

**FEELING SUBTLE: A PRACTICE-BASED STUDY OF HOW THE BODY LISTENS,
TUNES IN, AND BECOMES PRESENT IN PERFORMANCE (AND IN COVID TIME)**

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Abstract

This is an embodied research project that explores the subtle, unseeable, unhearable forces at work within performance. It uses a common improvisational duet as its anchor, the rules for which seem paradoxical: move in perfect unison and at the same time, but neither dancer can initiate movement, both must follow. Despite this, a choreography unfolds. The structure of this research project is an exploration of why this is so, and along the way uncovers applicable information to common, yet esoteric performance techniques: listening, tuning in, and becoming present. This project posits that the improvisation works because its slowness and focus allows for a magnification of the charged affect potential between the two dancers, referred to throughout as the “bloom space”. The paradoxical task of mimicking a partner in real time, without initiating movement, is an attempt to stay in or stay with the bloom space. Even though neither dancer can initiate movement, the dancers begin to move because bodies and the moment are never still; they are teeming with affect, and affect moves. The dancers are able to mimic one another through the freneticism of affect potential and kinaesthesia. The research takes place over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, and is thus influenced by this unexpected context.

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Introduction

My entire body shook the first time I saw Sunn O))) live. They're a drone metal band from Seattle. I saw them in 2017, at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre in Toronto:

The show hasn't started yet but haze is being pumped into the auditorium. So much haze. There is a distinct smell to theatre haze, it smells dank, chemical but in a way that I like, and earthy. It's thick and adds instant atmosphere, literally and figuratively. Haze hangs, curls, bends, twists the air between me and the group. It's getting thicker. I yell to Adam over the hiss of the smoke machines and the buzz of the audience, I wonder if this much haze was an accident. I can barely see anything as it's all becoming enveloped in a thick fog. I see the breath of my yell mushroom into a plume, drifting and breaking over Adam's face. The band hasn't entered the stage yet, I can barely see my own hands in front of me, and the fire alarms blast. The first aural assault. Hundreds of us are evacuated from the auditorium and we press ourselves into the much smaller lobby. And we wait there, for over an hour, excited, confused, haze spilling through the auditorium doors in slow and confident pursuit of us, its displaced audience. Shortly after the fire trucks come and go, another beer or two later, the hundreds of us are ushered back to our seats. The hiss starts again. The room fills again. The haze billows through my lungs. I can't see my own hands, I can't see Adam beside me, and I can't see that the band is on stage, in monk habits, standing in front of a wall of over 20 amplifiers, but I feel them start to play. It's loud. My entire body shakes. Everything shakes by an unseeable force. This isn't a listening experience, this is a full-bodied vibratory experience - but maybe it always is, just less obvious. Listening is feeling, after all. The Sunn O))) concert amplifies this point so heavily that I feel the organs in my body pummeled. I'm cradled by the deafening drone metal, the languorous haze around and in me, the sea of bodies. I feel an intimacy in the concert and amongst the hundreds in the crowd.

The resonance and intense volume rattle my core. I feel like I'm having an out-of-body experience. My boundaries are invaded, or maybe I escaped, I become entwined with the other rattling audience in the room and feel myself both expanded and dissolved into this critical mass of experiencing bodies.

If there were a dial, the Sunn O))) concert is set at 11; a maximalist performance. It left me feeling hugged, exhausted, grateful, and had me in contemplation of how my body works this way when the dial is set to .001, in minimal moments when it seems not much is happening, in subtlety. As an artist I have always had a preference for minimalism and the simple gesture. In the absence of spectacle, the dial remains - the ability for my body to sense to a minimum or maximum, to affect and be affected, to resonate with, to expand and dissolve into the space I'm in. These subtle workings are what enlivens performance. I came to this research excited by the ineffability of performance and togetherness. In this project I contemplate the subtlety of performance. The stuff that can't be captured, but can be felt.

This research project is a practice-based study that combines affect theory and studies in sound and the performing body. At large, it illuminates what happens between and within bodies when together. Specifically, this research investigates the unseeable, unhearable factors that enliven performance. It is common for a performer to hear esoteric instructions in a rehearsal hall like, "listen to the moment", "be present", and "tune in", but it is rarely understood what is being listened for, what presence means, and how to tune in, and to what. In this study, I anchor my research using a common improvisation practice, referred to throughout as "The Improv". The paradoxical instructions for The Improv set up a contradictory premise, yet it works. In a close and embodied examination of how and why this is so, I unpack what is meant by listening, tuning in, and being present in performance.

The Sunn O))) concert was back in 2017, and I began this research shortly after, in the “before-time”, as we have been calling it. That is to say, before Covid-19 hit, an international pandemic that has lasted 26 months and counting. Many of the ideas that I wanted to work with, the impetus to take a deep dive into a common improv practice, and desire to work creatively with other bodies were established in the before-time. Over the course of many waves of peak viral spread, I was forced to continually rethink how to carry out the research or whether it was possible at all. I was able to find pockets of time when a restriction would lift temporarily, when I could continue my inquiry but with proper amends for safety. While I made physical changes to how the research was carried out, when, and with whom, I stuck with my original desire to research the subtlety of affect potential in performance, and how the improvisation somehow manages to unfold, even if the context in which we were working was, and still is, unusual. After finishing the creative research phase, and after having some time and space to reflect, I realize that this research is about togetherness. More specifically, it is about the sentient, transmutable bond between yourself and another. What can it do? How is it formed, and how are you formed by it? To continue with my plan, I had to work in scenarios that would have been undesirable in the before-time - dance outside in the cold, dance in a space that is not entirely private, dance in big bulky layers, meet with someone for a couple of hours despite risk of covid contagion (albeit outdoors, masked, and distanced). Of course, this affected how we danced, and I write about this throughout the research findings. But the irony of writing and researching togetherness while in isolation due to a contagious virus is not lost on me. Therefore, I have chosen to bookend the research with a reflection on the context in which this research took place. While my research focuses on togetherness on a subtle level and in performance specifically, the context in which it happened calls for a consideration of togetherness on a larger scale, and during covid-time.

In a paper titled “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat”, Brian Massumi writes about how the affects of an anticipated future are very much felt in the present. Likely unaware of his own prophecy, he published the paper in 2010, and it opens with a hypothetical threat of a global pandemic as a model scenario for how affect can manifest a future threat into the present. Now, in 2021, a global pandemic is no longer a potential-future threat, but a present reality. The future threat of affect is happening each day - are numbers dropping or rising? What if the economy never recovers? Will my business survive this? Will my parents be ok? What happens after the Canada Recovery Benefit ends? Why are people from select neighbourhoods receiving the vaccine before frontline workers? While we try to find comfort where we do, and make the best of a groundhog day scenario, we vibrate threat each day.

