I am on my own, usually in the kitchen’ (BB1: 7). Decisions about movement phrases, sound making or image editing do not need to be translated into words, an internal processing of ideas is possible: ‘things circulate in your head a bit without pinning them down into words or decisions or an argument’ (TE1: 13). An indeterminate working space is opened up beyond rational thinking. We have seen that in intuitive working, this is a central way that information is processed.

In the absence of others, significant attention can be given to the practitioners' reading of their own thoughts, impulses and intuitive knowledge: 'a place where I can try to deal more with ideas and with thought processes that seem more or less impossible to get to in the group work' (TE1: 19). While not exclusive to solo devising, creative thinking in the form of contemplation, reverie, dreaming, musing or pondering would all seem more readily accessible when working alone. Guy Claxton also places these 'mental modes' of contemplation, reverie and dreaming in the 'solitary' (as opposed to sociable) category of interaction, in the aforementioned fluid attention pathways he conceptualises in the 'Glide Space of Creativity' (p.111). Claxton is one of the few performance scholars to write about the importance of solitude, as a dynamic context in which an individual interacts with multiple source materials, to create artwork.

In solitude, each practitioner can work with their own personal rhythm – their own sense of timing, pace and their sense of when to start or stop, when to do nothing or when to do too much. Being familiar with a personal rhythm of working could potentially facilitate another 'domain shift' to occur within the practitioner's multiple practices: bringing an increased sense of rhythm to how they experience the work they have made. The synaesthetic way these practitioners 'heard' their theatre practice seems to suggest this. The 'pause' that solo practice offers to interpersonal communication potentially opens up space for other sonic elements to emerge.

The pause, or 'silence' as the absence of talk, is one particular kind of silence in the acoustic environment of solitary practices. There are, as

Etchells writes, many other kinds.<sup>102</sup> The related question that can be explored here is what can emerge, when nothing has to be said? Some provisional 'answers' discussed above include ideas, intuitive impulses, private internalised processing, an increased doing and interaction with things, and a heightened sense of the rhythms used when making work, and in the work itself.

Regine Elzenheimer (1999) notes the shift of perception and consequent treatment of silence in relation to the artwork itself. She traces its development from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as representing a gap or negation, to a 20<sup>th</sup> century use of silence as a structural element in performance. She discusses John Cage as an obvious proponent of this, in particular his infamous work *4'33* (1948). He focuses on silence as an ambiguous material, moving from empty to full when it has attention directed at it.<sup>103</sup>

While my focus here is not on the artwork itself, the intentional 'gaps' or authorial absences in the solo performances are designed to invite audiences to insert their own creative acts. Equally, the idea of the silence in solitary practice, as both empty and full – empty of conversation and full of the workings articulated above – is a paradoxical and useful ambiguous state, suggesting the complex texture of the space that is the solo devising situation.

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<sup>102</sup> 'The kind of silence you sometimes get in phone calls to a person that you love. The kind of silence people only dream of. The kind of silence that is only for waiting in. The kind of silence as a thief makes away with the gold. The kind of silence that follows a car crash.' (1999: 108).

<sup>103</sup> See Cage, (2009: 190). The book as a whole engages with this subject, through writings and lectures and scores. One explicit example is the score – *45' FOR A SPEAKER*.

I started to outline above the challenges that working alone, in solitude, makes to the solo deviser. The seemingly endless choice and freedom over time and space of working and what to do when working requires strong management on their part. The lack of interruption and debate, the potential for over-immersion in the work, lack of perspective, self-indulgence, and narcissism are all issues that ghost those who work in solitude. These experienced solo devisers revealed skill in managing them, which I have framed as using scores, conceptualisation and inviting and including contributions by other people into the work.

### Exploration/Composition: Orchestrating in the in between.

Exploration, composition and performance are not, in practice, distinct processes, as the activities discussed within them occur throughout devising processes, deployed as and when the emerging piece of work requires. This has already been demonstrated in the previous discussion of improvisation as generative of material and as performed, real time composition and is also true of the devising that occurs in the performance context, discussed at the end of this chapter. I have separated out the discussion of exploration and composition in solo devising in part for pragmatic reasons, so as to manage the numerous activities included in both, but also because they do require different skills, foci and kinds of creative thinking. As previously discussed, this distinction challenges the solo deviser, through having to engage in many of these activities simultaneously. Solo devisers need to work as generators and composers of material and make numerous decisions about when to use the particular skills related to these different activities. In groups, different people can take on different

roles, such as that of deviser, director, dramaturg or writer. Houston states:

It's the problem of having *to make executive decisions* from an outside thing as well as *being* inside it. And I think you only get that mining when you are completely inside stuff actually. When you are with a company and you can flounder about. (WH1: 9)

She uses informative images to characterise her devising: mining (digging deep into the earth, and collecting layered materials through a persistent, measured excavation), and also a contradictory watery 'floundering' (struggling and frantic activity, expending high degrees of energy with very little outcome). These devising activities come into conflict with the skills she knows she needs to apply as an efficient 'executive' of the process: having an overview (not underground), separate from the 'labour' force, making clear, management decisions and continually maintaining a wider perspective.

In describing her dilemma, she uses this common, wider framing binary, of being 'inside' or 'outside' of work. Both group and solo devisers, as both devisers and performers experience and characterise this felt sense of being on the 'inside' of this creative process intently, as most usually they are makers and performers in the work. In contrast, the writer of a play for example is the creator but not usually the performer in the play itself.

The inside/outside binary is usually invoked as a problem, with the issue of devisers being immersed in the working process itself and therefore being considered, or considering themselves as too close to it, lacking perspective and often needing an 'outside eye'. This customarily involves someone

either not directly in the making process (director or dramaturg) or a person from the group who temporarily 'steps out' of the process to look at it anew.<sup>104</sup>

The other practitioners, although not specifically using these words, did suggest that over-immersion in the work can be problematic. Pearson warned against becoming 'a barroom bore' (MP1: 22), Etchells spoke of it as 'something you have to cover your back on really, something that you have to find ways to offset' (TE1: 4). He suggested that *Instructions For Forgetting* was a more 'successful' theatre piece compared to *Downtime* through his strategy of formally working with multiple voices.

While Houstoun did use the inside and outside binary to characterise her *felt experience*, understandable in the context of frequently working with solo devising activities like improvisation which require immersive involvement, I also consider its usage to be another example of Claxton's 'coarse grain thinking', a shorthand which does not, in fact, accurately represent the more complex, ambiguous states of being required.

Arguably, watching something is not the same as doing it, even when it unfolds as an event. The deviser has created the work, 'knows the score' and performs and embodies it. At the same time, this lack of 'involvement' does not mean I as observer am not bringing my own tastes, experience and expertise to my watching. I am 'inside' my own dramaturgical

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<sup>104</sup> See for example Mole Wetherell's writing on being both an 'inside' and 'outside eye' in his work with *Reckless Sleepers* (2007: 76), or Mermikides & Smart's discussion and examples of how companies like Shunt, 3<sup>rd</sup> Angel, Faulty Optic, People Show or Gecko create strategies for sharing and obtaining compositional perspectives on their work (2007: 26, 41, 78, 119).

perspective, for example, and so notions of increased perspective or distance are not absolute or always useful.<sup>105</sup> I discuss this further in talking about solo devising, collaboration and dramaturgy in Chapter Four.

The issue for Houstoun is not that she lacks the skills necessary to mine, flounder and have perspective on her work or take executive decisions but rather that she needs to contend with these sometimes conflicting activities and attitudes *at the same time*. Put in another way, the solo deviser is again required to maintain an ambiguous position in relation to their work, being involved in generative activities requiring immersion or thinking which also require perspective. Working solo, Houstoun does not necessarily have someone to attend informally to these activities during the making process, as group devisers do, so that she can concentrate on just one of these. Managing the tension that arises in between devising and directorial or dramaturgical roles could be said to be one of the most fundamental skills required by the solo deviser. Claxton also suggests that managing different mental modes of working is essential: 'If we focus on the individual, I am suggesting part of their creative success lies in their ability to move fluidly around in this three-dimensional creative space' (2008: 56).

In this thesis, I call this meta-activity 'orchestration', and it is carried out by these solo devisers in a number of ways throughout their devising processes.<sup>106</sup> As an image, it suggests composing with multiple,

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<sup>105</sup> I start my own work as a dramaturg by stating explicitly my areas of work, aesthetic focus and also my obsessions and irritations, my likes and dislikes, to turn myself inside out, as whoever showing me work is also usually doing.

<sup>106</sup> I discuss this in several places in the thesis, in relation to how they move between the multiple modes of creative thinking they need to engage with (for example intuitive, physical, conceptual,

simultaneously played instrumental lines while at the same time making decisions about bringing some instruments forward or backward or keeping them in continuous but supportive roles. It also requires an ongoing making while hearing the whole piece of work as it emerges. Charnock brings forward his directing skills: 'You just say, "Oh right now I would like you to do this Nigel". I detach myself – I go over there and look and I think, "Oh yes I would like you to do this now, and this"' (NC1: 11). He uses imaginative and spatial strategies for engaging his director persona, who creates task-based activities for an imaginary Charnock as deviser. Baker also describes engaging herself in debate while she was making:

I actually think that it is a very important tension to keep, so that everything I do, I am asking that question – Why am I doing this, is it self indulgent? Sometimes one does stray into that, definitely and it always has to come back to – Why am I doing this, what is this about? (BB1: 13)

Baker generates material at the same time as bringing forward her reflective thinking. Imagined dialogue is used as the device whereby practitioners formalise or ritualise simultaneously occurring activities of making and directing.

Houstoun spoke of her devising as based on 'just keep doing it every day [...] I tend not to work with video, so it's as much as remains in my memory. And use what surfaces' (WH1: 9). She works with a particular kind of physical thinking (her skilled, somatic memory) to make choreographic decisions about what to 'use'. This approach clearly differs from one based

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reflective, analytical, contemplative) (p.194, p. 200) and the activation of different kinds of roles required for managing their solo practice as a whole, as manager, director, designer, fundraiser for example (p.228).



on what movement 'looks like', through the eye of a camera. Houston here refuses to spectate, to watch herself as maker. She also reverses the binary chain of association, whereby inside the work=making=immersion and outside=composition=wider perspective. For Houston, inside = compositional perspective. Another clear reversal of binary thinking is offered by Pearson:

I do think that in almost everything I have done, whether physical or narrative or whatever, I think what I am always looking for is an internal logic. Whatever the work is like it has to hang together internally from my point of view. I think having an outside eye would be like looking in a mirror so you would get it all backwards anyway. (MP1: 30)

Although somewhat confusing as a statement in relation to what an 'outside' audience might experience, it is still a useful example of the dramaturgical perspective as again located within the remit of the practitioner. It is also a very clear example of solo devising as a simultaneous doing and thinking, of the generation of material as being part of the compositional process.

The concern about over-immersion in the work, or self-indulgence or lack of perspective is an understandable issue for solo devisers, who accompany the work from conception to performance and beyond. One person has to occupy simultaneous and sometimes contradictory roles. The issue is also one of context, requiring pragmatic strategies to resolve it. One strategy used to address this issue, at least in part, is that solo devisers collaborate with others as dramaturgs, to temporarily hold that perspective for them, as discussed below. However, it is also one that needs to be self-managed.

## Composition

### **Shaping**

As well being concerned with generating new material, devising includes making decisions about ordering, structuring and shaping, which in postdramatic work is most frequently thought of as related to processes of composition. Again, orchestration can be seen to be at work in how the activities of generating and composing materials are managed, with different practitioners bringing forward different activities while working on the whole at the same time. Miller offers composition as a kind of 'shaping': how things come into being and the forms, the prime shapes that seem to be present at this generation. (Miller, 2006: 222) This occurs simultaneously with the generation of work, and each of the interviewees articulated this sense of an ongoing process of 'shaping' their work, orchestrated with different emphasises.

The kinds of overall structuring shapes they articulated in these interviews are what I will call Baker's 'trialogue', Charnock's 'sandwich', Pearson's 'timeline/stratigraphy', Etchells 'economy' and 'game/tasks', and Houstoun's 'quick sketch.'

With Mike Pearson, a critical shaping that we discussed in the second interview was the effect of increasingly working with video and audio and the central importance of the timeline as a structuring framework:

MD: It struck me that working with video, as opposed to dance, imposes a very specific timeline.

MP: We have been thinking about that a lot recently. I think the change, that came for Mike and me was actually the digital timeline.

Because with the advent of digital technology you can actually frame exactly in time. So the formal arrangement of video – of sound and song – you can imagine and you can structure and you know it will be there on demand. And I think the digital timeline did really change the way we think. And again you can do it schematically so although you don't have the material you can still map the time frames and then generate the material to go into those timeslots. (MP2: 37)

The 'shape' of the work can be imagined as a long timeline around which material can then be placed. This is a fairly 'expected' narrative shape, echoing the narrative line or 'thread'. This is not simply linear, however. Pearson writes in *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001) of his work as layered: using the language of archaeology to describe a 'stratigraphy' (24) or 'simultaneity'. of working of light, sound, text and physicality, which carry different significances at different times in the work. These layers allow for simultaneous 'veins' of material to be represented at the same time. These veins can be fatter or thinner, depending on their importance at any given time within the work as a whole. As discussed, this image has parallels with my discussion of the meta-activity of orchestration.

Lehmann's concept of postdramatic practitioners playing with the 'density' of material (2006: 89) can be applied to Pearson's compositional metaphor. Lehmann's 'dialectic of plethora and deprivation' (ibid.) can be plotted in Pearson's work to a timeline, along which varying 'seams' of material are plotted. This is not a simple linear trajectory but works synchronically, each layer varying in its size and presence within the piece. These materials are also ordered in surprising ways, appearing and disappearing through what he calls 'narrative wormholes', discussed further below (MP2: 18).

Houston spoke of enjoying a model of making which she compared to a 'quick sketch' (2007: 2), wanting to return to a structuring of the work carried out in earlier solos like *Haunted* and *Happy Hour*:

I started remembering about all the early stuff I made and why it started growing its own sort of energy was that they were all made as short pieces that then got extended because there was some life in the short bit that I had made. (WH1: 2)

Unlike Pearson's compositional timeline, which is then 'filled in', this is an aggregative model of composition:

Maybe it's just a good time to go back to this earlier model, of picking something that really resonates with me and running with it. Not worrying what it is going to turn into, until it tells me itself, and I only follow it because of interest, not because I have to fill up this time. (ibid.)

Sennett writes about drawing for design and the use of the 'sketch' as indicative of expert making, allowing for porous open design: 'the informal sketch is a working procedure for preventing premature closure' (2008: 262). Houston also engages with her work as sketch, allowing its form to emerge gradually through performed iterations.

Etchells returned repeatedly to the language of the 'game', in planning a piece of work and in the overall structuring of it. This reveals a procedural approach, working under rules and task conditions: in *Words and Pictures* his task is verbalising thought: 'Having decided that that is a good idea I then live with the consequences and have to articulate myself through what is essentially a limiting form. But in a way, accepting that is almost saving

yourself from gratuitousness' (7).<sup>107</sup> The game structure holds the boundaries of the work, its shape, so that the deviser can focus on exploring the dynamics within it. It also provides necessary limitations which, as has been identified, is particularly useful when working alone.

On the surface, this would seem a different model of compositional boundary than that of the quick sketch – fixed lines as opposed to a light shape, which invites redrawing. Yet, as has been discussed, in a solo devising situation, the score or structure can in fact encourage freedom, working with unknown rules and outside of patterns and extraneous material. Etchells spoke of finding within this shape the 'extremes [...] pleasures [...] punches of different materials' (ibid.) or the differing 'weights', a word he attributes to a conversation he had with Ron Vawter from the Wooster Group.

Houstoun moves between compositional strategies in her solo devising. She also applies this model of creating a rule or task, and then the performance involves its consequent playing out, in for example, her solo, *50 Acts*: 'I called it *50 Acts* and then I have to bloody well do 50 acts. My own fault' (WH2: 5). In prioritising the setting of rules and tasks, and then performing some of the consequences of this live, Houstoun and Etchells reveal themselves to be working clearly with postdramatic work as a live event,

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<sup>107</sup> These are not just games with set outcomes depending on who 'wins' but games of chance, a tradition maintained by Cage, which usually involve set structures but containing some room within them for chance procedures to occur. Etchells controls the initial 'rules' but does not control how people interpret and play them. Even when he is playing, as in *Downtime*, he is subject to the chance procedures of how he organises and performs the texts on the particular day. More recent examples of other kinds of game use is the developing use of technology and game work, for example in the company work of Blast Theory, Gob Squad, and the durational games of Forced Entertainment.

where some of the content and ordering of it is only generated in the moment of performance.

Charnock revealed an explicit example of composition as 'musicalisation', through his description of structuring *Frank*, 'like an album' (NC1: 10). The choice of ordering of material was organised through his sense of tempo.