A defining feature of my first experience of an international pandemic and year-long (and counting) relative isolation, is paradox. Let me start by saying I have been incredibly lucky throughout this pandemic as well as privileged in that, even though this event has brought more financial instability (but for an artist/academic that’s not far from “normal” life anyway), I do not yet know anyone personally suffering from Covid-19, I have not had it myself.¹ I have had a safe, warm house to stay in and people to check in on, and who will check in on me. I do not

¹ Edited March 30th, 2022: Got it. I was surprised to see a positive result on my at-home rapid test that I only took as a precaution. Symptoms arrived shortly after and seven days later it still feels like a head-cold but I’ve lost some smell and taste, and I have recurring tinnitus, and brain fog. Yesterday was scary. Editing this document made me nauseous. Later, when I re-read my work, I was chilled to find nonsense, scrambled words in the wrong places. Recently, the Ontario government decided to lift masking regulations, and shorten the covid isolation period to five days (down from fourteen). Since then, there is casual talk of a rapidly growing wave of the “stealth variant” Omicron, though it’s not reported to the public because Premier Doug Ford has also decided to stop tracking case numbers, abandoning our immunocompromised and more vulnerable friends, leaving many of us wondering; what’s the plan?

currently work in frontline services, and do not have children to care for. The paradox lies in its inability to be captured. The ubiquitous covid term is “unprecedented” - and it is for my lifetime. The carnage and its social effects are monumental, however there is not much to mark it in my personal day to day, moment to moment. My experience of covid looks a lot like my days just before the pandemic hit. I still work from home, but I have less than half my concentration and energy. I have access to essential products and services, but anywhere I would go for fun or to relax has been long closed. I still listen to the CBC each day, but the news is markedly more depressing and I feel more despondent.

Everywhere, people are asking when we will “go back to normal”, which begs the question: What’s the normal we speak of? The struggles of the pandemic highlight social inequities that were already thriving in our “old normal”, and this past year-and-a-half saw the Black Lives Matter movement erupt after George Floyd was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis. Shortly after Joe Biden won over Donald Trump in a tense American presidential race, the Senate was stormed by white supremacist terrorists. Politicians hid in closets while Senate security helped to usher in angry white men with guns, posed for selfies, and looked the other way while the mob threatened the lives of the liberal and left-wing opposition. Toronto heads into winter, and after 8 months of a pandemic, the divisiveness and urgency of the city’s housing crisis is put into full view. The City of Toronto continues forcible removals of tents and even temporary tiny home structures that have popped up in the city’s parks and patches of green space where homeless folks attempt to find safe shelter in a pandemic strewn city. Ontario citizens struggle to make sense of a vaccine roll-out, and meet lockdown after lockdown with uncertainty of how this lockdown differs from the last. We already were “locked-down” but now there’s a “stay at home order”. Or is it the other way around? Either way, I lost all of my work

and I'm still unsure when or how performance will reach live audiences again. I haven't hugged anyone in over a year, I've barely seen friends and I haven't seen family because they are a plane ride away, and interprovincial travel is risky.

In attempting to find "normalcy" throughout this pandemic, or at least a sense of comfort, many of us need to reckon with togetherness - or more so, apartness - and connection. How can we connect when we must keep our distance? Why isn't this body ache of isolation somewhat relieved after a long zoom hang out? What is it that our bodies are missing when we attempt to connect over online platforms? These are big questions, and it is difficult to fully understand the thing that we are still in, but the research that follows might offer some insight as to what it is that is there, in real life, when we are together. The central questions in the research are performance related, but one can apply the gist to real life togetherness, on or off the stage.

Bodies

This is a body-based creative study, and I will outline the theoretical approach to the body that this research is predicated on, and seeks to build upon. This research project is about choreography, improvisation, and performance, but it is also explicitly about the body; how it may be understood and embodied, and what it is that it can do. I will begin with what I mean when I use the term “body”, introduce myself as the primary body who is the site of this embodied research as well as the others who danced with me, and finally briefly introduce the lineage of affect theory by which the body in this research is contextualized.

About The Bodies In This Research

I do not intend to universalize “the body”. There are collective bodies and bodies understood as individual bodies. There is the human body and the bodies inhabited by the more than human world. There are racialized bodies and bodies implicated in centuries of white supremacy. Some bodies move differently than others, are put together in various ways, expressing themselves with their own capacities and echoes of experiences past. Some bodies find pleasure here, and others there. There are old bodies and young bodies. There are bodies that are criminalized and bodies that are erased. There are bodies that some refuse to recognize. There are bodies as defined by philosophers and their ideas, like the Cartesian body (Descartes, et. al), or the sonic or sound body (Julian Henriques, and Deborah Kapchan), or the Spinozan body, defined by what it can do.

The body that I refer to in the studio research is my own, in relation to a small selection of other artist-performers. This research can only accommodate a personal account of embodying the theories and activations of affect in improvisational performance. I hope that this type of

practice-based study offers valuable phenomenological insights, yet I also acknowledge the limits of subjectivity within those discoveries.

About Me and My Body

I am an artist and academic. I was born and raised as a 3rd generation settler on Treaty 4 land and within the traditional territory of the Metis; which I called Regina, Saskatchewan, growing up. My mother's last name is Procyshen (pronounced in English as "procession"), and her first language is Ukrainian, even though her parents were born and raised in Saskatchewan. My father's grandparents came to Saskatchewan from Norway. I have his last name. All of this to say that I now reside in Tkaronto, but I still carry the prairies in my spirit and in my bones. The most pleasant and safe sensations manifest for me as wide-open landscapes. My body likes dry weather and I don't mind the cold. At the time of writing this, I am 39, then 40 years old, and gender-fluid. My body does not hinder me in many ways, aside from the compensatory attitude I probably formed to make up for my smaller than average frame. My body loves to eat, and needs a lot of water. It is limber, strong, and aging. Its first impulse to something new is through tactility, I like touching things. I believe I have a well-honed intuition. I have low ferritin and B12 always. I lived through the bartender's urban-myth injury, and have the scar to show; a wine glass broke in my hands and cut through my wrist, severing my pinky tendon. I had my first and only major surgery for that 3 years ago. I love my gnarly scar but all of the tendons on that hand still feel stiff. The scar runs about 2 inches down from my wrist. I have caught people I've recently met gazing at it somberly, and I wonder what story they're writing about me. I hold on to things, and my body doesn't eliminate well. I've straightened my teeth. Twice. The first time, they almost shaved down my animalistic incisors, but I caught them just in time. I have lots of

laugh lines and I smile often. My hair is poker straight. I move through the world with relative ease physically, but less so with gender. My body is supported by an immense amount of racial privilege that I will surely spend my lifetime unpacking. I wonder how power is stored in and expressed through my body, and how this affects other bodies. I wonder why my body wants what it wants. Frankincense is my favourite smell, maybe tied with coffee, and I can still smell the frankincense on my Baba's cloth napkins that I kept after her passing. They covered the food in the baskets that were blessed over Ukrainian Easter, in the hall full of other Babas and Gedos with their baskets, and their cloth napkins. My Baba died at 100 on Easter Sunday – which is believed to mean that she was a holy soul, and she was. She had the strongest hands and always held mine when she sat beside me. I have her hands, and my moms, small working hands, hands of prairie people.

The Bodies in Relation

The original plan for this research did not account for an international, years long pandemic, and I had not anticipated the health precautions and governmental restrictions that would limit who I work with, where, and how. As such, there were not many dancers that I could contact to be a part of my research. The bodies that I danced with were specifically invited from my inner, personal circle who were comfortable enough to work with me during a pandemic. They were:

Adam Paolozza - Adam is a movement-based theatre creator, and also my romantic partner. He is a 42-year-old, cis, Italian-Canadian settler, whose body gives him trouble with his back sometimes. I have worked with him many times, mostly in a theatre context, as actor, dancer, dramaturge, and co-director.

Patricia Allison - Patricia is a 34-year-old cis, queer, Canadian settler, working as a choreographer and dancer in both contemporary dance and theatre contexts. She choreographs, dances, and trains as a body with Multiple Sclerosis. Her MS expresses itself primarily in her feet. She and I met in a Dance MFA program, and enjoy working together though we have not had many chances to yet.

lo bil - lo is a 51-year-old cis, queer, second-generation Canadian settler, who works in dance and visual art contexts, focusing on improvisation and utilizing aspects of clown to destabilize performance encounters. She calls her trauma-informed practice of response to the everyday “moving weirdly.” She is completing the same masters degree in Interdisciplinary Studies and we talk a lot about art, ideas, and bodies. She works as a performer, creator, academic, and teacher.

Lineage of the Body: Affect and What The Body Can Do

This research comes to the body by way of affect theory and the contributions the affective turn has made toward scholarship on the body and its capacities. What follows is a brief introduction of the lineage of affect theory that prefaces the ideas and theorists referenced throughout this research project.

Over the past 30 years, there has been a renewed scholarly interest in the bio-social, the intangible, and non-verbal as a relational, ever-active network of affects. In academic circles, the influence of relational over representational logics in the humanities and social sciences is referenced as the “affective turn”. Affect theory takes a contingent, internal, subtle approach in conceiving not only the body, but spatial relations between bodies and their environments, as well as the thinking body in movement. There is no one stable definition of affect, and it would

be difficult to cite the origins of affect theory, but we can recognize that there have developed two streams of affect scholarship; one that is centered in psychology, by way of Silvan Tomkins, who takes a quasi-Darwinian approach to defining neuro-psychological processes and mechanisms that lead to motivation as affects, and the other stems from a re-reading of philosopher Baruch Spinoza by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and later Brian Massumi, Nigel Thrift, and Teresa Brennan, among many others, and launches off the question of what the body can do. It is the latter stream of affect scholarship, one that opens to infinite inquiry into the body's capacities and potential, that is fit for my choreographic exploration.

The Spinozan-Deleuzian lineage of affect research stems from the 17th Century work, *Ethics* (1677), where Spinoza famously wrote, "For indeed, no one has yet determined what the body can do, that is, experience has not yet taught anyone what the body can do from the laws of Nature alone, insofar as Nature is only considered to be corporeal, and what the body can do only if it is determined by the mind." (P2, part III). In the context of the Western philosophical canon, Spinoza challenged the Cartesian dualism of René Descartes, which in many ways still dominates Western philosophy today: mind/body, nature/culture, man/woman, human/animal, spirit/material. According to Spinoza, all matter is of the same material, and God and nature are of one "unfolding substance" (quoted in Thrift, 2004, p.61). He states that, "everything is part of a thinking and a doing simultaneously: they are aspects of the same thing expressed in two registers. In turn, this must mean that knowing proceeds in parallel with the body's physical encounters, out of interaction" (Spinoza, quoted in Thrift, 2004, p. 61). In other words, to Spinoza, what a body is should be determined by what it can do.

Over 300 years later, Gilles Deleuze revisits the Spinozan writing of the body, expanding the philosophical definition to include not only the body's ability, but its reliance on affect and

relation. Deleuze writes, "...relations are inseparable from the capacity to be affected. So that Spinoza can consider two fundamental questions as equivalent: What is the structure (fabrica) of a body? And: What can a body do? A body's structure is the composition of its relation. What a body can do corresponds to the nature and limits of its capacity to be affected" (1987, p. 217-18). In the Deluzian-Spinozan thread of affect theory, a body's very ontology is tethered to its ability to affect and be affected, and this only happens in relation. This body is not a bag of meat, with a brain at the controls, and the skin as its barrier. This is an intramodal body, being built and rebuilt by every infinite, relational encounter. This is the body that will be referenced and expanded upon throughout the research.

Methodology

This project is an experiment in embodied research that relies on, and is made possible through *becoming with* the research, and *thinking through* the body in movement and relation. As a conduit for the research, I have chosen a simple improvisational practice whose rules seem impossible, but that nevertheless unfolds, herein referred to as The Improv. I oscillated between doing The Improv and writing about The Improv, and I ground this experiential research with scholarship in affect theory and sound studies. Throughout this section, I describe the methodology used for the studio research. I begin with background on my creative practice, citing interdisciplinarity as a through line, and how my inclination toward the simple proposal led me to this particular improvisation. I then explain the rules of The Improv, as well as discuss who I worked with and why, the “studios” in which we worked, what we did during studio sessions, how we prepared for the work, and finally the adjustments and accommodations that were needed along the way.

About My Practice

I have always worked interdisciplinarily, so it is fitting that I have taken an interdisciplinary approach to this research, both in content and form. I have an interdisciplinary undergraduate degree in Fine Arts Cultural Studies, and continued into an Interdisciplinary Masters Thesis for which this is being written. The same can be said for my artistic practice, as I weave together cross-disciplinary techniques as a creative strategy to maintain my individual consistency throughout and across the multifarious creative milieus that I enjoy working within. My work is always grounded by the body. As a dancer, my strengths lean toward improvisation and state work over recognizable dance moves or traditional dance forms; as a choreographer I prefer aesthetic and concept over virtuosity, and I am almost always more interested in un-

conventionally-trained dancers than those employing conventional technique; dramaturgically, my methods of drawing and finessing ideas are closer to those of a conceptual visual artist than to dramaturgical practices of traditional theatre; as a visual artist I work with time, duration, and live-ness, human and non; and as a creator in general, I am most excited by the aesthetics of sound art and film, two disciplines that I have little experience with. I'm ok with no story, with no balance between form and content, with long awkward pauses, with ugly, with cliché, and I'm cautious with what feels better to do than to watch, which I have learned the hard way on both sides of the stage. I often find it difficult to answer what it is that I do as an artist. Usually I use the umbrella term "performance", but I certainly do not feel loyal to any one discipline, nor the categorical boundaries that are understood to define them. No matter, always a goal in my work is to pull an audience into presence and as generously as possible offer something worthy of witness and curiosity.

A through-line in my practice is to work with minimalism, playing with the exposure of complexity where it would be otherwise overlooked, which I refer to as the simple proposal. I am enamored by the simple proposal and how far it can be stretched, as well as the alchemical potential of "not that much," - especially in how it shaped visual art practices, dance, sound art, and performance. What I find most satisfying about minimalism, whether in the plastic or time-based arts, is that with the absence of didacticism, or narrative, I fill that void with my own stories - of who I am at that moment, and with what is present with me (even if I don't recognize it as such). I appreciate that instead of addition, excess, and representation, the simple proposal often exposes what is already there. Minimality acts like a tuning rod, and has the ability to rush into the minute and focus on what may feel otherwise invisible. This inclination has led me to choose a well-known improv practice, whose rules are scant and paradoxical, to anchor this

research. The Improv simply proposes a paradox for improvisational performance, and carries a deliciously significant weight, potential and complexity. What it reveals about performance is what is already there - how we might listen, tune in, and become present.