The piece combined previously worked out and improvised material in the shape of a 'sandwich': the songs and set movement framed his improvised spoken materials, which he termed the 'bits in between' (NC1: 4).<sup>108</sup>

Baker repeatedly talked of her making in the solo works of 2005 to 2008 as consisting of an interactive exchange between herself as artist, the concept of the work and the very particular context out of which she was working:

'the process of making it had been constantly trying to check in with what is this event about, what is my personal relation to it' (BB1: 6). This suggested what I have called an interactive 'trialogue' shape within which she develops the work.

She gave me a very clear example, in *Angels*, of how her making of this work was shaped by the context, source material and her creative response to these. The overall context was being invited to make a piece of work for a symposium at the end of a three year research project initiated by Aston and Harris at Lancaster University. The subject throughout had been women in performance, with the suggested conceptual source materials being angels, women and performance. Baker discussed her ambiguous feelings

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<sup>108</sup> Lehmann discusses a more extended example of the use of music to structure theatre in the work of Christophe Marthaler, who 'stages musical and lyrical structures' (2006: 131) and also Frantic Assembly's use of DJs structuring of their sets according to the beats per minute, to structure the tempo of their dance-theatre pieces (2009: 33).

about the subject: 'relevant' [but] "Oh God do we still have to keep doing this, why haven't things changed" (BB1: 5). She described her unease about the 'angels' link and situated herself within this context as a mature artist who at the time (2008) was well known but still struggling financially. She spoke of being 'angry and battling and very, very annoyed with myself'. (4) Baker offered her making as continually working within these three parameters. Two of the smaller solo pieces focused on in the interviews; *Angels and Ballistic Buns* were also described, like *Houstoun*, as made, or 'drawn' quickly:

It's like sketching actually [...] doing the next big piece is like doing the Sistine Chapel... so much money and so many people [...] a really big piece of work with lots of people involved in it. And then having a little scrap of paper and doing a sketch. They are equally valid and they equally can communicate things. (ibid.)

Baker uses the sketch in different ways to *Houstoun* (clearly she is very familiar with it as a literal practice, given her fine arts background). It *is* the event in its entirety, not built up during performance iterations. She explicitly uses this way of working to take 'risks', and highlight 'irreverence' (BB1: 9), as opposed to what she characterises as more 'grandiose' (ibid.) large scale working (hence the Sistine Chapel metaphor).

## **Ordering**

Devising and postdramatic work have a history of ordering material by borrowing from other disciplines such as fine arts (collage, assemblage), film (montage, juxtaposition), media and technology (editing, collage).<sup>109</sup>

The solo interviewees additionally revealed a number of diverse approaches

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<sup>109</sup> See for example the work of the Wooster Group (montage, juxtaposition); The Builder's Association (media and technological editing, montage); Les Ballets C de la B (assemblage).

to ordering their work, including the use of feelings, game structures, shifting energy states, and step-by-step logics, in addition to borrowing from the wider disciplines of quantum physics, archaeology or geography.

Charnock, in *Frank*, orders his material through feeling: 'what I did was find music I really liked to dance to and put it in a certain order' (NC1: 1). As with the way he generates and shapes material, he continues to foreground personal feeling, likes and dislikes, as leading compositional decision making. This is an explicitly autobiographical way of ordering and composing: reading and inscribing one's feeling self into the work. Houston orders her materials in several ways. She brings forward her dramaturgical skills to scrutinise the logics of her compositional choices about timing, tone or mode:

I do have a strong eye on time. That is quite proportional to what you are making often. The length of that requires some shift. If something has got one tone for some time it is probably going to need to shift tone. And mode as well. (WH1: 9)

She establishes the 'game' as one of compositional necessity to carry out the title *50 Acts*, and in doing so erases the necessity for explaining the link between one act to another. The piece makes explicit its operation as a process of watching the performer 'do battle with an idea' (11), which is perhaps most comparable as a structuring device to the musical modes known as 'variation forms'.<sup>110</sup> Houston alluded to examples from the classical music world:

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<sup>110</sup> Early well-known precedents can be found in the work of most of the major composers, including Byrd, Monteverdi, Handel, Bach, Mozart and Haydn. More recent precedents for this include of course John Cage's or Philip Glass's work which insists on repetition and variation within a tight phrase, often presenting a performer enduring the work as much as performing it.



Chopin's preludes, which I did in Brighton. Prelude No. 1 is like this. You don't question why Chopin's No. 2 is like it is. You don't say "Oh, he got frustrated with No. 1 and then made No. 2". You can say "Oh that one is like a funeral march and that one is light and breezy". The contrasts in them are what seem inevitable. You don't think: "he must be sad after No. 1". Although there is something about a shift in the energies which make them right. (ibid.)

Using changes in energy to order work is not exclusive to postdramatic or even contemporary work, as Houstoun's example makes clear. She recognised it as a familiar compositional way of working for her dating back to her earlier solo *Haunted* (1995):

The way that that progresses alters, but I think it probably doesn't centre the performer on a cause and effect. The next section doesn't come because the last section has been pushed to such a point where it has to change. (4)

Houstoun also revealed her choreographic expertise in discussing these transitions as based on changes of physical energy: 'So I think the transitions are what I do best [...] change from one energy, shape or intensity to another. And transitions are what produce emotion I think. Changes bring emotion' (WH2: 10). What is significant here is the formulation of composing as working with changing physical energy 'states'. This characterises a choreographic approach; for example, Rosemary Lee speaks of working with 'the intangible – the dimensionless, the subtle energy, the invisible flow' (in Bannerman, 2006: 182) or Burrows describes unexpected energetic shifts: 'Flow is an accident of the attempt to get from one event to the next' (2010: 117). Lehmann suggests that postdramatic theatre works more with 'energetic impulse than information' (2006: 85).

Baker sequences her work in different ways. She spoke in practical, craftlike terms:

It's a question of having an idea and then thinking what's next. And having a question. So the question might be 'Do we have any music?' and then thinking about it and toying around with that idea and listening to some music and thinking, 'Yes, that takes it a bit further'. It's a step-by-step process. (9)

'Step-by-step' as a process signifies movement forward in small, achievable stages. It suggests knowing how to limit your horizons, to be able to see what it is you have found or discovered and then work forward from it. 'Do one thing. What's the next thing you want to do?' asks Jonathon Burrows (2010: 50). This is a model of heuristic compositional practice – a doing that informs the next step to be taken.

As I have already mentioned, Pearson and Etchells have written extensively on contemporary dramaturgy and composition. Pearson turns to rhetoric, in *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001), like Lehmann, to provide some examples of ordering models: parataxis, hypotaxis and catachresis. Parataxis is 'the placing of clauses etc. one after another [...] with implications of sequentiality' (25). It also implies equality of status, there being no subordinate clauses. Hypotaxis, however, works with 'the subordination of one clause to another, implying simultaneity'; and catachresis is originally the misapplication of metaphors, a bringing together of words, which are normally not put together, implying 'discontinuity' (ibid.). Pearson links this linguistic ordering to art practices which use juxtaposition, collage (art) and montage (film), all used in postdramatic theatre practices as well and

clearly operative in these solo practitioners' work. Pearson spoke of his freedom to be able to choose between ordering modes, as in *From Memory*:

We can then combine all three in some kind of topical way. So if we look at that beginning of *From Memory* it is hypotactic because it keeps compressing time and then actually it's on a very weird time span over a very short bit of text and it's catachresic because it's this, it's this – here's the poem, here's me talking about my father.  
(MP1: 19)

Catachresis for Pearson means 'misapplication' (2001: 25), and 'in Spivak's usage, a process of reinscription' (1991: 70). I read this as meaning an overwriting of forms – from epic poem into personal narrative about Father with no explanation. Pearson suggested posing similar questions to the solo work:

if you are thinking about solo performance: what material gets in there and what doesn't and why? And when it gets in there, what is the nature of its relationships with the other material, what is the dramaturgy around it? Even if you are working with catachresis, is there a dynamic in the ordering? Why that disjunction? (MP2: 20)

He introduced the concept of 'narrative wormholes' in *Bubbling Tom* and *Carrlands*: 'You can mention something and it won't appear until long after but it will be there. And people can make some kind of long stretch connection' (19)<sup>111</sup>. This image of the wormhole allows for a complexity of articulation about composition and viewing experience, allowing for a connection between materials that defies ordinary perceptions of linear space and time. We now know, if we accept Einstein's theory of relativity, that spacetime is curved, not linear and straight, due to the effects of the pressure of mass on it. Wormholes are most simply conceived of as 'bridges' across spacetime (Morris & Thorne, 1987).

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<sup>111</sup> This notion can also be compared to what comedians like Stewart Lee call 'call-back', the return to a joke several times throughout a set.

'Narrative wormholes' as a metaphor for how pieces of work develop allow for rhythms of material coming and going. This seems a suggestive description of compositional movement through a non-chronologically based piece. The material of the wormhole, dark mass, is also more suggestive metaphorically for how composition, that does not concern itself with fixity, can work. Dark mass is purported to be flexible, enduring yet invisible and able to be connected in surprising ways. This is also an interstellar version of Deleuze's rhizome: as space tunnel, dimension, connected, a multiple passage.<sup>112</sup> The heterogeneous, changing nature of the wormhole, connected yet flexible, seems a more useful metaphor for postdramatic composition than the more common term 'narrative thread', suggestive of a certain fixity of line, shape and movement.

Etchells mapped out two rhythms of compositional ordering:

I basically don't see any difference between writing an essay-like piece or a conference-like piece. I am making a performance and to me things unfold in time or they unfold on the page. But it's all dramaturgy, it's all creating a presence, subverting it and opening a space and suddenly focusing in a certain way. (TE1: 3)

He offers a broad dramaturgical mapping of an entire piece of work and I asked him to elaborate further on this in the second interview:

... in performance you expect that things will get more complicated and more interesting [...]. It doesn't matter where you start, twenty minutes on we should feel like we are in a slightly different place. After forty minutes we should feel we are in a slightly different place. And after sixty minutes we should be in slightly different place. There

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<sup>112</sup> See Deleuze & Guattari. 1987: 6. A rhizome suggests a complex connective system, whose significant characteristics include connection through lines or dimensions of space, multiplicity and heterogeneity. They give specific examples of the underground systems created by rats, (tunnels) or plants (tubers). Pearson's metaphor discussed in the ensuing section on composition, wormholes as channels for compositional activity, is in this sense analogous to rhizomes.

has to be a thickening or a process whereby we go further or deeper or things become more complex. (TE2: 19)

Creating compositional complexity is perhaps a particularly challenging task for solo devisers. While it is possible to engage the solo performer in simply interacting with theatrical materials of text, body, light, object or space, without the need for attending to interpersonal communication, at the same time, as Etchells confirms, compositional 'thickening' still needs to happen. The absence of others also disallows compositional development through difference. Excessive consensus risks becoming dull:

I suppose one person acting in a vacuum of their own will or intention – that is likely to be quite boring so you in a way have to find ways that they encounter some kinds of structure, or impetuses or forces from outside. (TE2: 28)

The search for structure, impetus, or force from outside is precisely what Etchells creates in his collector format, where he has to negotiate the unexpected materials that arrive (videos in *Instructions for Forgetting* and questions in *In the Event*).

## Performance as a process of devising

Solo devising is usually intended to lead to a performance by the deviser. The practitioners I interviewed all devise and perform their work, although not exclusively.<sup>113</sup> These practitioners all explore the porosity of the boundary between devising and performing and they use the creative potential of the performance platform in different ways.

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<sup>113</sup> These practitioners also make work for other people to perform solo. Charnock spoke of trying to teach his solo *Frank* to another dancer; Houstoun devised a solo *Small Talk* (May 2012) for Antonia Grove; and Etchells wrote *Sight is the Sense Dying People Tend to Lose First* (2008) for actor Jim Fletcher and *Although we fell short* (2011), a solo for dancer/choreographer Kate McIntosh.

Houstoun currently aims to use performances and feedback from them to extend her compositional work. Charnock uses real-time composition to communicate and practise his philosophical life practice. Baker, Pearson and Etchells all create task-based work which is only completed by an audience's collaboration in it in different ways. I will specifically offer here Houstoun's and Charnock's approach, as particular examples of how the performance platform and live co-presence of the audience can be worked with. They position an audience as interlocutors, people to address directly and gain feedback from. I will also discuss the audience's devising activity as co-participants in the live event of performance, although this will also be returned to in my wider exploration of solo devising and collaborative work in Chapter Four.

Houstoun most recently develops her work further through performing it:

I am quite keen on them [performances] being time framed, maybe ten minutes. One of them might be very long or one might be very short but they are quite contained within themselves. [...] There is something about being able to take out these small bits. I remember very early starting off with stuff in those little rooms above pubs, almost variety slots where one thing wasn't like another and you build it up in the doing of it rather than in a 'now I am going to make a piece'. (WH1: 2)

She again reveals her capacity to read what she has made, using the platform of performance to receive feedback and further develop the work. Like Baker, she expressed enjoyment in being able to work and perform the material quickly.

While practitioners working in devised theatre will be familiar with the notion of devised work as never finished and performance as often being

another stage in the development of the work, Houstoun's time frame of ten minutes and the self-contained nature of those ten minutes suggests a specific shaping of the material. *Haunted* started as a fifteen minute piece which she then extended, adding to the existing material.

This is a kind of serial approach, a 'green light' model akin to a television drama series being commissioned after a pilot has been shown and received positive audience feedback. With individual working, such an approach is perhaps more feasible than in group working, where scheduling devising sessions with long spaces in between rehearsal times is difficult and also where expectations of a longer piece of work would be higher. While 'scratch' performances are common now in the UK for trying out material, they are most usually aimed at emergent companies or individuals rather than emergent work from experienced individuals.

She also spoke about honing the work through performance:

If you get a lot of bookings you can really work the performance a bit. By 1997 that [*Haunted*] had had a lot of performances in a lot of places [...]. Now I am lucky if I do a performance ten times, spread over two years. So the chances of it ever looking sharp, succinct or worked rhythmically are rare. Which is why a lot of work looks neither here nor there. Because it never gets a run. Never gets lived in. (9)

Work that is dependent on being developed in relation to an audience is in a particularly wasted position by being performed so sporadically.

MD: It is interesting to me that I get more and more out of this work when I see it repeatedly, which is worrying. If I only see it once, how much am I seeing?

WH: It might be that a construct in order to be read in one sitting should be less dense.

MD: Yes. If we talk about Tim's notion of an economy – "look at me messing about with the same rule and variations on it" – it is very accessible.

WH: For a one sitting genre. Which is quite interesting because I have never really actually considered that at all. As to what it is like – one sitting versus many. (WH2: 12)

Solo postdramatic practitioners intentionally devise work which plays with issues of density: Pearson offering 700 visual images and fragmented views of the solo performer, or Etchells leaving five minutes of silence in the middle of *In The Event*. 'Synthesis is cancelled' (Lehmann, 2006: 82). Postdramatic work denies easy resolution.

At the same time, having a strong relationship to chaos theory and acknowledging unstable systems is not the same as being chaotic and creating confusion for its own end. Postdramatic theatre places high expectations on its audiences, required to work synaesthetically, accept simultaneity and suspend the need for resolution. It would therefore seem all the more important for the maker to have the possibility to develop 'sharp, succinct or worked' material.

Charnock is one practitioner who had the opportunity to hone his originally improvised piece *Frank* through having performed it so many times. He spoke of shifting his use of performing *Frank*, from an enjoyable piece of quickly made real-time composition to it providing him with a vehicle in which to practise his philosophy of 'aliveness' in performance. Inevitably, the original improvised piece became fixed, but this offered him the clear structure to explore his study of non-dualistic thinking and the interconnectedness of being, along with his audiences.



People say – ‘well why do you do it then? Why do you get up and do it? And my answer to that is, well, why not? Because the whole thing to me is an absolute joke, it is a total illusion, it’s like a performance and I am just playing around with everybody. And I am sorry and I really care about your mother who is dying and I really care about Iraq, but actually I don’t, because I know that it’s just not happening. That it is just being arising. It’s just arising. (NC1: 23)

Charnock is working very precisely with the existential ambiguity that David George has suggested performance allows, in this case his activity of performing being ‘like a performance’, but also not a performance.

Charnock is framing his performance work here as performing an existential state of being – of ‘being arising’. His conceptualising of this as ‘playing around’ with an audience is however irritating, offering the duality of an unambiguously enlightened Charnock and a uniformly dullard audience. He creates an arena in which he provokes each specific audience, a performance of unresolved tension created through insult and provocation but the battle is unevenly weighted, as only he can ultimately speak, dance or perform – very clearly monologic, as opposed to dialogic work.

As I have already established, Baker and Pearson in particular use elements of improvisation in their performed works, when they stage works as ‘events’, which are, to different extents, made in the performing of them. Set materials and scores are used and then only realised through performance and an interaction with place, objects, technology or the audience. Baker’s later solo works, *Mad Meringues* and *Angels*, are made through prospective thinking through what would happen and then assembling specific materials:

In a biscuit tin there was this battery operated fairy light thing but in a circle. It was just perfect. So I had that. And I had the meringues.