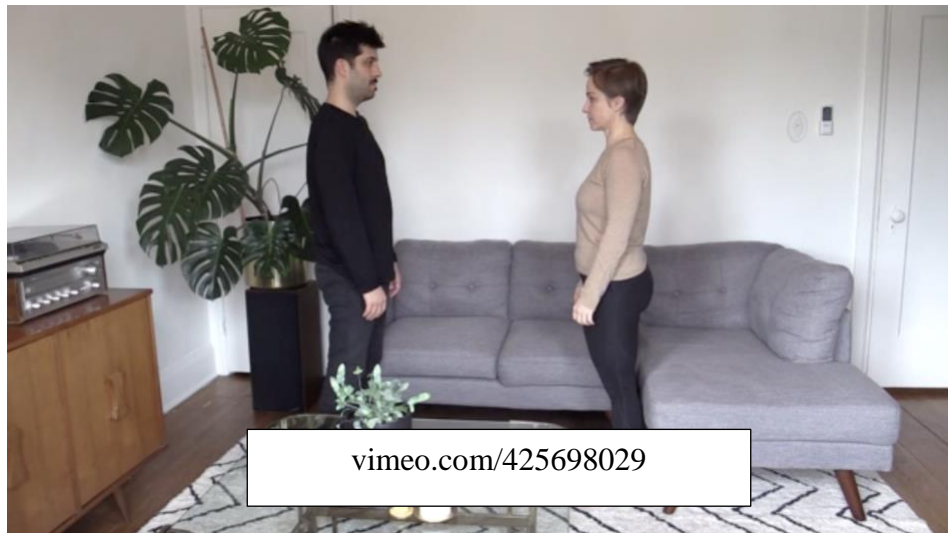
About The Improv

The dance practice that I have chosen to anchor this research is a well-known performance exercise that many performers have encountered at one time or another. Its proposal is simple: each dancer must mimic and mirror the other's movements as precisely as possible, and at the same time. The rule is that neither dancer can intentionally instigate movement, and they must attempt to start from stillness.

Throughout my encounters with the improvisation I had never heard it properly credited; however, a version of the practice can be traced to Konstantin Stanislavsky, the well-known Russian director and theorist, active in the late 19th and early 20th century. Stanislavsky's acting technique prioritized the art of experiencing over an art of representation in the theatre. He and his students were familiar with Tibetan yogic philosophy and technique, and Zen Buddhism, which informed his approach. He incorporated rhythmic breathing exercises to his practice and believed an actor must strive to balance their attention, concentration, and will. Stanislavsky called his meditative, improvisational duet the Mirror. It is similar to what we use in this study but differs in two important ways. The first is that the dancers in Stanislavsky's Mirror exercise must keep active eye contact. He said that only through eye-to-eye concentration can the dancers truly connect and experience a brief "soul-to-soul communion with the disappearance of the usual perception of being two completely separate entities" (Curpan, 164). I did not instruct the dancers in this study to look anywhere specific; in fact, I didn't mention the sense of sight at all.

Instead, I encouraged the dancers to try and tune into a full-body sensing. Furthermore, and most importantly, there is a designated leader and follower in Stanislavsky's Mirror, although the eventual goal is to become so in sync that "the notions of leading and following seem to disappear while the actors begin to exist together in motion" (Curpan, 164). Even if the actors achieve near-unison, there remains the comfort of a leader. Much of my research hinges on the paradox set up by the leaderless premise of The Improv - an important difference to the Mirror. It is in The Improv's difficulty, in its problem, that affect blooms. The directions for The Improv seem impossible: how can two dancers begin to move if both are the follower and there is no leader to instigate the movement? Nevertheless, a choreography begins to unfold.

This is what it looks like, unedited. Feel free to skip the cursor along to get a general idea.



The dancers you see here are myself and Adam Paolozza dancing in my living room. Over the course of this research period, the Covid-19 pandemic limited which dancers I could work with, and had us working in places I did not anticipate. As mentioned previously, I danced with Adam Paolozza, Patricia Allison, and lo bil, and we used a number of different "studios".

Adam and I at the Collective Space studio, in Toronto Ontario (pre-pandemic)



Adam and I in my living room (mid-pandemic total isolation)



lo and I in in my back yard (later-pandemic during distancing measures, in the Winter)



Patricia and I in my back yard (later-pandemic during distancing measures, in the Winter)



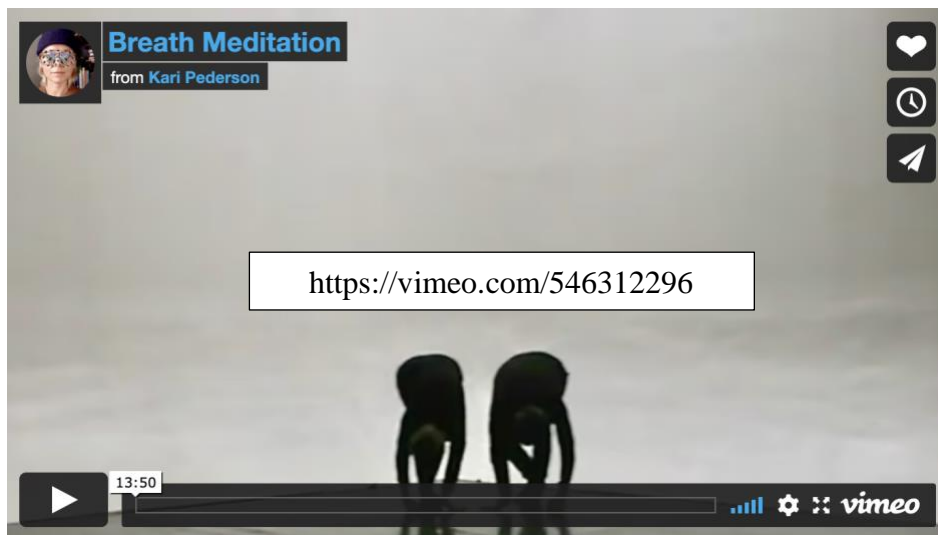
The Studio Sessions

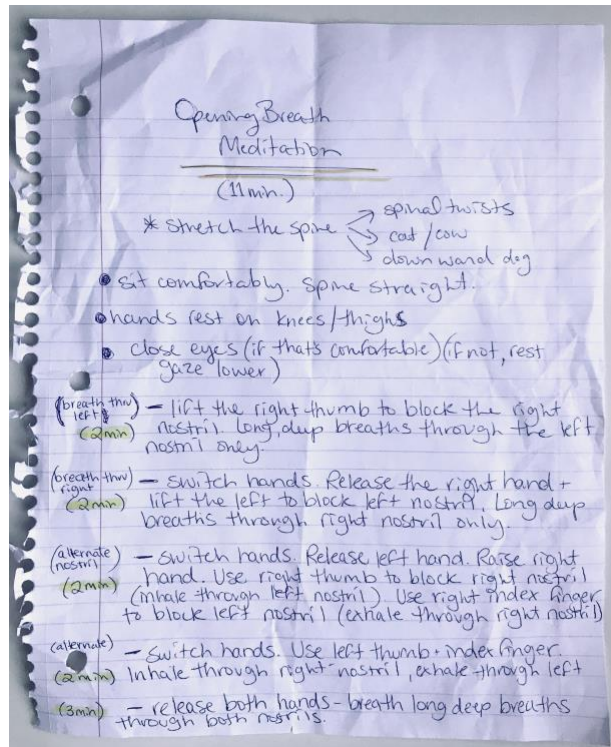
For each “session” I worked with only one other dancer. I was always present in The Improv because this research is from my perspective from the inside the practice, feeling the sensations, listening, experiencing my body in collaboration. I did not include iterations where I observed others performing The Improv, because in order to gain the insight that I am after, this research needs to be felt and not simply watched. We performed The Improv a number of times, for 5 to 15-minute durations, using a timer on my phone. After the session concluded, I wrote my personal reflections on what had just happened in studio while it was still fresh. You will encounter snippets of this writing in italics throughout the section titled Research Findings. Occasionally, I returned to the writings, and continued the free reflection but through a body memory of The Improv after more time had passed between the doing and the writing. What struck me about this process was that in recollection of performing The Improv, the sensations could be felt once again through my body.

To warm-up for each session, I led us in an 11-minute alternate nostril breathing meditation. This type of breath meditation is found in many traditions, but this particular one I pulled from my old Kundalini yoga textbook. The idea of alternate nostril breathing is that it balances the right and left hemispheres of the brain, and relaxes the autonomic nervous system. Sound artist Pauline Oliveros writes that “breathing is the bridge between the voluntary and involuntary - the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system, the conscious and the unconscious, the inner and the outer” (2005, p.11). Breathing with my dance partner for 11 minutes before beginning The Improv allows our bodies to relax together, and prepares us for longer endurances of focus. I can’t speak for my dance partners, but the sensation I experience during this meditation is like a continual unfolding of a box; flattened, grounded,

opened, spacious. This happens in my mind and in my chest, and additionally I like to imagine this box-unfolding sensation continuing throughout each cell in my body. Breath became an undercurrent throughout this project. Not only did we use breath to focus the mind and co-regulate our bodies to warm-up in the studio, but breath is one of the most observable ways a body cannot be still, so breath would often initiate the first observable movements to begin the choreography. This was made significantly more difficult to perceive through bulky winter clothing, while in the unexpected outdoor ‘studio’.

Here’s the meditation in case you want to pause here for 11 minutes to try it yourself. You can listen to me guide you, or read it and time it yourself.





In addition to the breathing meditation, I learned that it helps to warm up by moving together before we begin the official improv practice. Throughout my history in performance classes and workshops, I have encountered this improvisation and other similar practices. I had not experienced it enough and in such a condensed amount of time, though, to fully experience how much it changes from person to person. Over the research period, I came to realize how much a familiar body changes the results of The Improv. This should have come as no surprise, as my time in Contact Improv would support this. It is common in that practice to have favourite dance partners. Although each dance, no matter who your partner, is going to be fully improvised on the spot and will never be the same as the last, there are some bodies that you dance better with. This might be because of comfort levels, propensity toward fast or slow movement, quick and fierce or languorous and meticulous. Here, I realized that a body's familiarity with the others has the most impact, perhaps because of trust or familiarity, but also perhaps because of prior

mimesis, kinaesthesia. Although a body is never still, it can appear that way. When movement erupts from apparent stillness, it illustrates the magic of The Improv. The eruption of movement seems to be abetted by physical familiarity and intimacy of the two bodies in duet.

In the earlier stages of this research period, I danced with Adam. Not only do I have the most experience improvising with him in the studio and working on creative performance projects, but at the time of writing this, he and I have been in a romantic partnership for over 6 years. During the sessions that I danced with Adam, our bodies were quick to begin movements, and in the same 5-15 minute durations our bodies would travel more through space than my dances with lo or Patricia. This may also be because we were able to dance indoors, where we could stand much closer together and did not have to wear bulky layers of clothing. We were able to register much smaller movements in the other's body. The shift of levels of the chest as the breath moved in and out, tiny involuntary twitches, and the closeness allowed for peripheral vision to pick up on smaller movements from body parts that were not in our direct line of vision, even a toe flexing into the ground for balance. I could feel Adam's warmth when closest, smell him, and hear any tiny sounds he may have unintentionally made - as minute as the sound of his lips parting or a release after holding his breath. Doing the improvisation with someone who is experienced with it, in close intimate relationship, and indoors without layers of bulk allows for much more stimulus, and more movement to erupt from the two bodies in duet.

My first session during this research period with a dancer other than Adam was with lo bil. lo is a performance maker, and though we have taken dance workshops together, we have never danced together in duet. lo and I have a friendship, and share familiarity or intimacy this way, however it is important to note that although we were acquaintances before Covid-19 hit, the bulk of our friendship has been built online over zoom during the pandemic. Our bodies do

not have a lot of experience being in the same room together, nor having moved together or tuning in to one another. For the dance session with lo, I purposefully did not discuss the themes of the research, such as the relational body or listening, because I didn't want to steer the outcome in any way. I wanted her participation of the "simple proposal" of The Improv to be driven by presence and bodily impulse over the intellectualization that can come as a result of discussing the theory or concepts that propel this practice. I began with a short explanation of the directives of The Improv before we started the meditation. Immediately after the meditation we stood up, I set the timer, and once I felt we had "dropped in" I gave a verbal cue to "begin". I felt some nervousness and hesitation, as it was the first attempt working in such a restricted way due to Covid-19 safety. I was confronted with the 6-foot distance between us, as well as the fact that we needed to work outdoors, during the winter. This required many layers of bulky clothing which made the minutia of movement difficult to perceive visually, and the momentum of taking reciprocal cues from each other was dulled. This resulted in less overt movement. My duet with lo led to a lot of weight shifting but not a lot of movement of limbs. lo and I were very concentrated for each improv iteration throughout our entire session, and we did not end up with a lot of noticeable movement. Large or quick movements are not necessarily the goal of The Improv, but it is interesting that there were markedly less with her than with the others. I believe this to be because we had not danced together previously. After our session, when I discussed the concepts and themes of the research, she suggested to warm up before a session with a mirroring exercise where there is a clear leader-follower to allow us to introduce our bodies in movement to each other. I took lo's advice and warmed up with Patricia in this way, and our session yielded much different results.

The dances in the session with Patricia were eventful and dynamic to the outside eye. Patricia and I warmed up by taking turns being the leader and follower. Patricia and I met while doing our Dance MFA, during which time we were required to make choreographies every two weeks for two semesters. We often used one another's bodies for our choreography, and in addition to moving together, had many conversations about the body in space, as well as spent an hour-and-a-half driving out to campus and back in the close proximity of the vehicle. We have a close friendship and collegueship. During my session with Patricia, likely because of our physical familiarity and thanks to lo's expert advice, I was able to free myself up creatively and broaden the tactics by which to approach this movement research. With Patricia, I tried some alternate versions of the same improvisation. For instance, during one session, instead of waiting for our bodies to "drop in" and start from "stillness", I would give a verbal cue prematurely to catch both of us off-guard and possibly unready. This projected us into movement, and found us off-balance. Time immediately sped up and then slowed right down. We were cast into mimicry which sent our bodies in a forward motion and onto one foot. Then the impossibility of the task caught up with us and slowed us down, catching us in a balance on one foot, and having us reckon with momentum versus intention. For another alternate approach, we used the mirror on the back "wall" of the outdoor studio. Instead of standing facing one another, we both faced the back fence and could only see one another through the actual mirror image, with only a slight peripheral image - which would compete with the mirror's image. Finally, the third alteration was accomplished without the mirror, and not starting by standing directly in front of one another. Instead we started standing askew, in slightly different stances. How can two people mimic each other in real time, if they do not start from the same position?