And I had this piece of music and a ghetto blaster. I don't know what was going to happen... And we found a rather lovely little marble table with iron legs. And we set up the meringues, set up the light, plugged it in, worked out how to turn it on and off, fiddled with the ghetto blaster and that was it. I hadn't practised it. (BB2: 12)

She uses her intuitive-conceptual skills to plan a piece of work, and assemble the ingredients, which include the audience as co-performers.

Their interaction with the work becomes the work.

In these events, Baker and Pearson involve the audience as co-performers, so I would describe this work as solo devised but co-performed. The solo deviser still retains conceptual control of the score for the performance, as Baker reveals in her acknowledgement of the effect of *Angels* as 'cruel' and Pearson in his assumed need to regain control of the performance dynamic in *Bubbling Tom* (MP1: 17).

In these performed 'events', the solo devisers have the opportunity to share some authorial power and agency with their audiences in performance; the elaboration of the work can be inflected by the audiences' creation of nuanced working within it. While this does not equate with co-devising (shared authorship from concept to the performance of a work) (p.270), it nonetheless invites participation. In return, the devisers can receive new perspectives, difference, conflict, and interruption or even encounter obstacles that are compositionally productive, and create dynamics which are different to those they would use when performing alone.

## Chapter Four: Collaboration in solo devising

Solo performance-making is an activity enjoyed by the interviewees for its capacity to allow for self direction, conceptual authorship, attention to detail, and at times pleurably solitary devising processes. However, when asked the question about collaborating, all of these practitioners discussed it as part of their solo devising practices, using different models of working which I specify further below (p.259).

Collaboration, as a set of activities taking place within devising practices, is commonly understood to denote several people working together through consensual creative processes, to make new performance.<sup>114</sup> However, there is nothing in the word's Latin meaning – *col* (together) *labōrāre* (to work) – to suggest it be excluded from a discussion of solo devising, or that the defined 'working together' needs to be continuous throughout the making process. Solo devising is different from group devising in that the conceptualisation and vision of the work created remains the responsibility of one person, who is also usually the person who realises and performs this vision. However, in group devising, the roles assumed and models of leadership in play vary widely (Harvie, 2010: 4), and this has important implications for who has the final responsibility for the overall conceptualisation of a piece of work. As discussed in the earlier section on devising, the collaborative model which includes both collective working and collective decision making about the work is increasingly rare. This earlier model has evolved into collaborative working, which includes clear role

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<sup>114</sup> See for example Heddon and Milling, 2006: 2; Govan et al, 2007: 34; Etchells, 1999: 50.

definitions, in particular of director, writer dramaturg and deviser.<sup>115</sup> In this sense, solo devised practice is different, but perhaps not quite as much as might be thought, in terms of one person holding an overarching conceptual vision. What *is* different is that this vision is also realised and performed by one person, although others are often involved.

Vera Steiner (2006), writing about creative collaborative practice across a number of disciplines including art, physics, psychology and music further clarifies this. She identifies several models of collaborative practice at work in the arts, including 'interdependent', where two different styles of working meet together and create a third dimension (which can be likened to the ensemble as collective decision making model of devising) and 'complementary' where 'differences' in training, skill and temperament support a joint outcome through division of labour (8).

In recent theatre company devising practices, this 'complementary' model of collaborative working is evident through this increasing use of role definition within a company. There is still a sense of the devisers offering in material, and the use of 'integrative methods' in terms of a 'third dimension' being created, but this is most often facilitated and led through deploying the specific compositional skills of a director and dramaturg.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> A small sample of well-known companies with assigned directors include Ex Machina: (Robert LePage), Forced Entertainment: (Tim Etchells), The Wooster Group (Elizabeth LeCompte), Frantic Assembly (Steve Hoggett and Steve Graham), Reckless Sleepers: (Mole Wetherall), Complicite: (Simon McBurney), Kneehigh Theatre: (Emma Rice) and Les Ballets C de La B: (Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui).

<sup>116</sup> There are exceptions to this, in the work of Lone Twin for example, which I discuss as co-devised further on in the chapter. Forced Entertainment emphasises the group nature of its devising, although Etchells is clearly named as Artistic Director of the group on their website.

Harvie argues that specialisation of this kind does not necessarily signal the end of democratic working, as 'practitioners are now exploring strategies for *negotiating* democratic practices and relationships, in recognition that dispersed power is not necessarily democratic power' (2010: 4).<sup>117</sup> In solo devising, as one person holds the conceptual basis of the work, 'integrative' collaboration is not widely in operation. But equally, maintaining individual, conceptual authorship does not equate with working based on autocratic practices, or indeed on the work being entirely singly authored.

Solo devised practice can also negotiate democratic practice. As discussed in Chapter Two, these interviewees reduce the centrality of their own individual presence, as performers and devisers, by operating in relation to numerous 'others', including their theatre materials, collaborators and audiences. Steiner describes collaborative practice as revealing 'the interdependence of thinkers in the co-construction of new knowledge' (2006: 3) and I shall show how solo devisers also reveal interdependent collaborative working, with other artists and with their audiences.<sup>118</sup> In Steiner's terms, they also employ 'complementary' artistic collaboration and this has artistic and economic implications.

At present, funding priorities of bodies such as Arts Council England are directed towards company work, without a consistent recognition that solo

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<sup>117</sup> Space limits a full discussion but what is notable in this collection of international case studies is the repeated use of the word 'ensemble', to now describe companies who have clearly named directors. The 'negotiation' is not about *who* finally decides on the meaning, shape or vision of the work but more *how* this is done within collaborative rehearsal processes (see Cope on Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui in Harvie, 2010: 49)

<sup>118</sup> I am specifically discussing the collaboration used for creating new work, as opposed to the working together that is fundamental to theatre performance production, touring, administration and publicity.

practitioners can also employ dramaturgs, directors and professional artists to devise with, as well as creating events for audiences to co-perform and participate in. Aston and Harris (2008) discuss the performance practices and processes of several contemporary individual practitioners while acknowledging the lack of attention given to 'the different kinds of artistic collaborations that can take place' (4). This lack of recognition was further confirmed in May 2012, at a symposium 'On Collaboration' at Middlesex University, UK. Collaboration was almost exclusively debated in relation to groups working.<sup>119</sup> This omission from debates, fora and long-term funding policy, of solo practitioners' ongoing and necessarily relational practice, has implications in academic and professional practice contexts and is in need of revision.

All five of the interviewees spoke of working with others in specific roles, like the expert contributor, dramaturg, or musician. These roles are examined more closely below, to further understand where they contribute to a solo devising process and the kind of collaboration they engage in. These interviewees reveal a working with collaboration as an enabling and also at times deliberately confounding activity: cooperation and collision being potentially productive forces, especially for the solo deviser when working alone. I will extend this idea of collaboration as collision to include the ways in which these practitioners seemed to be deliberately confounding themselves, in their move from the role of deviser to that of performer. This

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<sup>119</sup> While it is perhaps not surprising that this should be the main focus of the conference, I was interested that there was almost no mention of solo working in relation to collaboration at all. I offered a reworked paper I had initially given in 2010, at Theatre and Performance Research Association, titled: "'I know this won't work, don't we?': Solo making and collaborative practice', which forms the basis of this chapter.

created specific, useful compositional ways forward for them as solo performers. I end the chapter by exploring the different ways each of them discussed inviting engagement from their audiences, circulating authorial power by offering specific kinds of collaborative activity within the performance event itself.

## Collaborating with others

Initial analysis of the interview materials involved identifying the different collaborative roles discussed. These included:

- collaborator
- outside eye
- dramaturg
- director
- co-deviser
- friend
- professional artist (e.g. writer, composer, video/filmmaker, musician, choreographer, deviser)
- specialist (architect, psychologist, education worker, geographer, archaeologist, co-respondent)
- production crew (manager/administrator)
- interviewee (family, resident local people, workshop participants)
- audience

I subsequently mapped out these roles in a table format (see Table 1, below). I categorised the main architecture of these solo pieces as falling into three basic categories: concept, content and structure. I used 'concept' to signify the overall vision of the piece, 'content' the materials that make it

up, and 'structure' to indicate the order, overall shape and composition of the work.

Using Guy Claxton's terminology once more, I would term these categories 'coarse grained' (in Bannerman, 2006: 60): crude and certainly not fixed, as indicated by the broken line (-----). This allows for the reality of exchange, porosity and passage in between the areas of work. For example, content includes material input such as music or video, but can also include the site where a piece is performed, which in turn has an impact on concept and structure. However, recent discussions on dramaturgy use similar categories, defining, for example, the dramaturg's principal task as exploring the relationship between form and structure and content of a piece of work (Williams, 2010: 198).



<i>Collaborator Roles in Solo Devised Work</i>					
	Etchells	Houstoun	Pearson	Charnock	Baker
Concept	n/a	n/a	Collaborator/ Co-deviser	n/a	n/a
-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
Content	Artist Friend Audience	Specialist Audience	Collaborator/ Co-deviser Specialist Interviewee Co- respondent Audience	Artist	Co-deviser Outside eye Audience
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Structure	Audience	Dramaturg	Collaborator/ Co-deviser Audience	n/a	Dramaturg Outside- eye

*Table 1: Collaborator Roles in Solo Devised Work*

## **Concept**

The table shows that Pearson is alone in collaborating conceptually in his work made since 2004. He moved from working alone to working with Peter Brookes on all aspects of the work, including the development of the concept and preconceptual preparation. The work is subsequently performed solo. I realised that this placed some of Pearson's work beyond the parameters I am using to describe solo devising, namely where individual conceptual authorship defines its specificity as creative practice (as revealed by the other four devisers). I decided to name the work with Brookes as co-devised, and performed solo, which I detail further on in this chapter. At the other end of the collaborative spectrum, this mapping also

confirmed that Charnock works mainly alone, using just one collaborator in his devising process, the musician Nicolas Bilbeck.

This absence of collaborators in the conceptual area by all of the other practitioners confirmed my definition of solo devising as being when the practitioner retains authorial control over the conceptual framework and vision of their devised work. It shed light on what I perceive as a productive conundrum in Baker's interview when she discussed Brown's multiple collaborative roles, explored later on in this chapter. This differentiation and definition of what made devised work *solo* was confirmed when I presented an earlier version of the aforementioned Middlesex conference paper to the 'Directing and Dramaturgy' group of the UK-based Theatre and Performance Research Association (TAPRA) in 2010 in Glamorgan, Wales. Practitioners agreed that individual conceptual authorship delineated the boundary of what made solo working precisely 'solo'.

## **Content**

Professional artists/practitioners/friends and professional and non-professional specialists contribute to this solo work. By 'professional specialists' I mean people whose main occupation provides the knowledge sought after, for example archaeologists, psychologists, or geographers. Non-professional specialists indicate people who have particular knowledge that interests the practitioner without this being linked to their central occupation. In these interviews these included students, friends, family and people indigenous to a particular geographical area. All of these people contributed specific knowledge or materials to the work, be this through

artistic or knowledge specialism. The practitioners also spoke of inviting their audiences to contribute materials to the performance, either during the devising process or during the performance event.

### **Structure**

I further identified roles that were discussed as contributing to the structure and overall composition of the work, although again there is crossover with the areas they all feed into. These include the work carried out in the extended collaborative relationships of the dramaturg and co-deviser but also shorter feedback sessions offered by friends invited in to see the work as it is being developed. Audiences are also given space to affect the structure of the work in performance, deciding how they will carry out the audio walk in Pearson's *Carrlands* or making connections between materials in *Instructions For Forgetting* or *50 Acts*.

I clustered the roles discussed into four identified kinds of collaboration.

- 1.** Contributing specific and distinct materials and expertise.
- 2.** Contributing through feedback on material already carried out.
- 3.** Extended working which spans the whole devising process and includes material generation and compositional feedback.
- 4.** Collaboration in performance

### **Contributing distinct materials and expertise**

Pearson currently co-devises with designer and media artist, Peter Brookes, with whom he originally worked in Brith Gof. Houstoun collaborated with

Etchells on *Happy Hour* and regularly collaborates with the musician and composer John Avery and lighting designer Steve Munn. Baker worked with director Polona Baloh Brown, composer Jocelyn Pook, filmmaker Carole Lemonde and more recently worked with choreographer and performer Sian Stevenson. Etchells discussed as ongoing his collaboration with Richard Lowden and Hugo Glendinning, who work with video, film and photography. Charnock insisted that his work is carried out alone: 'I am really, really on my own. There is no director, no video, I don't have a mirror, I don't have anybody – nobody comes in and sees it before we do the first night. So it is just me' (NC1: 2). However, later in the interview he spoke of working regularly with the composer and musician Nicolas Bilbeck, who wrote music for him for *Original Sin*, *Hell Bent* and *Frank*.

This collaborative work with other artists was described as growing out of knowing about each other's aesthetics and work. Houstoun insisted: 'On your own it is pretty useless to start from scratch with someone because unless they are going to be there all the time then it's redundant in terms of contact' (WH1: 17). Baker spoke of her relationship with Brown as 'intimate', again having needed to work with someone 'familiar with my work and aims' (BB1: 10). This use of known collaborators is particularly relevant to devising as a creative process, which includes a wide range of possible approaches. Some common aesthetic and pragmatic ground has to be first established for the work to proceed, and in a professional context, time is very limited.<sup>120</sup> In addition, solo devising does not normally allow for a

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<sup>120</sup> Again this is echoed in collaborative practice in other fields – Steiner emphasises one of the predominant emotional needs identified by the collaborators she interviewed as being trust (2006: 12).

collaborator to be 'there all the time' so knowledge of the practitioners' aesthetic concerns and aims is a necessity for building up a knowledge base.

Pearson suggested that collaboration needed to grow out of ongoing practical concerns:

I think when you talk about collaboration you almost imagine that there is this special state of collaborating. I am not sure we ever get into that special state. It is always related pragmatically to the problem or brief at hand. The worst situations are those I have been in where you have arranged to collaborate with somebody and you think: 'what are we all doing in this room? What? What?' (MP2: 30)

Houstoun echoed this belief in collaboration which develops from specific material concerns rather than an 'idea' of working together. Etchells's involvement in *Happy Hour* resulted from his watching a fifteen minute performance of the material in the London venue, The Spitz:

'I spotted something in that which interests me'. So that is why they are going to be there, carrying on with it. Rather than: 'ok we have got to make a piece together'. I don't always understand that as a thing. (WH1: 11)

This insistence on working from specific embodied practice is again reminiscent of 'localising' as an activity (Sennett, 2008: 278), which in this case means working from shared materials, which are mutually recognised as important rather than ideas about working on an as yet unmade piece.

Etchells spoke of *Instructions for Forgetting* as involving the most collaboration: 'a solo but very much made in a team' (TE1:11). The 'team' consisted of known Forced Entertainment collaborators. Hugo Glendinning contributed expertise in video editing and sequencing and Richard Lowden

worked on design and video operation. Etchells spoke of them as present throughout the making process, feeding into his choices about narrative and composition, which led to the above 'team' definition of the process. He compared this to his later solos, *Downtime* and *Words and Pictures*, which he described as 'not part of any... group or discussion or agenda at all... very, very private in a way' (TE1: 11). However, with the former it is still clear that conceptually Etchells was authoring the work, in control of the overall decisions about which materials were initially invited into the devising space.

Music composition and playing is a specific expert skill, which was identified as regularly 'bought' in by several of these practitioners. Baker worked with Pook, Charnock with Bilbeck and Houstoun with Avery, although they did this in different ways. Charnock regularly makes his solos away from home, enjoying the immersive relationship this creates. When working on *Hell Bent* for example, Bilbeck accompanied him to Lancaster where they devised and composed the whole piece in an old Victorian mental hospital. They worked alongside each other, in separate spaces but at the same time and in the same place. Avery was also present in the same space early on in Houstoun's devising process in *Haunted*, although not continually so. This co-presence during early devising stages was initially his preference:

John would come in and there would be very little to see, as far as I was concerned. I would just be pottering about. He would come and sit. I would resist it, actually. I didn't really like anyone watching until I thought I had something. But actually I think it was more useful for him to see what I was working with. He would offer sound stuff in quite early. (WH2: 7)

Houstoun revealed in this statement the particular vulnerable devising conditions of the solo maker, exposed because alone. In addition, early work could easily not seem to be very visible – more akin to ‘pottering’. However, she also revealed how productive collaboration grew from ‘unfinished’ materials, processes that were not ‘closed’. She went on to work further with Avery on *48 Almost Love Lyrics* and *Desert Island Dances*. His contribution of music content was one obvious result of this collaboration but she also discussed his contribution in terms of setting the tone and timing of the whole piece, which I mention below.

Baker spoke of her relationship with composer Jocelyn Pook as starting with *Box Story* and being ‘tentative, involving discussion, experimenting together – we tried some things’ (BB1: 28). This suggests some working together in the same space after which Pook watched a run of *Box Story* and then wrote a piece of music separately, bringing it back at a later point. Baker characterised the relationship as ‘comfortable’, ‘fantastic’, ‘safe’ (BB1: 28), and like Houstoun, remarked on the ease of the collaboration. What is again revealed is that the relationship was carefully developed (like Houstoun’s), once the source material was in place. The ‘brief’ was very clear, as was the collaborator’s separate roles as composer and musical director. As with Etchells and Houstoun, Pook and Baker worked together and apart on the piece. Baker went on to invite Pook to work on the large-scale show *How to Live*, and the clarity of all the roles in this later work, including Baker as author, was also evident: ‘This was my most successful collaboration so far [2008]. It meant I had an overall artistic vision and people were able to bring in their own creative element’ (BB1: 28).