The Research Findings

What follows is a creative and theoretical exploration into how and why a seemingly impossible improvisation works. Through repeated practice of The Improv, and in different scenarios with different dance partners, I learn about the performing body and performance technique - specifically listening, tuning in, and becoming present. In the first section, Listening, I address the oft given directives in performance to “listen” when there is no audibility (to the moment, to one another, and to the audience), I compare listening with hearing, and use scholarship in sound studies to contemplate listening as amplification and transduction of affect, as a full body experience that happens with a body whose borders are unstable. In the second section, Doing Nothing, I discuss how the slowness and focus of The Improv strips dance down to what looks like “doing nothing” in order to magnify what is already present within the simple performance, the charged affect between the two dancers. If affect potential is the subject of this research, the “bloom space” is the metaphoric location for the research. In Magnification and Bloom Space, I explore the concept of the bloom space as the placeless space where affect exists as un-captured potential. I show how the paradoxical task of mimicking a partner in real time, without initiating movement, is an attempt to stay in, or stay with the bloom space. I discover that, even though neither dancer can initiate movement, the dancers begin to move because bodies and the moment are never still, they are teeming with affect, and affect moves. In The Body Is Never Still, I explore scholarship in affective ecology to show how bodies, when understood through affect, are constantly in flux, always becoming through their environmental intra-relations. To understand how mimicry works within The Improv, and how the movement continues momentum, the final section is titled Mimesis and Kinaesthesia. I find that once The Improv is slowed and magnified, the dancers are able to mimic one another through the

freneticism of affect potential. Inherent in mimicry is kinaesthesia, a type of embodied empathetic response to witnessing another and the change that takes place when you do, otherwise phrased as “becoming with”. I learn that the dancers in The Improv begin and continue moving through the tension of impossibility, the interplay of mimesis, kinaesthesia, and a weakening of a body’s individual autonomy.

Listening

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From the inside, I understand the novelty that we are not facing one another squarely. We're facing different directions, but I can still sense that we are bound by other connections. If we are to turn inside, we share that space between us as a shared inside. We start and I anticipate disorientation, but then I drop in and move effortlessly. There is a sweeping sensation of comfort and safety. This wasn't supposed to work but here we are in connection, tethered, and I feel cradled by that. This new direction gives my soft focus a new landscape, a different angle of my backyard, to exist as a fuzzy backdrop to my internal focus. With a new visual landscape that places Patricia only in my periphery, I feel the right side of my body light up. Like little feelers rushing out with open hands, searching, exploring for information. When Patricia moves (or did I start it?), I'm pulled like a marionette with strings in all directions. My body moves first, my realization of it follows behind. Sensing Patricia sensing her back-body sensing me feels trustful. This is so comforting. It's bizarre but relaxing. In our tense mirroring, a turn starts to happen. She turns inward and I can feel my body turning inward to meet her, we are being pulled closer. But my body hits a limit. My feet are planted in the wrong direction. The momentum of the swivel made sense in the moment, but was actually untrue to what is available to my position. The force was stronger than the logic. I'm twisted like a corkscrew and this is as far as the momentum can take my body without moving my feet. Now I can see Patricia. I'm facing her back. Her back. She can't see me. But her body is my body doing things. Her back-body listening.

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Patricia and I performed The Improv a number of times. Ordinarily, The Improv is begun with the two dancers standing squarely in front of one another, facing each other. However, in this iteration, Patricia and I began from an “un-mirrored” position, standing askew, facing different directions, not looking directly at one another. Once the timer ran out, Patricia and I immediately burst into conversation and exacerbations about the tension between attempting to be ‘true’ to the task of mirroring but also the impossibility of it because of our mismatched beginning postures. Instead of intellectualizing what we were doing, we had to let our bodies interpret where they should be in space according to the resonance with the other body. This brought surprise for me, but also trust. I found this iteration to be impactful, dense, and to have a lot of choreographic potential. It also opens for personal interpretation. The verb “mirror” would usually be associated with a visual action - *watch* someone, do as they do as if you were *looking* in a mirror, *seeing* your own image reflected back to you. Yet, this time, Patricia and I began from a position that barely had the other in our field of vision. The session began with hand movements, then weight shifts. The interesting bit comes when we start to swivel our bodies

because our directionality is not mirrored. I observe that I swivel towards her instead of away, which would have been true to a mirror. It could have been a subconscious move to continue vision, but I also felt it as a tie to her, an instinct to be with her direction. When we swiveled, Patricia lost almost all sight of me. Although I could see her, she could barely see me, and what resulted was a mimicry of a specific type of movement, a shimmy of sorts. I must trust that my body is finding another way to mirror, leaning into the metaphoric rather than the literal. What does it mean to mirror sensorially instead of only visually? When she twists and curls, I mirror the sensation of twisting and curling, instead of mirroring the image of where her twist and curl takes her in space. I am using visual cues, but it feels like my body is also listening where to be.

Questions related to listening are central to this research. So many of the instructions given to performers involve listening in some form or another, but what is meant by it? If listening is imperative to performing, how does the act of listening change how we understand the performing body? What can a listening body do? If a performer attempts to listen to the moment, to one another, to the audience, or to themselves, what is the performer listening for? What is the performer listening to? What sort of information is to be found, if not something you can hear? Do you need to be able to hear in order to listen? If there are sounds that cannot be heard but still perceived, how does one listen to that which cannot be heard, and more specifically what does listening to that which cannot be heard afford a performer? This research attempts to locate and better understand that unseeable, unhearable stuff that a performer is instructed to listen to. From inside *The Improv*, my body tells me that there is more to mimicry than “monkey see, monkey do” (discussed further in *Mimesis & Kinaesthesia*). In returning again and again to *The Improv*, and through an inquiry as to why the seemingly impossible improv works, I am struck by the importance of listening, a listening by a broad definition. I

learn that what we are told to listen to, as performers, may be the charged “stuff” that we cannot see, and cannot hear, but can sense. The “stuff” that fills the space between performers, that charges that space, and what propels The Improv along. Inadvertently, this research has illuminated what it is, and how it is, that a performer might listen. Here I will discuss listening before delving into the specific functions of The Improv, as a precursor to why The Improv works and how. In this section, I distinguish listening from hearing and discuss what that difference allows using the work of Pauline Oliveros; contemplate listening as a full body experience using Deborah Kapchan and Julian Henriques; and finally, compare the borders of the body used in Oliveros’ work to those operative in Kapchan’s and Henriques’ accounts.