In all these collaborations, the musicians were responding to the practitioners' briefs. These were not written down but interpreted from rehearsal processes, developed over time through a dialogic process. Examples of academic or specialist collaborators working outside the deviser's own knowledge fields include Baker's research and development projects carried out with education worker Mark Storer in *Grown Up School* (1999) or the 'disciplinary experts' or 'correspondents' Pearson engaged with for *Bubbling Tom* and *Carrlands*. Both Pearson's performance events were site-related and he described his devising work as a process of finding ways to connect the audience/participants to the layers of history, geography and narrative that made up these particular places. To learn about the geography and archaeology of the site for *Carrlands* for example, he spent 'field days' in North Lincolnshire on the floodplains around the River Ancholme with archaeologists and geographers:

We walked all day and visited various sites and I recorded a conversation exactly like this, parked up, in that classic English way, of sitting in a car... A couple, looking at nothing in particular, with your tea, and just really talking about what we were looking at. (ibid)

Pearson also consulted the archaeologist John Barrett, who was working at Stonehenge at the time, involved in making the historic interactive and communicative to visitors. Pearson wanted to learn how to translate information to his audience, facing the added challenge of not offering a monumental site like Stonehenge but rather a floodplain where 'you are not looking at anything in particular.' He wanted to 'move beyond the monumental and talk about process. How did this place come into being?' (MP1: 3). His collaboration with these specialists involved walking, listening and talking. He and Baker collaborated through consultation and discussion,



recognising good conversation as a paradigm for good improvisation, out of which devising materials could be generated.<sup>121</sup>

Interviews were also collected and used in Houston and Pearson's work, enabling the inclusion of multiple perspectives. I have called the people they worked with 'non-professional specialists', in that their specialist knowledge was sought, but not necessarily linked to their employment. The information they offered was highly particular and prized. Pearson discussed interviewing people who work and live on the floodplain site in North Lincolnshire, including farmers, ornithologists and his father's 86-year-old cousin Cath, who lived on the riverbank. He reinterpreted and performed this material rather than reproducing it, calling it 'ghost voicings' (MP1: 2). This is different to a 'verbatim' theatre process, whereby interview material is used in performance, edited but essentially unaltered. Houston used this technique in *Desert Island Dances*. She specifically collected 'non-expert' texts from her interviewees, who were dance workshop students. She recorded their responses to topics related to the workshop, like gravity, physics or mobile phone technology: 'In a way it's about which tack it goes off in. I think it's very rich. It has some element of wonder and curiosity about the world, which I quite like' (WH1: 4).

I have already written about this as 'multi-vocal montage' (p.144) where Houston performed as a conduit of her collaborators' materials. Etchells also identified this as a fundamental activity for his solo working: 'Me as a gathering mechanism and this principle of inviting people to send something.

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<sup>121</sup> I apply this concept as used by Tufnell & Crickmay, specifically 'creating as conversation' (2004: 33).

That is quite a strong throughline or interest for me in terms of how to make work alone' (TE1: 2)

As discussed in Chapter 2, Houstoun and Etchells spoke of experimenting with how they can appear or disappear in performance amongst these collaborators' materials. They play precisely with the audience expectations of being the centre of focus and attention, performing a reversal of this.

## **Feedback**

Collaborative contribution occurs as 'feedback' – responses by others to the work made – usually in draft stage. Like collaboration, feedback as a process is not singular, homogenised, consensually apparent or an unproblematic 'known thing' or process. It is however frequently spoken of as an important activity used by professionals, teachers and students as part of a creative process, so I wanted to look more closely at what stages in these solo devising processes feedback occurred, the kinds of responses the practitioners asked for and how they fielded, used or ignored them: in effect, how they managed feedback.

### *Outside Eye*

One term frequently used in interview and in writing on devising to describe the person giving feedback is an 'outside eye'. The nomenclature suggests a person valued for positioning themselves as in some way separate from what is being shown, even if temporarily so, and primarily concerned with viewing the material made. The combined meaning suggests offering perspective on what is occurring.

The nature of what they are 'outside' of varies, however, according to how each individual and group works. In groups it can describe someone external to the production process, such as other artists who are invited in but it can also describe a deviser working within the group but choosing to change role from a 'performing' to a 'looking' role for a period of time, as in the work of company members in Frantic Assembly or Reckless Sleepers. So for that period of time they are outside the work made, changing their role from performing generated material to viewing the performance event. I compare group process with individual process in relation to this terminology of inside/outside to illustrate that the binary is not absolute for devisers in general, as well as presenting particular challenges and issues for the solo deviser.

Etchells, Houstoun and Baker spoke of using feedback from an 'outside eye', literally outside the devising process and also from collaborators who adopted that role temporarily. Houstoun invited in colleagues like choreographers Lloyd Newson and Jonathon Burrows; Etchells invited in long-term theatre colleagues from Forced Entertainment. Brown collaborated in a variety of roles with Baker but was also named as an 'outside eye' and 'dramaturg'. Etchells worked as a writer for Houstoun on *Happy Hour* and also offered overall compositional feedback.

Like expert contributors, people offering compositional feedback, tend to be known and trusted colleagues: Houstoun spoke of her work with Etchells as part of an 'ongoing conversation I am having' (WH1: 17). Etchells invited feedback from Richard Lowden and Terry O' Connor, who regularly work

with him in *Forced Entertainment*, on his second and third solos, *In the Event* and *Words and Pictures*. Like Houston, this occurred when the pieces had been at least initially sketched out.

Just as the expert contributions made by artists need to be filtered by the solo practitioners, so too does feedback have to be 'read' and used, or not. It is evident that these practitioners are very experienced in obtaining the particular kind of feedback that is useful to them. In drawing repeatedly on known choreographers and peers, like Newson and Burrows, Houston is aware of their individual aesthetic agendas. An example is Lloyd Newson valuing 'clarity' which she suggested was not her concern but which she can transfer: 'I can take his comments and apply them to another kind of territory' (10); or choose to ignore: 'you sort of listen and sort of don't listen' (16). She wants feedback that is: 'ruthless, spare, very few words' (16). She uses feedback from Burrows in a particular way: 'With Jonathon, one sentence can be the thing that is backgrounding a lot of activity. Even though you are not doing something about that, it still backgrounds it' (11).

Clearly there are different feedback 'languages' which are used in different ways. Burrows offers a diffuse and influential kind of feedback, which Houston applies indirectly to the work as a whole. In contrast, she spoke of using Etchells's feedback to specifically change compositional structure: 'working with Tim on *Happy Hour* was very much about logic – finding a logical form' (WH1: 8). Etchells gave examples of a type of specific statement or question that he finds useful: 'I was engaged by that or I was

bored there or I have got a big problem with the whole thing' [...]. 'This really needs to be addressed' [...]. 'What are you doing?' (TE1: 10).

He engages expert decision making and confident control in managing undesired feedback: 'I will just edit that right out by not inviting them or by not listening to them if they are talking to me' (ibid.). He is also able to let go of this control, and accept decisions with no debate: 'It's a way of suddenly not having responsibility for a certain aspect of the decision because you have maybe too much and it's cool to find a way to have somebody else decide' (TE1: 11). These are decisions about small matters on which 'I don't really care' (ibid.), entrusted to known collaborators. Again, negotiating ambiguous working is a useful skill for solo devisers.

Etchells also uniquely among the practitioners invites feedback from strangers, artists from the Vienna Biennale, for example, where he was rehearsing and performing *Instructions For Forgetting*. However, he had pre-allocated a role for this feedback: to simply 'confirm or deny my own suspicions' (TE1: 10). Etchells has highly developed and practised skills in dramaturgy and direction and this enables him to productively direct when and how he uses feedback.

Baker described Baloh Brown's first role as that of an 'outside eye' on *Cook Dems* (1990), a piece that she showed her when it was in first draft.

Brown's activity was observational; sitting and watching and then discussing what she had seen, on tour and in rehearsal.

One of the reasons for working with somebody like that was to fix something in my mind. You do it again and you get feedback and you practise it. I had not got used to the notion that I might do that myself. (BB1: 34)

Again, at that time, good conversation helped to imprint solo work. With experience, a kind of 'self-fixing' also becomes a possibility for Baker.

Brown's work with Baker spanned different functions, including generating material as a co-deviser. She also delivered compositional and directorial feedback. Her professional skills as a theatre director were clearly used and she is named as director, co-director and performance director at different times. Baker also described her function as that of a 'dramaturg' and, while this was contested by Brown herself at the time, I think it is a very accurate description for the more current expanded definition of what a contemporary dramaturg can do, in a devised theatre context. I therefore discuss Brown's work with Baker mainly in this category below.

## **Extended collaborative roles**

### *Co-devisers*

Pearson discussed collaborating with Brookes on most of his solos from 1997 to the present day. This significantly includes conceptual collaboration. He was alone in doing this and the extent of his working with Brookes makes the term 'co-devising' a more accurate description of their work together. I decided nonetheless to include this work in this section as a strong example of what co-devising can mean and also to further define solo devising by contrast. Baker also spoke of and named Polona Baloh

Brown (Pol) as a co-deviser, and I write about this at the end of this section and into the next one on the work of the dramaturg.

### *Brookes and Pearson as co-devisers*

Brookes is a designer and conceptual artist with whom Pearson first worked in Cardiff Laboratory Theatre in the mid 1970s. They subsequently collaborated on *Dead Men's Shoes*, *The First Five Miles*, *The Man Who Ate His Boots*, *Bubbling Tom* and *Three Welsh Landscapes* (2008). They worked together and apart during the making of each piece, from conceptualisation to development to realisation in performance.

I asked Pearson how they developed the concept or 'brief' as Pearson refers to it:

MP: We are very good at saying I have got this big idea and he will say here is another big idea so what happens when that big idea and that big idea come together?

MD: A kind of 'yes and...'

MP: Yes. It is a 'yes and...' (MP1: 33)

They finalise a concept usually through visually representing it: 'the way we communicated was by drawing. And I don't mean figurative drawing [...] creating a framework in which we can operate. As soon as we have a pattern like that we can leave ourselves to our own devices really' (34). As discussed in the previous chapter, they use the digital timeline as a precise mapping into which they can insert their sections of material once created. They have different clearly defined roles: Pearson writes text, works physically and performs, and Brookes works with video, photography and spatial design. Pearson emphasised their shared experience and respect

in their professional ambition 'to get to the top of our game simultaneously' (MP1: 19). Their use of 'shorthand language' – for example, 'I know this won't work, don't we?' (MP1: 20) – manifests a common dramaturgical focus, aim and overall vision for the work. He also revealed how they are able to trust in that which they do not share: 'Because he is a visual artist he has particular sensitivities to context and I am fairly convinced he will make the right decision in a way that I can appreciate, without necessarily imagining that is how it will be' (MP2: 32).

This is particularly important when working with smaller budgets, where events cannot necessarily be rehearsed or embodied, so the 'know it when I see it' mode of Pearson's previous experience on *La Leçon d'Anatomie* with the French directors is simply not affordable, or even desirable in terms of requiring considerable time. Their shared confidence is also manifest in the fact that co-devising for them means that speaking is frequently not necessary: 'I don't think we do any critiquing of what the other is doing really' (MP1: 19).

This lack of a need for conversation is important, as Baker and Etchells made clear that the need to discuss or debate everything consumes energy. Pearson and Brookes reveal a sophisticated collaborative relationship, which leaves room for working together and considerable space and freedom where necessary. They work closely together as co-authors and dramaturgs but also confidently apart as devisers.



### *Baker/Brown as 'co-devisers'*

There are two main differences between the collaborative relationship (as revealed in these interviews) of Baker and Brown and that of Pearson and Brookes. Firstly, Brown was not a co-author or responsible for the conceptual vision of most of the work. Brookes and Pearson share authorship throughout. Baker and Brown jointly named her role as a 'co-devisor' on several of the 'Daily Life Series' solo pieces including *Kitchen Show*, *How To Shop*, *Grown Up School* and *Box Story*, but she was only once involved in conceptual authorship, on *Take A Peek (1995)*: 'It really was something that we both made. The ideas, the structure and everything' (BB1: 9). Later, however, she suggested that this was not a straightforward co-devised piece, with many of the ideas being her own.

The second main difference is that Brown and Baker always worked on the material together, and their roles were more intertwined, whereas Pearson and Brookes have distinct roles in terms of material generation and frequently work separately when generating material.

Baker made it very clear that the issue of naming Brown's role in her solo working was never resolved and expressed a desire to continue our conversation about this at a later date – in consultation with Brown.

### *The dramaturg*

Baker described very positively and in detail the multiple roles carried out by Brown: 'one thing rolled into another rolled into another' (BB1: 17), and also spoke of the difficulty of naming her work precisely at the time. The

work of the dramaturg in devising contexts has expanded since Baker and Brown collaborated together, and recent writing on new dramaturgies (Turner and Behrndt, 2008; Williams, 2010; Kelly & Heddon, 2010) confirms that the role in practice can function in many different ways. What was revealed in the course of Baker's interviews was a strong, productive and close working relationship with Brown, which spanned over ten years. She also described the relationship as 'testing' (20) and confirmed that she was relieved that their friendship 'held and survived' (20). I observed that the tension seemed to arise from the difficulty of naming the relationship and the specific role functions within it, indicative of dramaturgy's then historically limited role in British theatre. I will discuss this briefly before examining how Baker and Brown's collaborative relationship seemed to fit well in the new expanded definition of what a dramaturg does in devised theatre practice.

As recently as 2006, Mary Luckhurst's *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre* offered one of the first extended examinations of dramaturgy and the role of the dramaturg in the UK. It is written from mainly a historical, dramatic perspective, focusing on plays. Turner and Behrndt developed this further in *Dramaturgy and Performance* (2008), clarifying some concepts and definitions of an expanded dramaturgical practice in the UK. They identify 'a recent surge of interest in the role' (1) in 2008. This included definition and separation out of professional role (dramaturg) and compositional practice (dramaturgy) (3), and the latter's meaning expanded from working on the play text to include engagement with 'the entire context of the performance event' (4). This moves beyond the literary or critical roles as exemplified by

G.E Lessing in the mid-eighteenth century and the later Brechtian production dramaturg, or the researcher and script curator of European main house theatres.

Turner and Behrndt discuss the notion of the dramaturg as a creative collaborator within a contemporary devised performance context and offer several specific case studies<sup>122</sup> as examples of the diverse ways that dramaturgs work within companies. Williams (2010) offers a useful and wide-ranging exploration of the functions and roles of the dramaturg in a devised context with Lone Twin (a perfect example of co-devised practice). His formulation encompasses the dramaturg as writer, director, facilitator, performer, poet, psychoanalyst, proto-spectator, researcher, interlocutor, co-writer, academic writer and coach. While this could be accurate, I am also reminded of Pearson's reading of the 'reverse' logics of someone who has not authored the work and Melrose's spectator/practitioner divide. Dramaturgs in devised work are clearly practitioners as well; however, solo work operates very specifically on the ability of the practitioner to occupy multiple roles, to differentially activate these and to maintain a sense of anchorage within this through being the 'author', in the sense of inventor, of the work. The dramaturg, if assigned all the roles Williams suggests, moves close to the multifunctional role that the solo deviser manages. Publically crediting Brown's multiple contributions proved difficult.<sup>123</sup> She is variously named as 'co-deviser', 'dramaturg', 'writer' and 'performance

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<sup>122</sup> See for example Louise Mari and Shunt (172), Frauke Franz and Primitive Science/Fake Productions (168) and David Williams and Lone Twin (177).

<sup>123</sup> Again, difficulty of crediting collaborators, listing of names or the distribution of royalties are noted by Steiner (2006: 142) as concerns common to creative collaborators, requiring trust and clarity around the ownership of ideas.

director' in the DVDs of the 'Daily Life Series'. None of these terms seemed accurate to either Brown or Baker. 'Performance director' suggested input when the work was already devised, whereas it was clear Brown was engaged much earlier on in the process. 'Outside eye', on the other hand, was also inaccurate as clearly Brown was 'inside' the process with increasing frequency. In our 2008 interview, Baker did name Brown as a dramaturg in the later work: knowing 'how to simplify things, concepts' (BB1: 17). She acknowledged however that Brown did not agree: 'I am not a dramaturg... I do not know what a dramaturg means'. (BB1: 17). Brown later described herself in interview with Aston and Harris (2008) as more of a 'catalyst through which the work progresses and passes and this catalyst helps channel it without destroying its original form' (33).

Brown reveals an acute awareness of the need for 'origins' or authorship to be protected. This was also clearly an issue for Baker, as she repeatedly made it clear that working with Brown occurred once her overall vision was already in place. She acknowledged the tension this continually created:

She [Brown] would say that she would suggest something and I would automatically say 'no'. And I wasn't being stroppy. It was a control thing. I would just think 'It had got to be mine.' I noticed myself doing it with Sian yesterday on the phone. (BB1: 28)

The issue of ownership ('mine') is a particularly charged one in devised work in general. Group devising contains an already shared authorship amongst the devisers, and additional conceptual input does not change the balance as obviously as with solo devised work. Issues of power and control are again more evident in solo working, the management being mainly

carried out by one person. Therefore negotiating collaborative roles can be more challenging.

At the time of *Box Story* (2001) and *How to Live* (2004), dramaturgy in a devised context in the UK was being practised but not comprehensively written about. In the current performance context, over ten years later, as discussed above, writing on the dramaturg's multiple roles in devised theatre does exist and is being circulated through publications, conferences and practitioner networks.<sup>124</sup> The role of dramaturg, as characterised above by Williams, does seem to fit in with Brown's own description of her multiple, facilitative role. I would suggest that self-directed solo work can make use of what I will distinguish as a 'contemporary dramaturg', as Houstoun and Baker revealed. What is important is that the role is carefully distinguished from that of a director; facilitative rather than conceptually responsible. The tension Baker articulated revealed a lack of existing examples of the practice of contemporary dramaturgy, of successful collaborations between solo devisers and dramaturgs. With new definitions of the dramaturg, and examples of good practice in a group devised context, this can now perhaps be a facility available to solo devisers.

### **'Audiencing' as collaboration**

Postdramatic theatre often includes performance as an 'event' rather than as a 'show', in a process of becoming rather than a finished product. These

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<sup>124</sup> Conferences include: March 2007, 'Next Stages – Dramaturgy and Beyond: Writers and their Careers', Manchester Metropolitan University, 2007; 'Pro-Sessional' Conference, Soho Theatre, March 2006; 'Alternative Dramaturgies Symposia', Exeter University; What is dramaturgy? Birmingham Repertory Theatre, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2005; and Dramatrix 05, London Oval Theatre 12<sup>th</sup> December 2005

practitioners offer their audiences different possibilities of engagement with their work, in roles that invite more activity than reception as a kind of completion of the artwork. Keith Bryant Alexander (2000: 99) reminds us of the origins of this pluralistic theory of meaning creation and author/reader collaborative relations from Roland Barthes' important writing, *From Work to Text* (1977: 155-164). Barthes offers the analogy of the author offering the text as partial music score to which the reader brings her own scored material, to become: 'the co-author of the score, completing it rather than giving it 'expression'. The Text is very much a score of this new kind: it asks of the reader a practical collaboration' (163).

Alexander names this audience engagement 'audiencing', suggesting an active role for audiences, which in his case are related to autobiographical work with memory. I apply it to the variety of kinds of engagement that these practitioners invite from their audiences, which also moves beyond the reception and actualisation that any artwork invites but rather extends into creative participation. Although I am primarily focused on discussing solo practitioner's devising processes, this seeming diversion into engaging with the performed work is in fact relevant as it engages with those sections or pieces of solo work that are only completed in performance, through the co-working of audience and performer. This is not true for all of the work but is an important part of solo devised practice.

This 'audiencing' occurs in a spectrum of different ways. People are invited to become physically involved as co-performers, to engage in creative thinking as dramaturgs, to dream and to do battle as combatants. They are

also invited to give feedback on 'scratch' performances. As I suggested in Chapter Two, this collaborative activity is made possible by the ways these solo practitioners, with the exception of Charnock, refuse to occupy virtuosic roles. Ron Vawter summarises this balancing act succinctly:

It's very easy to be bravura and wonderful but if you keep demonstrating and presenting like that it puts the audience in a very passive place psychically. Those gaps are the most important thing because it's there where you stop 'showing' and the audience can use their imaginative powers and they're the ones that fill in the gap. That's where they become true *collaborators*. And if you can invent the gap well enough the audience just comes right into there. (Etchells, 1999: 93, my italics)

This is a clear example of inter-dependence between performer and audience, the deviser creating 'gaps' and these being imaginatively filled by the audience. This is particularly enabled and facilitated by the frequent and charged use of the theatron in solo performance.

Lehmann in fact offers two slightly different characterisations of what the theatron is. The first is the aforementioned physical space in the theatre, the axis between 'stage' and audience (127).<sup>125</sup> I work with this usage but include both 'stage' and performer as one axis point, to allow for the work being mobile, as in Baker's *Mad Meringues* or Charnock's *Frank*. In citing his sources for the expanded idea of the theatron, Lehmann offers Andrzej Wirth's description of the whole theatre space in experimental theatre work being alive as a 'speaking space' (*Sprechraum*)<sup>126</sup>, which I read as meaning that creative input is envisaged as possible from all who attend the live event. Lehmann likens the theatre space to an 'instrument' (2006: 31),

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<sup>125</sup> Ladnar, writing about the performance lecture *On Everest*, by Lone Twin also defines it simply as 'the space between the stage and the auditorium' (2011: 230).

<sup>126</sup> Wirth, 1980 in Lehmann, 2006: 31

when imagined in this way. The theatron, in this wider formulation can be 'played' by several people, further supporting the idea of the solo deviser as orchestrator, in this case creating a score for performance which audience and performer 'play'.

Pearson's audio work *Carrlands* engaged with the audience as a collaborative participant and moved into the terrain of co-performance in a similar way to Baker's small site-specific pieces, which she discussed as a group of solos made in 2008. It is clear that the audiences are required for this particular work to happen. I would categorise this work as solo devised, as the conceptual authoring and overall shape and score of the work remains with the solo deviser but it is co-performed, with the audiences. These are examples of solo devising where the audience is physically very active in the work, and able to make some decisions about how and where it is enacted. In *Carrlands*, the work is site-related. The audience can visit the website (The Carrlands Project, 2007) download some of the twelve mp3 files and order their participatory experience themselves, online or onsite. Here the theatron axis as a relational connection is very short and very long, and both visceral and virtual. Short and visceral, because Pearson as guide is placed inside the visitors' ears, his voice situated literally in their heads, and long and virtual because Pearson the human performer is no longer present but clearly exists elsewhere. His simultaneous presence and absence encourages the visitor to assume control, make decisions and even usher him out of the work by turning the audio material off.



Baker spoke of particular kinds of ambiguous roles offered to an audience in *Angels* and *Mad Meringues*. She introduced these in interview as solos, which again I would agree with as they are conceived by her alone. Like Pearson, they also require the audience to participate in them and so are co-performed. In *Mad Meringues*, the audience literally consumes the work, paradoxically eating the meringue ladies who are signifying presence and diversity, in collusion with Baker who offers them up from her golf cart. This theme is recurrent in Baker's work, echoing the sweet cannibalism of her earlier cake-artwork, *An Edible Family in a Mobile Home* (1976). The work is experienced, endured and ingested. If the theatron is the physical space between audience and work/performer, when the work is co-performed and eaten, it could be said that the performance situation is literally realised as an act of consumption.

Etchells and Houstoun also spoke of inviting their audiences to engage dramaturgically in the work. Cathy Turner (2008) speaks of dramaturgical process as one of creating 'connective tissue' (84). In *Instructions For Forgetting* and *In the Event*, Etchells positioned his audience as people who connect and make sense of the material:

If you know that there is not a mysterious or meaningful reason that X and Y are put together, you are given the permission to make connections between distinct objects. I [as audience] have got a lot of work to do. That is pleasurable. It's very interesting. (TE2: 7)

In this case, Etchells as solo deviser shares the role of dramaturg with the audience. He has also made very precise, compositional decisions, aiming for a 'poetics' within this 'relaxing rationalist framework' (ibid.) but through his monologic narration of how he came to show the video materials,

speaking 'as if' directly to the audience and downplaying his own role, he opens up the theatron axis 'for business'. Vawter's 'gap' becomes evident and the audience can approach the work with their own interpretations and create their own orientation alongside his own.

Houstoun offers her audience a similar activity throughout her solo, *50 Acts*, where they are also invited to make dramaturgical 'joins' between acts, alongside her monologic narration. This is a familiar narrative device used in filmmaking, extended by Houstoun to include theatre-making. She further acknowledges the usefulness of sharing authorship in this way – 'it's a way to keep the nature of the surprise going, conceptually, on your own. The pace can get very similar if it is only you, hammering away' (WH2: 4). This is important as it's a clear acknowledgement that solo devisers clearly reap benefit from the different imaginings, dynamics and pace that their audiences can offer, alongside their own working.

Etchells also offers space for another kind of attention to be paid to his work, of a more reflective, autonomous kind. In response to my question about favourite solo performance moments he had witnessed, he gave the following two examples from Live Artists Edit Caldor and Eva Meyer Keller. His first was from Caldor's piece *Or Press Escape* (2002). In the piece, Caldor was working on her laptop and the audience only experienced her through the projected image of her laptop and the films, messages and music she was organising on it. 45 minutes into the piece, the hard-drive announced it was full and she spent five minutes putting materials into the trashcan, saying nothing. He spoke of valuing this moment as a 'sudden

feeling of freedom to think and to make what you can of what is happening' (TE1: 14). His other example was Keller's *Death is Certain* (2002), which I include in full quotation:

She enacts the deaths of 40 cherries. You are basically in a room and she has two tables, one of which is laid out with lots of material. A razor blade, matches, string, a cheese grater, a toy car. Lots of things, and 40 cherries. And the first thing that she does, (and this can be the moment), is she picks up one of the cherries and she takes it to the other table which is empty. She takes also the string and some Sellotape. She ties the string around the stalk of the cherry, tapes the other end of the string to the table and lets it go, so she has hung this cherry and walks off. She goes to the table and she comes back with a razor blade and another cherry and she basically slowly peels all of the skin off it and puts it down and goes and gets another one. And it is really brilliant, she gives no opinion at all about what she is doing. She is somewhere between the cookery demonstration lady and TV science presenter and some kind of technician from Auschwitz. She is not telling you anything. Not in that kind of robotic performer mode, she is just doing what she is doing actually. Again in both of those things *the thing that I am absolutely drawn to is space*. (TE1: 15) (my italics)

Etchells offers similar kinds of gaps in his own piece *In the Event*. Within its complex structure (p.317), in the middle of the central section, he plays five minutes of music, on its own, exploring: 'the relation between textual information and filling people's minds with stuff on the one hand and on the other hand just creating space [...] letting people drift or free-associate or go off in different directions' (TE1: 6). In the language of postdramatic work, Etchells is varying the density of information offered. He is also making room for each audience member to temporarily disengage with his work. I find this refreshingly opposite to an 'immersive' theatre experience, most commonly requiring physically entering the artwork or environment (Machon, 2013: 21, Tomlin, 2013: 182) and requiring 'deep' involvement (Izzo, 1997: 33). Instead, Etchells invites a (temporary) moving away from

the work, allowing time for contemplation – interestingly similar kinds of creative thinking to that which can also operate well in solo devising.

In a diametrically opposite fashion, Charnock 'manhandles' his audience into responding to his work, where they are situated as combatants for him to provoke. This is an example of goading an audience to engage through collision and conflict. In *Frank*, he adopted a patronising heckling position as prophet: 'hello, wake up... I am here to wake you up because you are all asleep' (NC1: 26). He works as an irritant. However, as previously argued, he intentionally contradicts this with the way he dances, performing a precise, joyful, physical presence. Alexander (2000: 99) cites Elyse Pineau (1995) and her formulation of the potential physical power of the autobiographical performer as a 'performance methodology [of] deep kinesthetic attunement, developed through rehearsal' (46). Charnock's ambition is for this kind of attunement to be shared with his audience: 'In a way you are trying to achieve the impossible with the technique. Forever you are trying to make the perfect connection' (NC1: 6).<sup>127</sup> In *Frank*, the audience's experience is therefore a mixed one:

I am constantly making them laugh and being nice to them and giving them sweets and everything and then suddenly I will tell them: you are a load of murdering bastards. Are there any Christians in the audience tonight? (NC1: 25)

Charnock's work offers little space for an audience to actively 'collaborate'. Rather, he uses solo performance and his naked control of the power dynamics of it to provoke, entertain and engender a conflicted experience.

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<sup>127</sup> My personal experience of watching *Frank* is that Charnock's physicality created a response in my own body: delighted, disrupted, at the same time as my mind wanted to switch his voice off.

## Collaboration as collision

There is a widespread and often unstated assumption that collaboration operates by 'agreement', the 'saying yes' or not 'blocking' that is taught in basic improvisation training typified by the work of drama educator Keith Johnstone and detailed in his influential book *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (1979). Charnock also associated collaborative process with agreement, stating that for him collaborators needed to 'be on the same wavelength as you' (NC1: 7). He described himself as operating on a distinct frequency, hence for him collaboration was 'difficult [...]. Usually I know what I want' (NC2: 40).

Etchells (1999) agrees that collaborative working posits 'a sharedness that doesn't have a name' (54) and his preferred definition is 'a good way of confounding intentions' (55). Collaboration occurs in complex ways and devising has long included accident, chaos, surprise, mistake and failure as important creatively generative components, as well as agreement.<sup>128</sup>

Collaborative process and work incorporates conflict and collision as well as consensual and combinative methodologies.

Drama practitioner and teacher Chris Johnston points out that saying 'No' can be equally relevant and productive, devising through and from conflict (Johnston 1998: 8), and suggests strategies and exercises for including diverse materials in one piece of work. Gottschild offers a model of working together across cultures based on productive difference rather than

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<sup>128</sup> Happenings as events, guerrilla theatre, site-specific work, community theatre, work which uses improvisation within its performance mode all work with these principles. Recent specific examples of discussion of failure include writings by Goulish, Etchells and others at [www.the-institute-of-failure.com](http://www.the-institute-of-failure.com) and Bailes (2010).

consensus: 'Intercultural' designates performance genres that look at the tensions, frictions and discontinuities that arise in the contemporary encounter and/or clash of different cultures' (Gottschild, 1996: 145).

Pearson offered one example of collaborative practice as collision, which I will go on to examine in more detail next. I will then explore how all of the practitioners work with this idea of collision between their devising roles and their performing roles, as one productive way of developing material further in performance.

### **Two solos or one duet?**

Pearson has an ongoing collaborative performance relationship with Peter Brötzmann, an experienced European free jazz improviser, which he described as 'two solos that happen in parallel' (MP1: 18). It is evident that this collision of working methods, performed together, is enjoyed by Pearson and based on different rehearsing and performing aims and modes: a kind of creative dissonance. 'What he does is so far out of our world' (18). 'Our' for Pearson means a devised theatre world. He talked about preparing for rehearsal with Brötzmann by bringing along materials or actions he had generated. As a solo deviser of set materials, he activated his dramaturgical eye, looking to see how the work would 'hold' together in performance. Brötzmann offers a Thelonious Monk tune. In the subsequent 'moment' of performance, Brötzmann, as a 'free' improviser played something else, characteristic of free jazz.

Real time composition occurs only in the moment of performance, performing a dramaturgy of change as opposed to set materials. Rehearsal

for improvisers involves amongst other activities being alive to changing dynamics when the work requires it. Rehearsal for Pearson was on the other hand envisaged as practising some set materials – not fixed, but with some sense of compositional flow to them. They then staged a collision between these performance approaches: devised work meets real time composition. It was, of course, agreed that these tensions and differences in performance would be played out.

In the language of improvisation, their performance 'scores' operated with shared and differing elements, which they performed simultaneously. They agreed to the length of performance, sharing the space with one another and a known sense of the forms each other would work in (saxophone playing from Brötzmann, spoken and physical actions from Pearson). How these elements are worked with and combined was subject to change, in the moment of performance, through a productive clash. Productive because the tensions and differences revealed make the work integrate and become effective in its own terms. Their work is realised in a productive clash of intentions, a successful improvised piece of work because it cannot, despite Pearson's attempt, be pre-planned. Once again, a successful collaboration is not about consensus but about realising difference: 'a process of co-ordination of individual contributions to joint activity rather than as a state of agreement' (Matusov, 1996: 34 in Sawyer, 2014).

More than one person in the space performed this work, yet Pearson called it 'solo'. This is due to their different operational modes. Pearson and I did not speak about it as strictly 'solo performance' so much as have a

conversation about work that is created from an individual score and then collides in performance: ambiguous as both solo and duo. Here, one and one is not felt to equal either two or one unified performance. This is another ambiguous 'adding up', as Josef Albers suggested (p.142) which aims not to add up – an obviously enjoyed, as the collaboration is ongoing. Images, when deployed in work, become more than the sum of their parts. Bodies, when deployed in performances with simultaneous yet different scores operating, remain distinct yet together. Pearson and Brötzmann in performance does not equate to  $1 + 1 = 2$  or  $1 + 1 =$  the collaborative 1. Pearson and Brötzmann in performance = 1 and 1 and the collaborative 1. They are distinct and together, in a collaboration based on difference and creative dissonance.