Listening and Hearing

Does one need to hear in order to listen? Listening differs from hearing, though they are often equated or conflated. It is the qualities of listening that differentiate it from hearing that enable The Improv, and thus the research. An artist who leveraged this differentiation throughout her practice was Pauline Oliveros, an American pioneer of early post-war experimental and electronic music, perhaps best known for her Deep Listening practice, "a practice intended to expand consciousness to the whole space/time continuum of sound/silences." (2005, p.2), and her *Sonic Meditations* (1971), a collection of improvisational, meditative, listening scores for trained musicians and non-musicians alike. Some of her scores instruct the practitioner to make sounds, but most of her scores are instructions on how to listen and perceive. Oliveros defines cochlear hearing as, “vibrations or waveforms that are within the range of human hearing (in frequency typically 16hz to 20, 000hz and amplitude 0.05dB to 130dB) [that are] transmitted to the auditory cortex by the ear and perceived as sounds” (2005, p.2). So, does one need to be able

to hear in order to listen? This research would argue that one does not need cochlear hearing in order to listen, but instead the ability to sense, feel and focus. “To hear is the physical means that enables perception. To listen is to give attention to what is perceived both acoustically and psychologically” (Oliveros, 2005, p.2). Listening, then, requires focus, and orients the body toward that which is being listened to. The human threshold of hearing is wider than what is listened to, “the ear is constantly gathering and transmitting information - however attention to the auditory cortex can be tuned out. Very little of the information transmitted to the brain by the sense organs is perceived at a conscious level” (Oliveros, 2005, p.1). In other words, sounds can be heard but not listened to. Listening is a co-creation of experience through intention and attention. Furthermore, when honing focus through the act of listening, Oliveros writes that there are different ranges of attention: “Focal attention, like a lens, produces clear detail limited to the object of attention. Global attention is diffuse and continually expanding to take in the whole of the space/time continuum of sound” (2005, p.13). The balancing of focal and global listening attention is an important technique within Oliveros’ Deep Listening practice. For example, if and when using instruments, Oliveros asked players to listen not only to the tone, timbre and tempo of what’s being performed, but to give equal priority to the sounds of the room, the audience (if there is one), to their own body, even to their thoughts - all as accompanying players to improvise with. Balancing focal and global listening attention helps to settle the mind and induce meditative states. Attention and focus are the harbingers of meditation and require intention. Hearing happens, but listening requires involvement.

Body Listening

During The Improv sessions, I felt a strong sensation that I described in my reflections as “body listening” - a feeling of every pore opening, tuning in, becoming alert and attentive, becoming receptive to collaborative information. It was a sensation that I felt everywhere, including the parts of me facing away from my dance partner, the soles of my feet in my shoes, under my arms, the top of my head; and my inclination was, and still is, to describe it as a listening. The instruction given to performers to listen (to each other, the moment, the audience, the performance itself), is given with or without the presence of audible sound, yet it is generally understood what the instruction means. This insinuates that the sonority that can be listened to in performance may not rely on audibility. To broaden my understanding of the listening body in performance, I turn to sound studies to borrow language and a conceptual schema to broach the ethereal and vague, such as “listening to that which cannot be heard”, “presence” and “tuning in”. Considering the ubiquity of affect theory since the 1990s, and its contribution to the relational body and the non-verbal encounter, it is not surprising that affect theory is often used in performance research. However it is rare to find research that combines affect theory and sound studies to understand the performing body. In *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience* (2013), Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle write, “If affect theory seeks to explore the parts of the experiential that are omitted by hermeneutic and/or discursive modes of analysis, then the sonic, as that which is so frequently resistant to semantic or semiotic interpretation, would seem like an obvious place to look for examples of affectivity” (2013, p.10). This research engages with two scholars who contextualize the body through affect and sound, and work within a sonic logos that does not necessarily rely on audibility: Deborah Kapchan and Julien Henriques. Both scholars offer insight to how a body might listen in performance, as well as

foregrounding the “substance” or “stuff” that activates The Improv and propels movement forward despite its paradoxical premise.

Kapchan presents the “sound body” as a borderless, relational body whose form and function is sound vibration, whether audible or not. She writes, “Every movement is in fact a vibration, and every vibration has a sound, however inaudible to the human ear. What we cannot hear, we can sense. Intuition is this: awareness of the body perceiving, the senses moving. And sound knowledge - a non discursive form of affective transmission resulting from the act of listening - is the fruit of this perception (Kapchan, 2015, p.34). Kapchan frames the body as a technology that listens to and resonates with what can *and cannot* be heard. Similar to a stethoscope that amplifies rhythms and pulses otherwise not audible to the human ear, or a telephone that transverses the body to spaces it couldn’t otherwise go, the body, according to Kapchan, is “able to transform by resonating at different frequencies...[it] transforms according to the vibrations of its environment, and correspondingly transforms that environment” (2015, p.38). The sound body, as described by Kapchan, is a paradigmatic shift in the perception of ourselves, and the world we inhabit, because it is so different from the approach left over from the Enlightenment. The dominant, contemporary iteration of the Cartesian body, which “Western subjects inhabit most unconsciously” (Kapchan 2015, p.39), is the “legal body” which is defined by its effects. It is a body that is linked to rights in relation to labour, ownership and sovereignty and contains within it a capitalist and colonial ethos. The limit of the legal body is the skin which acts as a barrier to separate one individual from another. In opposition, the sound body is a material body that resonates with its environment, always in flux, creating and conducting affect. As a vibrational entity, its borders are porous, and its existence is intramodal - “not only ideas

but also the actual chemistry of our bodies changes in the encounter with other bodies, sentient and non-” (Kapchan 2015, p.40).

Kapchan’s ideas of intramodal becoming and chemical entrainment are shared elsewhere in affect research into relational bodies. Teresa Brennan, for example, refers to the ways affect is transmitted via unconscious olfaction - the airborne pheromone molecules that communicate chemical information and alter the nervous and hormonal systems of the subject. “People can act alike and feel alike not only because they observe each other but also because they imbibe each other via smell” (Brennan 2004, p.10). For Brennan, affect transmission is a process “that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect” (2004, p.3), which means that “we are not self-contained in terms of our energies. There is no secure distinction between the ‘individual’ and the ‘environment’” (2004, p.6). In this line of reasoning, the body resonates with its environment and reciprocates metabolized affectual vibration, changing and being changed by that environment, resulting in a particular type of relational body-knowing, body-feeling, and becoming-with.

Similarly, in Henriques’ study of Jamaican dancehall culture, he refers to the full-bodiedness of sensory experience, and discusses how the body is an amplifier and transducer of affect. It’s widely argued that affect moves, but Henriques also points out how affect spreads among people. He proposes a model of sound vibration propagation to better understand the transmission of affect, and writes that “affect should be considered as the energetic patterning of frequencies...Rhythms are material, but not physical. This is what makes wave propagation particularly appropriate for understanding affect...A wave consists of no more than a moving pattern of intensity...Waves pattern relationships” (2010, p. 58). Both affect and sound waves are measured by intensity. Henriques references Jean Luc Nancy’s *Listening* (2002), where

Nancy develops a philosophy of the “resounding subject”, a sonorized body that listens to itself and the world, both of which are in continual resonance. Affect is understood as intensities, and intensities can be understood as resonating vibrations. Henriques continues, “resonation can be seen as converting distance, or extension into intensity” and that “intensity is experience” (2010, p.81). Bodies selectively transduce and amplify the environment’s energetic patterns, and in doing so, they propagate affect (Henriques). For a body to be in and of the world, traversing through and producing patterned intensities of affects, it is a whole-body *vibrotactile* experience (Henriques). Henriques shows us how the vibration model offers an organizing principle for understanding the transmission of affect through and amongst bodies, and how bodies might listen and resonate with their entirety.