## Collaboration as confounding intention

The other challenge for solo makers is how to advance the action when there is no one present to argue with, yet there is still a need to find 'the edge' (BB1: 7) I observed that these solo practitioners seem to offer multiple ways to create such a confounding of their own intentions in their work, which played out primarily in a deliberate tension they set up between their roles as solo deviser and solo performer. The 'hermit' sets up or sets off into a wilderness which at times confounds them. I will go on to discuss some specific examples.

Pearson chooses to work with outdoor sites and in *The First Five Miles* he is forced to carry out the walk in darkness, due to the helicopter scheduled to



light his way not being able to take off because of bad weather. In *Bubbling Tom*, he uses gossip as a delivery style and the audience fully comply: 'What I hadn't anticipated was that people would constantly interrupt me [...] So your work then is only becoming a mnemonic for their past' (MP1: 17). In the unedited interview, Pearson searched for the right way to express himself in this quotation. It is telling, I think: a concrete example of his struggle to regain control that I suggest he nonetheless invited. It allowed a central dynamic of surprise to be incorporated into the work and forced him to change, respond and improvise.

The way Etchells spoke of his devising process for *Instructions For Forgetting* involved him becoming enjoyably confounded:

The great thing about somebody sending you a whole story of a grizzly murder or the time when they did blah blah blah is that you have to deal with it then [...]. You had no idea that that was going to arrive in the post or email that morning. The out of controlness of that is really, really lovely. (TE1: 6)

Etchells is forced to change the way he imagined working with these extracts: his devising is required to be responsive to what he finds, not creative of his own ideas. He is subject to forces outside his own will, which he had himself invoked.

Houstoun also sets herself up to do battle with her work. In *Desert Island Dances* it is her choice of music track and volume: 'what I like about it is the music drowning out the voice' (WH1: 1), in *50 Acts*, it is the compositional structure which she has to perform in total: all 50 acts.

What unfolds in this piece is clearly a commentary on the 'act' as a traditional time frame of action in performance and also, in real time, her

action of carrying out this performed endurance test fifty times and the multiple meanings this can generate.

Collaboration, as the collective term for different kinds of working with others, proves to be an effective way to produce interdisciplinary, well researched and layered, devised solo performance. It enables these solo practitioners to work with others in a variety of roles, enabling multi-voiced work, which challenges ingrained attitudes, or expectations from other practitioners or scholars of performance for solo work to be self referential, monologic or inward looking in its form. They reveal a wide use of different collaborative roles; short contributions and longer collaborative working over time. They also reveal skill in managing feedback and being able to read it and place it where they most need it.

A particular issue for solo devised work and collaboration was exposed by Baker's previous collaborative relationship with Brown, which revealed the benefits and challenges of working consistently with a dramaturg or director, in a solo context. It raised important questions about the naming of roles, authorship and ownership of material, always a question to be addressed in devised work. These practitioners spoke of particularly valuing the independence of solo working, fully able to collaborate and incorporate this collaborative working into their own vision.

They demonstrated expertise in discussing how they negotiated the complexities of self-direction, at times deliberately creating struggle which they then have to navigate in performance. In this way they create work

that moves beyond the demonstration of one person's will. The portrayal of performed failure and struggle, while not unique to solo postdramatic performance work, offers particular meanings in the solo context. It challenges enduring perceptions of solo work as concerned with virtuosity, display or willful determined work. These solo devisers disclose models of collaborating with themselves that invite and welcome in conflict, confounded intention and enjoyable surprise.

Importantly, they make solo performance where the protagonist can be at the centre of the work but also create a space for others, including the audience, to imagine, dream, connect, make sense of the work and contribute their own meanings alongside those of the deviser. In doing this, they create solo work, which engages with a politics of shared authorship within the theatre event itself – and they reveal varying interests for circulating this creative agency amongst those who are present at the work.

## Chapter Five: On finding solo devising

Solo devising has been named as a potentially distinct category of making new theatre, at present occupying a nonspecified space, 'not lost but not yet found,' and my aim was to explore what specifying or 'finding' this category might include and offer, to practitioners and scholars.<sup>129</sup>

I will start this concluding chapter by returning to this notion of 'solo devising', before going on to suggest how this thesis contributes to knowledge in the field of theatre and performance, and finally putting forward some suggestions for further developments of the research.

### **Solo devising**

The question of solo devising as a potentially distinct category of experimental theatre-making first arose out of specific questions within my own solo practice and my knowledge of other theatre and performance practitioners who worked in similar ways and were also asking some of these questions. I had observed that there was a lack of written materials on solo devising and an absence of practitioner-centred writing on making solo work, which encouraged me to undertake this research and use practitioner discussion as primary source material.

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<sup>129</sup> I am using the word 'finding' as a gerund, meaning 'A form of the Latin vb. capable of being construed as a n., but retaining the regimen of the vb.' (OED, gerund, *n*). This idea of finding as a process works well with this initial mapping of some specific practices of solo devising, open to being both temporarily *found* (named, specified, debated, taught) and also usefully *lost*, (elusive, ambiguous and non-paradigmatic).

I have come to interpret this lack of material as arising out of limitations within the 'models of intelligibility' (p.24) by which solo practice and devising are defined and discussed in performance studies discourses. The terms 'solo' and 'devising' are considered to occupy widely different domains in how they are practised, the thinking that they contain and how they connect to wider cultural practices and frames of reference. Devising is historically understood as collaborative, sociable, relational, democratic, open-ended and dialogic; solo practice as individualistic, solitary, self-generated, autocratic, determined and monologic. This thinking affects the way writers and practitioners speak about devised practice, creating a climate in which – I have suggested – solo devising can 'scarcely be thought'. And yet detailed analysis of five expert practitioners' discussion of their engagement in solo practice, alongside my wider reading of scholarly and practice-based texts,<sup>130</sup> has revealed the binaries delineated above to be largely inaccurate.

I have suggested instead that solo devising can work best as a combined, category term which includes individual and relational making practices, (p.66, p.144, p.277) and my initial proposition, of exploring solo devising as a *distinct* category of making new theatre work proved to be too crude to be useful. Instead, it became more generative to consider solo devising as a set of practices related to group devising but which also have particular *distinctions*, due to being carried out primarily by one person. When this more complex view of solo devising is explored, its ways of operating offer

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<sup>130</sup> I have acknowledged that my interviewees did not themselves use the term 'solo devised practice' to describe their work.

potentially useful information to the domains of both solo practice and of devising.

In terms of making a piece of new theatre work, practitioners of solo devising were found to share with group devisers an engagement in activities related to research, exploration, the generation of material, composition, performance and collaboration. Although these were inflected and differently elaborated according to the disciplinary background of the interviewees, open-ended 'what if' processes of performance-making were used, like devising itself, or improvisation, which challenge the idea of all solo practice as determined, controlled or the product of exclusively pre-planned thought or intention.

Collaboration was revealed as active within solo devising practice, despite solo being largely overlooked in writings on collaboration. It was found to operate through working with others in specific roles: a complementary collaboration involving consensual and colliding processes of engagement (p.256, p.286). This is common to group and solo collaborative practices. Baker's collaborative relationship with Brown revealed the benefits of working with a dramaturg or director in a solo context and also clearly exposed important issues about the naming of roles, the ownership of material and the crediting of intellectual property which is a relevant issue across all devised work. Solo devising, like group devising, was also found to use multiple voices and perspectives in the performance space, solo devisers acting as conduits for other people's work, which I wrote about as

'multi-vocal montage' (p.144). Again, this challenges the notion of solo practice as singular, or monologic.

On an obvious level, solo devised practice is clearly distinguishable from group devising practice. Having defined solo devised working as being when an individual is conceptually and practically responsible for making, realising and performing new theatre work, this difference has a number of less evident corollaries for methods of working. It was these nuances that I explored in this enquiry.

While it is true that companies can have a director who holds the overall responsibility for the creative vision of the work, the solo deviser is responsible for multiple activities across the whole performance process, from creating the conditions out of which an idea can emerge through to its development, realisation and later analysis. They need to engage a multitude of skills, which although also true of group devisers, is different in that solo devisers frequently have to combine these activities simultaneously. This was revealed to be the case across different modes of devising activity, such as creative thinking, physical activities, managing collaborative relationships and organising work.

Devising solo thus requires the dexterous meta-activity of *orchestration*, skillfully carried out by the interviewees in this study in a number of different ways, including the use of long-term intuitive-analytical knowledge and experience, role-playing and creating scores and strong compositional frames for working and managing collaborative relationships with other

artists and dramaturgs. Having this ability to shift between knowledges and skills proved to be all the more critical because of the high number of ambiguous workings, experiences and perceptions associated with solo devising that I identified in the discussion and wider reading. These included solitary and collaborative working, the creation of complex performance persona created, engaging in immersive processes (improvisation, intuition) while maintaining wider perspectives (composition, conceptualisation and shaping), audience perceptions of admiration and distrust and the high risk and reward attached to performing solo.

These solo practitioners discussed kinds of devising that aligned them to notions of *postdramatic* thinking. My engagement with Lehmann's ideas about the postdramatic clarified the kinds of solo devising they were interested in: experimental, self-reflexive practice, intermedial theatre and relational working with their audiences, as well as offering detailed practitioner and practice-based thinking for future work on how solo postdramatic work is created.

The interviewees articulated a commitment to self-reflexive practice, prompting my analysis of how they 'undid' individuality, selfhood, autobiography, monologue and lone authorship. They work performatively with the notion of individuality, creating multiple versions of themselves as unreliable, contradictory, edgy and unlikable beings (p.129). Some of them made explicit use of their own experience to create particular resonance with the experiences of their audience, unraveling notions of autobiography as a singular or a fixed genre and instead pluralising it into a performance



methodology of relationship, in which audiences are invited to inform the performance. This is authorship as chorus, not monologue (p.79, p.128, p.144, p.278). In fact, freedom from oneself, from performing individuality is a theme that emerges from the work and working processes of these interviewees. What is continuously exposed in this postdramatic solo practice is not so much the desire for self-expression as the opportunity for particular, expert working and highly detailed crafting: physical, verbal, 'scenic' and sonic dimensions of theatre can be focused on in performance and fully explored.

I also observed a repeated pattern of *self-confounding* – a kind of collaboration between aspects of themselves producing 'collisions' that enable them to move beyond their own prior compositional patterns or knowledges, staging battles where the outcome is not defined or known (p. 289). In some ways, this way of working could be said to mirror a dramatic model of 'conflict' used to advance the action. However, with these solo practitioners, the conflict is not contained within the plot but rather enacted live with the theatre media that accompany them in the open desert that is the performance space. To borrow from Lehmann, the move from representation (dramatic) to presentation (postdramatic) can be further described in solo postdramatic work as performing *negotiation*. Etchells negotiates meaning, Pearson negotiates place and terrain and darkness, Houstoun shouts against a volume of music and light, which threatens to drown or erase her.

While the working environment in which solo devising frequently takes place can be solitary, the working performance environment could be said to be the opposite, engaging a particularly intense relationship between audience and performer with the use of monologue directing the work towards the audience and opening up the potential for different kinds of sociable interaction to occur. This can be and is fully exploited by solo devisers. For the collaborative activity with audiences, a working together in performance, I have adopted the term, 'audiencing', intending it to cover a spectrum of different types of engagement and participation (p.124).

In the terms of this research, some of the work discussed remains solo devised even when performed in a group, since conceptual authorship for the score still rests with the practitioner. However, an authorship shared by the audience, including imaginative, compositional or physical engagement and a dispersal of performance energy and attention can reveal different kinds of collaboration that are also of great benefit to the solo deviser. Houstoun's candid acknowledgement of the usefulness of audience engagement, as 'a way to keep the nature of the surprise going' (WH2: 4), is a refreshing balance to current discussions of participatory theatre practice – solo or group – which can make exaggerated claims about the generosity of devisers in inviting audiences into the work. Similarly, Etchells's offer of performance time in *Words and Pictures*, where the audience can distance themselves from his work or authorship, tempers the notion of 'immersion' in group and solo work as necessarily a radical or good thing.

The placing of solo devising within a map of a solo devising economy offered a systemic approach to discussing it, suggesting the potential for multiple connections and interaction with other expert practice contexts and relationships which could be said to elaborate the practice as much as the individual maker does, to 'practise the performer' (Melrose, 2011: 5). These elaborations included the artistic, economic, political, social and relational contexts out of which solo devising occurs and with which it interacts.

The lack of writing about solo devising can be, at least in part, explained by the challenging nature of writing about creative processes and terms more generally, including ones relevant to solo and group working, like *solo*, *devising*, *improvisation*, *intuition*, *collaboration*, *expertise*, and *imagination*. They are all differently defined, contested, and ambiguous and yet they are functional and have to be engaged with in a discussion of devising practices. Focusing on practitioner-centred discussion was one way to anchor processes of creation in the language of invention, the 'mucky, mutable, dirty business'<sup>131</sup> of making, and the labour that goes into it.

My wish to respond to Melrose's call to detail and delineate practitioner-focused discussion and expertise in relation to performance-making prompted my central methodological decision, to set up lengthy interviews and engage not with the working itself but with what the practitioners had to say in conversation about making their work. This enabled me to explore and engage in specific and detailed ways with the slippery terms listed above. It revealed clearly and surprisingly an expertise frequently

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<sup>131</sup> From an unpublished essay by John Ashford, cited in Etchells, 1999: 55.

articulated through questioning, openness, and determined uncertainty. It also revealed the gaps that speaking about making engenders – absent ideas, practices, thoughts, memories, articulations that engaging in one kind of practice creates. The limits of this method were encountered, and I recognised the need to sustain wider reading of other critical texts, not least to provide the means to interpret the interview material.

These included Sennett's detailed case studies and specific naming of particular skills and dispositions manifest in expert making practices in the domain of *craft*. Applying his terms and approach to performance-making revealed disciplinary expertise being articulated. Further expert skills identified as operating in the solo practices included being able to read oneself and what one has made, generating scores and structures to work within, being able to work and perform alone, maintaining momentum and being able to engage in self-confounding struggle as generative activity. Activities and skills which were identified and which could be applied across domains, from the individual deviser to group devising include the creative activities of questioning, localising and opening up problems as well as continuous expert decision making based on intuitive and analytical knowledge, avoiding early closure, encouraging complexity, maintaining curiosity as a motivational drive, and knowing when to stop.

Despite my methodological decision to draw primarily on the spoken words of practitioners, I found it necessary at times to attend to the performance work itself and wider commentary on this work. This served to reveal the limits of any one mode of knowledge (practitioner discussion about working)

through turning to another (the pieces of work themselves) and to another (critical thinking about the practice).

Although not discussed in great depth, the economics of solo devised practice revealed conflicting issues for its practitioners. Being frequently small-scale meant that work could be made relatively quickly, within defined financial parameters and be supported by wider organisations that view it as being of 'value'. Venues of course also have to negotiate limited funding sources for experimental new work. This can also be a problem, with solo work being viewed as 'cheap', individual, or working through one-off projects and in the UK at present, there is a relative lack of long-term funding structures to support individual artistic development. For long-term working, practitioners need to form companies or ally themselves to institutions such as universities. Baker recognised the need to have gone through a 'battling phase' (BB1: 5) to achieve the funding she had in 2008.<sup>132</sup> Houstoun, having avoided a 'game plan' of this kind, was in the position of questioning, in 2008, 'how to finance a coherent creative life'. This is despite her long experience and full career as a well-known dancer, choreographer and physical theatre practitioner (WH1: 19).

The consequence of a lack of long-term funding is that artistic development, outside of making specific work, is not widely supported. Yet experimental practice and solo devising is repeatedly articulated as relying on a commitment to open-ended making, at times outside of a known end-product (p. 160, p.196, p.201). This is also true for group devised work.

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<sup>132</sup> She had formed her company, Daily Life Ltd, in 1997 but did not receive long-term funding for it until 2012, as one of the National Portfolio companies of the Arts Council.

Changing the model of intelligibility whereby solo devised work is recognised as a creative practice which requires regular training and collaborative input, artist development and training support over a long term career might well contribute to addressing this problem. What is evident is that platforms for artist development, including residencies in theatres, universities and galleries are essential support for solo artists' professional development and will remain as rare opportunities, if the current funding structures carry on prioritising company working at the expense of solo devising.

Not including solo devising in discussions of postdramatic performance-making and collaboration misses the potential of engaging with modest, interpersonal political issues raised by solo devised practice. Its practitioners are shown to explore a deconstruction of the notion of the individual, exposing interdependent selves in relation to the many contexts by which they are constituted: disciplinary (p. 55), artistic (p.65) and social (p.252, p.279). They practise and stage questions about the relationship between the individual and the group, and persistently engage with important issues of individual authorship and collaborative working.

The ambiguities identified in solo devising, and the need to deal persistently with 'two [or more] in one' – two conflicting parts, which can inhabit a productive place in their working practices – contributed another facet to my discussion about the politics of solo practice. This is a politics which is revealed as celebrating contradiction, diversity, and dialogue and allows for the expression of relational individuality. Gayatri Spivak suggests that a

search for identity can be reformulated as a search for space, whereby the individual meets the collective: 'if you are clearing space, from where to create a perspective, it is a self separating project... it is against territorial occupation' (Spivak & Arteaga, 1993, in Landry and Maclean, 1996: 21). These interviewees use solo performance to practise making these kind of spaces, where the individual meets, creates and negotiates multiple perspectives, alone and with their audiences. In doing this, they combat what Richard Sennett perceives as contemporary social life's brutally simple edicts: 'us against them' coupled with 'you are on your own' (2012: 280). Solo devised practice offers instead the possibility of enjoying the space to be deeply on one's own, precisely because one is also severally connected, regularly facilitative of and engaged with others.

### **Contributions to knowledge**

This research has explored solo devising as a potentially distinct category of aesthetic theatre production whereby new solo postdramatic performance is created. It specifies some of the creative activities of this category, as well as others it shares in common with other devising carried out by groups and companies. In doing this, I hope to have contributed reflective thinking, arising out of analysis of practitioner interviews and suggestive ideas from Melrose, Sennett and Lehmann to wider contexts engaged with devised practice and postdramatic thinking. My primary method, of accessing and commenting on detailed practitioner interview, has made available the detailed thinking and views of five significant, experienced practitioners of solo and group devised performance. Even in its filtered and selected form,

this is original, practitioner-centred source material, available as a rich resource for other scholars and practitioners

The research has aimed to extend Lehmann's work on postdramatic theatre with a fuller account of solo devising as falling within the postdramatic idiom. It has also aimed to respond to and extend Susan Melrose's call for studies in performance to engage with expert practitioner knowledge about performance-making. To this end I have offered an inside, process view of solo working, as opposed to more widely available spectator knowledge, based on the analysis of performed works. I offer some responses to her succinct call (2011: 1), further developed in my own enquiry, to clarify what solo devising expertise is, where it comes from, who has it and how one can get it. This has relevance to emergent practitioners and students of performance. This enquiry thus intends to contribute to the field of practice-led research, engaging with praxical knowledge, or practitioner-theory, through an analysis of detailed practitioner interviews in conversation with wider theoretical concerns.

In a further contribution, I have identified collaboration as active within solo devising, a set of activities previously overlooked but often vital to this type of working. I have delineated a number of ways in which it works, the detail of which is again not prevalent in current writings within performance studies. I differentiate specific kinds of collaborative working to include expert contribution, collision, audiencing and self-confounding. Alexander's initial work on audiencing in autobiographical work is extended to include the collaborative activity engaged with by audiences of solo postdramatic



work. I also apply the term 'contemporary dramaturg', drawn from writings which deliberate on its workings (Williams, 2010), to suggest useful kinds of collaborative relationships for solo devisers, as opposed to working with a director, for example, where issues of conceptual authorship can be more problematic. I also elaborate on terms like an 'outside eye' and 'feedback', which, like collaboration, are widely used and can benefit from further specification according to the context in which they are applied.

As discussed above, in the course of this work, I obtained material which suggested that solo devising might usefully be placed within the wider context of a solo devising economy. This is not a fixed model but rather an imagined space and dynamic system, which includes devising processes, primary relationships, practical, disciplinary and wider cultural contexts, working environments and the main dynamics and energy exchanges that occur within such an economy. Areas like the intense relationship between audience and performer were highlighted by conceptualising this map, which in turn foregrounded the usefulness of Lehmann's conceptualisation of the 'theatron' as an axis of communication, and supported further analysis of communicative devices and relational activities that occur along it. These included the use of monologue and the possibilities of audiencing that the best of solo devising explores and activates. These are initial suggestions for future scholarly work.

I hoped that as part of the interview process some new thinking would occur to the practitioners themselves. Although it is not possible within the scope of this research to measure the long-term effect of the interviews on

the practitioners, this new thinking was evident in several instances during the interviews themselves (p. 37). I think, for example, of Pearson's new thinking of himself as a solo practitioner: 'curiously there is quite a lot of work I have talked about, although I never really thought of myself as a solo artist. But it is recurrent. It is recurrent' (MP1: 22) and his recognition of the impact of his use of video timeline on the composition of his work. Houstoun articulated surprise at the repetitive nature of her use of transitions over a twenty-five year period, through watching the detailed moment of *Haunted* with me. She also said she had not considered the effect of what a 'one sitting genre' might have on how she made work. Baker spoke of reconsidering the terms 'solo' and 'devising' in the light of our interview. Charnock observed his work was always sourced from autobiography, never made 'about' a subject not connected to himself in some way.

### **Future methods and lines of enquiry**

Lines of enquiry and methods I did not take this time, as explained in my early section on method (p.29), which could be pursued at a later date by myself or by others include:

Examining performed works more closely, to see what insights they yield about the making process that led to them. This was actually undertaken as the main focus of interview number two, though not pursued further in the current research. It yielded very specific material about making, centred around one performance moment. This could form a starting point for further research, for which some primary data has already been gathered.

Widening the interviewee group, to include other kinds of experimental solo work, like the solo transformative physical body in the work of Kira O'Reilly, Franko B or Martin O'Brien, the large-scale solo work of Robert Lepage or Diamanda Galas or the one-to one performance work of Kira O'Reilly, Jo Bannon and others. I am now in a stronger position to return to these other practices, having established some focal areas and concepts. I can also now ask more targeted questions, for example on intuitive working, the use of improvisation, orchestration, scores or questions about the effect of economic issues on their practices.

Exploration of solo working across popular as well as experimental work, such as devising for stand-up or magic acts can be further pursued. There is also work to be done comparing solo experimental performance-making across other disciplines, such as dance, music and the visual arts.

## Postscript

I began this thesis with a preface alluding to my own practice and how it led to this work. Any future lines of enquiry will involve returning to my solo making practice, in an ongoing conversation with the findings and the productive gaps arising from this research. I continued to make solo work during the earlier part of this research but subsequently this gave way to an engagement in more reflective, discursive working. This in turn has offered ways forward now for my own theatre practice and associated activities. As well as teaching, this includes further developing the Solo Contemporary Performance Forum with its expanded number of platforms in which I can also disseminate this research. In the light of this enquiry, I will return to

making work, exploring performing mixed ethnicity, using direct address, music, physicality, voice and humour. I shall be further developing the lying, fakery and gaming that had been growing around that work and I will be developing my complementary collaborative work with Crickmay and other artists who can generate music and design. I also want to find more ways to pluralise the voices in my work and develop it as composed theatre.

In conclusion, it seems fitting to remark that my research methods, of practitioner interview and dialogic interplay with thinking, analysis and reflection on this and wider materials, evolved in a manner similar to the solo devising I was studying. By this I mean 'stratigraphically', with seams of knowledge running under and over each other and 'wormhole' connections appearing and disappearing as I progressed, at times in conversation with my different collaborators. My work as a 'solo devising scholar' amongst these labyrinthine materials at times engaged in the present moment, aiming for an intuitive-analytical response. I also at times required similar skills of immersion and/or more distant perspective. The multi-vocal montage that the practitioners produced was a weighty, complex resource, needing light-heavy navigation. Repeated reflection on and analysis of the practitioner interview material, alongside wider reading and critical analysis, revealed an interdependence of method, a relational interplay which further 'backgrounded' by my own practice, offering the opportunity for a further type of orchestration to take place.

## Appendices

## Appendix I: Indicative questions from interviews 1 and 2

### Interview 1

Are you working on a solo at the moment?

What devising strategies do you use specifically for making solo work?

How do you develop your work?

Who do you collaborate with to make solo work? (*Does working solo mean having to be alone?*)

What is the role of your self in your solo work?

What are some of the problems you have encountered with solo work?

What's good about working solo?

Would you describe to me your favourite moment from a piece of solo work not your own?

Can you describe to me your favourite moment in a piece of solo work you have made?

What does the word 'solo' conjure up for you?

What is particular, do you think, about solo performance?

What haven't I asked you?

## Interview 2

Exploring a moment from one of the practitioner's pieces of work.

Discussing further key statement(s) from the previous interview.

The moment is very much about *making* and these are the questions I want ask around it:

How did you get to that moment?

Where does it come from?

How does it fit into the piece?

How does it get built up?

How does it relate to the source(s) of the work?

What aspects of your 'training' enabled you to make that moment?

## Appendix II: Ethical statement for interviews

I will be recording these interviews with a digital voice recorder. The questions will be sent to the practitioners beforehand and they are set open questions at this stage. How they are ordered will depend on each interview. There is also intentional room for other questions to arise in the course of the conversation. I view these interviews as starting points and I will be asking each artist if and how they would be willing to continue the dialogue at a later date.

I am a solo practitioner and a researcher. I also coordinate SOLO, a new contemporary performance forum which has been meeting twice a year at Dartington College of Arts and which has been established for solo devisers to show work and gain feedback. I am asking these interview questions to start a comparative enquiry into solo performance practices, which may include my own as a deviser. I am also collecting materials together for a research project (a PhD).

During this process, I will continue making solo work myself and exploring ways of sharing some of these materials with a wider community, be it through the SOLO performance forum, journals, Internet, articles and some kind of bookwork. I will consult all artists before writing or printing any of their words, to gain their agreement for using the material. I will show them what I intend to publish and if they are not in agreement, their words/material will not be used.



## Appendix III: Solo works and additional practitioner information

I provide more detail here on the main solo works discussed in the practitioner interviews, drawing on the interviews and viewings of life and recorded performance where these have been available. I have placed these within a chronological list of all of the practitioners' solo works, for reference. I also include additional biographical information on the practitioners.

### **Bobby Baker**

*Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988)

Baker uses autobiographical material based on her experience of motherhood, domesticity and her role as an artist to perform this challenging, humorous and visual monologue. It is framed as a story about her experience of childbirth, depression and illness, drawn out in the space verbally, physically and visually through her use of words, food and her body to materialise this history. She works with several motifs, which are used as a recurrent refrain, introducing herself as 'Bobby Baker, a woman' and wearing a white uniform dress and specific shoes. All the materials are carried into the space in shopping bags and labored over. The piece ends with her dressed in the sheet she has mapped the story out on, dancing to Nina Simone and exiting.

*Chocolate Money* (1989)

*Packed Supper* (1989)

*Cook Dems* (1990)

*Kitchen Show* (1991) ('Daily Life Series' Part I available on DVD, filmed by Carole Lamond). Created in collaboration with Polona Baloh Brown.

This piece was devised in Baker's kitchen, where it was also first performed to an invited audience. Baker greets the audience and explains she will carry out twelve customary actions (plus one – the baker's dozen) including the serving of tea and biscuits. Each action is marked on Baker's body by an object being attached, or a stain or visual imprint, and followed by a pause. Once the twelve actions are carried out, the piece ends with Baker on a stool, sculpted into the domestic art object as human, spinning around. She continues the framing of the seemingly everyday actions and tasks in ways that reveal their repetition, social nature and particular detail.

*How to Shop* (1993) ('Daily Life Series' Part 2). Devised with collaborator Polona Baloh Brown and filmmaker Carole Lemond.

Baker performs this as a lecture on the art of supermarket shopping, explored through connecting it to seven spiritual values, which she proceeds to perform, using associated objects, actions and tasks to ritualise the activity in personal ways: techniques of trolley usage, for example. She uses pre-recorded film, in conversation with God in the supermarket, and the embarrassing, vulnerable and comic actions that ensue. The piece ends with her being transported upwards in the studio, wearing a halo and supermarket bag to the sound of angelic music, which then stops as she returns, with embarrassment, to earth.

*Take a Peek* (1995)

*Spitting Mad* (1996)

*Grown Up School* ('Daily Life Series' Part 4) (1999)

*Table Occasions* (1997)

*The Woman who Mistook her Mouth for a Pocket* (2000)

*Pull Yourself Together* (2000)

*Box Story* (2001). Co-collaborator Polona Baloh Brown and with music composed by Jocelyn Pook.

Baker narrates ten personal stories from her past, based around ten packets of foodstuff which she brings into the space in a huge cardboard fridge box. As each story ends, she uses the contents of the box to add to her drawing of a map of the world which is eventually swept up and returned to the large box into which she also climbs before leaving the space. A choir of nine singers accompany the performance, commenting on her actions.

*How to Live* (2004)

*Ballistic Buns* (2005)

A very short piece created entirely conceptually, while Baker was in hospital. It is based on one action, about Baker's grandmother, whom she characterised as anorexic, furious and representative of a long line of angry women in her family. Baker narrates her story and throws buns at the audience. The piece ends with this action accompanied by music from the Ukulele Orchestra of Britain playing the Dambusters theme.

*Mad Meringues* (2005)

*Meringue Ladies sing ABBA's 'I Believe in Angels'* (2005)

A solo piece that came out of a three-year women and performance research project created by Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris based at Lancaster University. It culminated in their celebratory conference and book, *performance practice and process* (2008). Baker was asked to make a one-off interactive performance event for the seminar weekend gathering at the Theatre Museum in London. Her devising for the event included cooking 100 meringue women, deciding to use an ABBA track, choosing a circle of fairy

lights and a table and cloth. The live event consisted of Baker speaking to the assembled women, inviting them to participate in an action. This was to look at the meringue woman on the table and while doing this, to smile, for the full length of the ABBA track. She instructed them that if they wanted to stay at the table, they had to keep smiling. This was enacted.

*Mad Gyms and Kitchens* (2011, tour 2012).

### **Tim Etchells**

*Instructions for Forgetting* (2001) with Hugo Glendinning (video) and Richard Lowdon (design).

In a performance lecture format, Etchells works from a prepared text and film, speaking directly to an audience. Richard Lowdon, who works on stage as a technician, plays a number of five minute filmed extracts that Etchells had invited friends to send to him, taken from discarded old video footage. Etchells combines speaking about the way the piece was made, the texts that were sent to him and the texts he wrote for the piece. He starts in a genial, casual mode of delivery, telling the audience the process of making the piece and of how the many video extracts he had been sent were confusing and made no sense. He plays the video pieces as he further narrates the writing people sent to him. The video extracts and writings switch registers, from political to personal, sexual to tragic, and include one section of 'white noise'. Etchells also reveals other facets of his performed presence, from friendly narrator to cruel father. The connections between pieces are not explained – the viewer is invited to gradually make more and more sense of the materials themselves.

*Downtime* (2001) Single channel video and live performance

This piece consists of a large-scale ten minute filmed projection of Etchells's

face, during which he is (purportedly) thinking. He sits facing the screen, with his back to the audience and refers to previously written notes, in which he has recorded what he (thinks he) was thinking from prior watching of the material. In the live situation, he orders and refers to these texts, to try to recreate what he was thinking as the film is played. There are two versions of this piece – one a recorded narration that accompanies the video, and one a performance where he does the narration live, from notes he has made.

*Words & Pictures* (2005)

Etchells sits facing a large silent video image of himself thinking. He attempts to narrate, live, what he can remember thinking when he shot the video, using notes. The work covers topics such as happiness, the future, endings and farewells. The work was developed from *Downtime* and consists of six ten minute videos and live narration.

*In the Event* (2004). A lecture-performance with images by Hugo Glendinning.

This is a performance lecture based on reviewing twenty years of Forced Entertainment's (FE) work. The piece has a complex structure, starting with two questions he responds to from a callout he made, where he asked people to send in questions about FE's performance. He then moves on to reading a text he wrote about performance-making with FE, including topics of discussion and improvisation and including many footnotes. This is then followed by a five minute interlude, in the centre of the piece, in which he projects images and plays music from the company's work. He ends the piece by telling the audience the third question: 'in the event that you

weren't here tonight doing this, who would/should or could be?' Etchells then lists all the people who could replace him that evening.

*Sight is the Sense that Dying People Tend to Lose First* (2008)

*Although we fell short* (2011)

### **Wendy Houston**

*Stranger in Paradise* (1986)

*Haunted, Daunted and Flaunted* (1995)

In this solo, Houston performs a monologue in eight sections, switching between narratives, personae, situations and lives, using dance-theatre, spoken word, light and minimal objects. Inspired by *Crimewatch*, a television programme which publicises unresolved crimes with the aim of getting public help, legal language is deployed in evoking the persona 'Veronica', who narrates herself in the third person as she moves and addresses the audience. Houston switches from this to narrating her autobiographical somatic movement history, literally; and other sections include her discussion of Swedish dance sequences, dancing with a gun, material inspired by Peter Handke's *Self accusation* (1968), jazz ballet and Celtic dance, as well as narrating jokes through a microphone and a list of confessions. She mixes in visual jokes and multiple narratives.

*Happy Hour* (2001)

A site-specific piece, made for bars, combining monologue with extended movement sequences, revolving around the themes of drinking, bar talk extended into talk about the state of 'bitter England', love and loss.

*48 Almost Love Lyrics (2004)*

Houstoun performs this as a series of physical, recorded and spoken monologues, using movement, text and video. She switches between multiple personae: an award-winning director, a choreographer bullied by an audience, a dancer physicalising audio instructions. She also comments on the industry of performance – grand Hollywood announcements combine with small-scale professional bullying, as well as the pressure of delivering a performance product to the audience in the room. The tone of the work switches between anger, sadness, violence and humour.

*Desert Island Dances (2007)*

Combining text and movement, working with large boxes and maps, Houstoun explores notions of utopia and paradise, absence and presence. Framed by the radio programme *Desert Island Discs*, Houstoun works with recorded conversations from different people and movements from previous lives, in a humorous exploration of what would be left behind when isolated on a desert island. The work shifts tonally between humour and melancholy.

*Manifesto (2008/9)*

*Keep on Dancing (2009)*

*50 Acts (2009)*

Houstoun performs this task-based interdisciplinary work, which involves the performance of fifty acts, speaking and moving. It develops from: 'This is the start' in Act 1, in which 'time and space die' through a series of posited situations, engaging with movement, objects, a large amount of film, projection and sound. The piece does not explain the transitions or connections, changing its mode from private to intimate to declaimed, and

instead offers the audience the possibility of making sense of its materials and structure.

## **Nigel Charnock**

### *Resurrection* (1991)

This was his first solo, a dance-theatre piece, including two songs, which engaged with themes of love, loss, redemption and loneliness. Charnock located this work as being created in reaction to making the DV8 piece, *Dead Dreams from Monochrome Men* (1988), and therefore having a light-hearted tone.

### *Original Sin* (1993)

### *Hell Bent* (1994)

Inspired by drawings by Francis Bacon, this piece was a monologue to the audience, exploring the public and private aspects of Charnock's character. The stage is divided into two – on one side the public persona with a cabinet, stage and stairs, and on the other side a private space made to resemble Charnock's bedsitting room. It includes spoken text and dance, with original songs and music by Nicolas Bilbeck.

### *Heroine* (1995)

### *Alone at Last* (1995)

### *Second Coming* (1995)

### *Frank* (2001)

Charnock again uses dance-theatre and spoken word. Charnock speaks to and harangues the audience about their attitudes to life, love, religion and politics, whilst also physicalising his exploration of being and aliveness through dance and music. In one part, Charnock leaves the stage and



crawls over the audience, sweating on them. He created it as a one-off performance for the Vienna Biennale, in 2001. However, due to its popularity, he toured the UK and internationally with it. Charnock described how it was not improvised after the first few performances, and how it changed to being a vehicle for him to explore his existential thinking about dualism and its transcendence through performance. In *Frank*, he spoke of this as an experience of being absent from the work during its performance.

*Nothing* (2010)

*One Dixon Road* (2010)

### **Mike Pearson**

*La Leçon D'Anatomie* (1974)

This is the collective name for a quartet of solos, the first (*Flesh*) and last based on texts by Artaud. In these performances Pearson uses direct address towards an audience and interaction with several objects, including a large white slab table and a suit. He creates a series of actions and interactions linked to the themes in *Flesh*. The piece was site responsive to the three-quarter performance space of the Arena theatre in Sherburne, so Pearson was able to change his persona from lecturer to specimen on show, suited to the arena shape of the performance space.

*Whose Idea was the Wind* (1977)

This small-scale piece, in which Pearson speaks of exploring the subject of birds, focused on Pearson's hands on a table, using bird skulls and sections involving storytelling as learnt, long sections of text.

*Deaf Birds* (1977)

This was a continuation of the theme of birds, involving text, objects and physical actions in space.

*From Memory* trilogy:  
*A Death in the Family* (1991)

A piece exploring the death of Pearson's father, through a series of scenes and monologues, and delivered in an intimate, inherited mode of gossip/anecdote located as characteristic of Pearson's family. The monologues vary in tempo and use of gesture, starting very quietly and with minimal movement but switching to a more physical use of body and the space. He also weaves in multiple kinds of textual material – from recounting family events to texts by Thomas Hardy.

*Patagonia* (1992)

This piece was about the shooting of Huan in Patagonia in 1909, by Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Pearson spoke of it as a Western; and he was dressed as biographical 'other', in mask and coat, wielding guns. The material is not autobiographical but is delivered in a personal gossip style.

*The Body of Evidence* (1995)

*Dead Men's Shoes* (1997)

A piece about the death of Welsh explorer Edgar Evans, the fifth man on Scott's Antarctic expedition, staged in a black box studio. Pearson uses 'block text' monologue and a set of precise physical actions in a small space with a forty-foot long projection screen, onto which seven projections were continually showing over 700 images. The audience and performer are 'jammed in' (12), unable to see the whole image or space and only seeing

the performer in profile at times. Pearson delivers a 75-minute text and set of physical choreographed actions, exploring audience/performer proxemics in the scenography.

*The First Five Miles* (1998)

A performance work involving live radio broadcast and live feed from Pearson as he walks across Mynydd Bach: five miles in the Welsh landscape as Augustus Brackenbury, a Victorian landowner involved in the land enclosure of Ceredigion in West Wales. Pearson speaks and walks, recounting a layered monologue on the political narrative of enclosure. The walk took place at night and was meant to be lit by a helicopter's search beam. However weather intervened and the helicopter could not take off.

*The Man Who Ate His Shoes* (1998)

A studio-based piece of work, involving four fifteen-minute monologues, four small projection screens with films and the performer Pearson using radio mike and simultaneous digital translation loop headsets for a standing audience. The theme revolves around four Lincolnshire men, including Mike Pearson, his great-grandfather, John Franklin the polar explorer and Augustus Brackenbury (from *The First Five Miles*). The audience are standing in a small space where the screens play continual projections of the polar walk from different viewing angles. Pearson narrates four fifteen-minute monologues about the walk, from the four different characters. These are transmitted through the headsets directly to the audience while loud music is played in the space. The piece is low lit, so Pearson is not always visible but his voice is ever present.

### *Bubbling Tom* (2000)

A site-specific guided walk around Hibaldstow, Pearson's childhood village. During the walk, he stops at various locations and conjures up memories and incidents that occurred there, from photographs, past incidents, people and events. He uses long sections of multi-layered narrative, 'deep mapping' (Pearson, 2001: 162) by which he suggests an evocation of the complex and sometimes conflicting layers of event and memory attached to places beyond the immediate geography, as well as speaking with his audience through using an anecdotal, gossipy tone to narrate the work. The piece lasts two hours, and the audience is made up of a variety of people from the village and acquaintances.

### *Carrlands* (2007)

Three one-hour audio narratives, further divided into four fifteen-minute sections, which are available as an MP3 download. They consist of Pearson's guided vocal narration, related to walks visitors can take across a North Lincolnshire landscape, around the River Ancholme. Pearson's interest in this area is as a fragile landscape under threat of change; it is a canalised agricultural landscape with the old river winding around the man-made structures. Its return to a river state is imminent. The narration mixes instructions to the participants, interviews with local people, poetic texts and music scores.

### Additional Biographical Information on the practitioners

**Bobby Baker's** earlier solos were performed mainly in small-scale spaces like studios, kitchens, schools, village halls and later included larger venues like the South Bank Centre in London. A later large-scale collaborative piece

*How to Live* (2004) explored mental illness and its treatment, and was performed at the Barbican Centre, London.

Baker has been written about extensively as well as co-authoring two monographs about her work and her drawings. She has worked with feminist theorist and critic Michelle Barrett to produce a book about her work, *Bobby Baker – Redeeming Features of Daily Life* (2007), and has had her collection of drawings depicting her experiences with mental illness published: *Bobby Baker Diary Drawings – Mental Illness and Me* (2010). Writers, including Marina Warner and Adrian Heathfield, and practitioners such as Maria LaRibot, Tim Etchells, Franko B and Nigel Slater have all engaged with and written about her work. Her current work, *Mad Gyms and Kitchens*, was commissioned for the London Cultural Olympiad and first toured nationally in 2012. Her company, Daily Life Ltd. is part of the national portfolio of the Arts Council.

**Wendy Houstoun** started working in physical theatre and dance contexts with Ludus Dance and then with DV8 as founder member and core performer in 1985. She has also collaborated as a deviser with performer and choreographer with the filmmaker David Hinton, choreographer Jonathan Burrows, performance artist Rose English, Gloria Theatre, Lumiere and Son and Candoco.

**Tim Etchells's** work with Forced Entertainment includes making new collaborative performances, installations and photographic works with a strong theme being the complex nature of performance itself and wider

reflections on culture, cities, and the human beings who live within them. He has published several books, on performance, dramaturgy and fictional works, including *Endland Stories or Bad Lives* (1998), *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment* (1999), *The Dream Dictionary for the Modern Dreamer* (2001) and *The Broken World* (2009). He has co-authored and written prefaces to at least eight more books, working with arts practitioners such as Franko B, Brian Eno, Deborah Levy, Hugo Glendinning; performance scholars such as Jen Harvie, and curator/writers such as Lois Keidan and Catherine Ugwu from the Live Art Development Agency and its off-shoot, Keidan/Ugwe. He has contributed numerous chapters in books on contemporary performance, devising and arts practices. He co-curated the website *The Institute of Failure* with theatre practitioner Matthew Goulish from performance company Goat Island and also writes a 'notebook' online, detailing work he is engaged in making or viewing. He has also worked with writers who have contributed important critical thinking about UK Live Art and contemporary performance, including Adrian Heathfield and Peggy Phelan, amongst others.

**Mike Pearson** has published extensively on his work with Brith Gof and site-specific performance (see Appendix IV). Pearson writes about his site-related work in *Theatre/Archaeology* (2004). His later site-specific work is detailed in two books, *In Comes I* (2006), and *Site-Specific Performance* (2010), which cover thirty years of engagement in this area. His collaboration with Pete Brookes most recently includes larger group work for National Theatre Wales (*The Persians*, 2010, and *Coriolan/us*, 2012).

**Nigel Charnock** performed and toured with Wendy Houston in *Heart Attack* as part of a cabaret called *Cheap and Nasty* in 1990. He choreographed for Volcano Theatre Company, Ricochet Dance Company, Tin Box (Danish Theatre Company), Companhia Instavel (Portugal), the Pet Shop Boys, Helsinki City Theatre Dance Company (2003 Artistic Director) and Tanz Theatre Wien. In 1996 he founded The Charnock Company, of which he was Artistic Director.

## Appendix IV: Solo practitioners cited in interviews and thesis

### Mono Drama

Kanzeo Hideo  
Steven Berkhoff  
Eric Bogosian  
Edith Piaf  
Martin Crimp  
Simon Callow  
Julianne Moore (film)  
Mojisola Adebayo

### Performance Lecture

Spalding Grey  
Walid Raad  
Chris Dobrowolski

### Comedy

Bill Hicks  
Margaret Cameron  
Jonzi D  
Shazia Mirza  
Glen Campbell  
Tommy Cooper  
Kazukho Hoki  
Dave Gorman

### Improvisation

Sten Ruudstrom  
Andrew Morrish  
Julyen Hamilton  
Peter Brotzman  
Min Tanaka

### Body Art

Tehching Hsieh  
Diamanda Galas  
Marina Abramovic  
Franko B  
Martin O'Brien  
Kira O'Reilly  
Orlan



## Voice

Diamanda Galas  
Laurie Anderson  
Meredith Monk  
Imogen Heap

## Site-Specific Performance

Mike Pearson  
Janet Cardiff  
Simon Whitehead  
Phil Marshall  
Graeme Miller  
Geraldine Pilgrim  
Phoebe Davis  
Caroline Wright

## Monologue/Spoken word

Whoopi Goldberg  
Karen Finley  
Holly Hughes  
John Fleck  
Annie Sprinkle  
Tim Miller  
Danny Hoch  
Nilaja Sun  
Sarah Jones  
Margo Gomez  
John Leguizamo  
Saul Williams  
Carmelita Tropicana  
Bryant Keith Alexander  
Tami Spry  
Stacey Makishi  
Lisa Kron  
Ria Hartley  
Francesca Beard  
Bryony Kimmings

## Visual Theatre

Robert LePage  
Robert Wilson  
Mem Morrison  
Rose English –  
Eva Meyer Keller  
Edit Caldor

## One-to-One Performance

Vito Acconci  
Linda Montano  
Douglas Dunn –  
Keira O'Reilly  
Adrian Howells  
Daniel Agami  
Fiona Wright  
Franko B  
Julie Tolentino

## Physical/Dance-theatre

Isadora Duncan  
Wendy Houstoun  
Nigel Charnock  
Rosemary Lee  
Lucinda Childs  
Siobhan Davies  
Deborah Hay  
Simone Forti  
Rosie Dennis  
Meg Stuart  
Jonathon Burrows  
Raimund Hoghe  
Gaby Agis  
Eddie Ladd  
Richard Layzell  
Jan Ritseo  
Nando Messias  
Yumi Umiuare  
Julie Tolentino

## Appendix V: An A – Z of solo devising

**A**mbiguity, Audiencing, Autobiography, Apostrophe, Aside, Attention, Authorship, Agency

**B**ody

**C**reative thinking, Collaboration, Composition, Conceptualisation, Craft, Confession, Co-respondent, Co-deviser, Collage, Communication

**D**evising, Dialogue, Drama, Dramaturg, Director, Discussion

**E**nergetics, Expertise, Eremitage.

**F**rame, Feedback, Familiars

**G**iggling, Gaming

**H**umour

**I**ntuition, Improvisation, 'I', Image, Imagination, Individual, Internal logics

**J**oke, Juxtaposition

**K**itchen

**L**ife Narratives, Live Art

**M**aking, Monologue, Monologie, Monodrama, Monopolylogue, Mettisage  
Musicalisation, Montage

**N**arrative arc, Nonverbal, New Dance

**O**rchestration, Outside Eye, Ordering

**P**ractitioner, Practice-led, Postdramatic Theatre, Performance Art, Parataxis, Perspective, Postmodern Dance, Politics

**Q**uantum Theory

**R**esearch, Rhythm, Relational

**S**olo, Solo devising, Solo devising economy, Solitude, Shaping, Space, Soliloquy, Singular, Synaesthesia, Spectator, Self-direction, Sensibility, Simultaneity, Stratigraphy, Site

**T**ime, Tone, Text, Theatre, Theatron

**U**ndoing

**V**irtuoso, Vision

**W**ormholes, weight

**X** Prize Foundation

**Y**earning

**Z**eami

## A Lexicon of Training Terms

### Understanding

It is both essential and unnecessary. It's a chameleon. Understanding changes when we try and grasp it. Some training regimes locate it in the head, the chest, the spine, the feet. Others in the text and delivery; the interpretation and dissemination of ideas; the transmission of energy and the meaning expressed by one to another. Understanding is having insight, knowledge, sensation, awareness, appreciation and a grasp of what is going on.

Understanding is an activity, an expectation and a place. It's a quality of being which is accepting, tolerant and considered. Understanding is something we find in the process, directly and indirectly. Much training requires us to understand some things but not others. Sometimes understanding accompanies a feeling of arrival and realisation. Perhaps the ultimate sense is to know how we know.

### Unwavering or *hao*, a verb used in *jingju* training

The purpose of *hao* is to spend a long time in an unwavering position in the basic training for *jingju* or Beijing Opera. *Hao* is one of the key means for obtaining strength and accuracy and applies to the leg-stretch, the 'bridge', the 'handstand' or to the arm movement. For the latter, the figurative term 'mountain arms' is used, emphasising stillness and strength, as if the arms had the power to hold a mountain. *Hao* is to hold the arms raised in a fixed curved shape with a certain height and width in order to gain the 'stage habit', i.e. actors stretch arms accurately and subconsciously. The height and reach of the arms are decided by the role types the actor performs.

### Verticality

Verticality is the embodied transmission of training knowledge and skill from one generation to the next, usually in a specific training context which allows for a deep and long-lived relationship between trainer and trainee. Because of its association with generational transmission, verticality is often referred to as occurring within a training 'family' – from surrogate father to son but much less often from surrogate mother to daughter. Verticality is therefore double-edged – a guarantor of the integrity of highly specialised training regimes and a mechanism for retaining the status quo.

### Virtuoso

As a noun, its early etymology indicates a learned or skilful person, specialist of the arts or science. Its Latin root, *virtuosus* adds gender, offering 'manliness, courage and valour'. It is also applied to collectors of 'fine' arts and rarities, specialists by purchase: connoisseurs and dilettantes. High-level skill normally requires patient repetition, available from training, apprenticeship or professional full-time work. But virtuosity also requires the fierce 'amato' of the amateur, in pursuit of what they love, just because... Perhaps unsurprising, then, that 'virtuoso' attracts ambiguous attitudes of admiration and distaste. It is often connected to solo practitioners, suspected of narcissistic, determined 'showing off'. But I have observed other solo virtuosities at play: humble, generous, collaborative performance work inviting audiences to perform small shifts in how they operate in their worlds. The solo deviser/performer able to trip themselves up and enjoy the fall: virtuosity of an altogether different kind.

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MIKE PEARSON

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NIGEL CHARNOCK

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RESCEN

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SUSAN MELROSE

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**All interview quotations taken from unpublished transcriptions of interviews carried out on the following dates:**

**Interview 1**

Dey and Etchells (2007). Interview transcript from recording at Ibis Hotel, Commercial Street, London on 21<sup>st</sup> May

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**Interview 2**

Dey and Etchells (2008). Interview transcript from recording at Kensington Park Hotel, London 5<sup>th</sup> July

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