It is not a stretch to imagine the implications that Kapchan’s borderless body, and Henriques’ body that amplifies and transduces affect, might have for performers in a rehearsal hall. If the body is a vibrational entity, with porous boundaries, then it is easier to posit what is happening when a performer “listens to the moment”. They are listening to that which cannot be heard, gaining what Kapchan would call intuition to then guide their next improvisational move. They can “tune in” to the moment and to other performers by literally resonating with the others, by affectively changing and being changed by the charged moment (transduction). Framing the performing body as one that amplifies and transduces affective intensities grants access to deeper and more subtle choreographic research. It changes the type of knowledge gained as well as how that knowledge is learned. Body listening can be understood as the transduction of the affect that’s created by and through each performer. The performing body in *The Improv* works subtly and requires little input for maximum output. The knowledge that the dancers gain with each improvisational moment is not only thought, or visualized, but also felt and sensed by the

dancer's partner - thus, my inclination to call the body sensations I felt throughout The Improv a form of listening.

The Borders of the Listening Body

There are key overlaps between the technique used in The Improv and those in Oliveros' Deep Listening practice, though the complications that Henriques and Kapchan pose to the boundaries of the listening body create key differences as well. Both The Improv and Deep Listening involve a broad form of listening and can be meditative. Similar to Deep Listening, The Improv seeks to balance focal and global listening attention (while locked in improvised and leaderless mimicry). The oscillation between the dancer's focal and global attention, as well as harmonious and fleeting moments where the two seem to merge, is a practice of becoming present, becoming conscious. As Oliveros puts it, "Consciousness is awareness of stimuli and reactions in the moment. Consciousness is acting with awareness, presence and memory" (2005, p. 10). A leaderless mimicry improvisation demands acute presence, for once you realize that you are doing it, and the ego takes the wheel, the flow of the improvisation is lost, and the duet becomes instantaneously and recognizably awkward.

There is also a key difference between The Improv and Deep Listening regarding the body that is doing the listening. Oliveros' practice of Deep Listening mostly works within the framework of listening to sounds that can be heard, though she stretches the definition to include bodily sounds, dreams, and thoughts. However wide her definition of what can be perceived as sound, it is still limited to a body with stable boundaries. In her practice, there are external sounds and internal, heard either through cochlear hearing (external) or from the mind (internal), or as she would put it, "acoustically or psychologically". I am curious to know what Oliveros

would have thought about the borderless and relational body. What Oliveros' listening body can do differs from the bodies with de-stabilized borders as described by Henriques and Kapchan. "The vibrations of affect offer an escape from the cage of the autonomous, self-consistent, rational subject - liberating the *relational* subject. The practice of listening, in the broadest sense and sense, allows us to sink under and sync up with the dynamics of the vibrating world of intensities" (Henriques, 2010, p. 79). Here, the border between the internal and externalities of the body is less stable. Where in Deep Listening, a performer might listen to their own thoughts as the internal sounds of their mind, this research considers, via Kapchan and Henriques, the possibility that even a performer's thoughts can resonate as vibrational information, unconfined by the body, available and feel-able for the duet partner's perception and response.

The sensations that I detailed from within The Improv turned my attention toward the act of listening in performance, even when the vibratory information does not manifest as sound. Unlike hearing, listening requires attention and intention. The delicate balance between focal and global listening attention can foster presence, and meditative states in performance. The dancer's attention, when performing The Improv, locates the "stuff" that performers are intended to "listen to", which is affect intensity and potential. The Improv uses the concept of listening in a broad sense, one that is open to the possibility of a borderless body that resonates with others, amplifying and transducing the very affect that is co-produced between the two dancers. In the case of The Improv, the practice of listening to the affectual enmeshment between the two performers is a practice of listening to and in performance.

From here, I will move into an examination of how the paradoxical improvisation works. In doing so, I explore what it is that a body can do in performance, starting with doing nothing.

DOING NOTHING

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As I stand 6 feet away from my dance partner in my backyard - attempting to wrangle my thoughts and attention toward the moment, my body, our bodies, our connection, the research - my mind wanders to my downstairs neighbour, who uses the back door with clear sight to this haphazard, covid-friendly, backyard dance studio. What would she see, if she leaves the house at this moment? The slowness of the improvisation would have us appear as two living beings suspended in time. We would appear as masked bodies, standing squarely in front of one another, intensely focused, but hardly moving. Depending on where we are in the improvisation, and whether this improvisation yielded more grandiose movements, perhaps my neighbour would catch a glimpse of two bodies locked in a stare-off, each body in a hanging, mirrored, balanced shape. Despite the fact that it looks like we aren't doing much, and certainly we don't look like we are dancing or performing, I feel certain my neighbour would be able to sense the charge - the tension and focus that it takes for us to be "locked-in" in this way. The charged affect between the two dancers is similar to the charge between any two bodies, but may be missed or go unnoticed during the hustle and bustle of regular life, or through the spectacle, narrative or entertainment of a faster, more eventful performance. However, slowing things down, even stopping and "doing nothing", or not much, allows for a zoom-in to what is always there but often missed, overlooked, invisible or hard to see. Doing nothing magnifies, it zooms in.

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And she did; during my first improvisation with lo, I heard my neighbour Kendra's door open and close. After that I lost track of her, or rather I gained track of lo, my partner. I don't remember the sound of Kendra unlatching the lock on the fence. I didn't hear the sirens, or the birds, or the person walking down the alley that hugs the back yard. lo and I hadn't ever moved together before. This was our first attempt. It was like watching for a subliminal message in a movie clip. Through our inexperience, through our bodies' unfamiliarity with one another, and through so many bulky layers of winter clothing, we stood attentively, taking in any minute signal to mimic. This practice is the densest when there isn't a lot of momentum, or large movements to hook in to. When the movement is minimal, the focus becomes acute, sounds and sights disappear. The mind wants to become busy then, but I know that what I'm holding on to - the connection between us - I'm holding on by a thread, and I can't afford to drop it.

After this session, lo shared with me that one of the biggest challenges for her while doing the practice was to resist her training in improvisational performance and clown. In lo's practice, she also does nothing of sorts, but looks for the story and rides that until she "does something". Here, she needed to resist the temptation to find a story or narrative of the moment

and stick to the rules of the improvisation, even if they are paradoxical. She needed to wrangle her attention to nothing, and stay in nothing with me. She had to drop all of the fancy things, like narrative and story, and stay with the nothing.

*

The first thing you'll notice when watching the improvisation is that it looks like nothing is happening. Jenny Odell is an artist and writer of nothing. The title of her book, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (2019), self-consciously mocks the capitalist ethos of productivity. *How To Do Nothing* is, in fact, an action plan. It is about how to do something, but it is a something that does not look like much, but perhaps feels like a lot. The doing nothing that Odell refers to is a strategy to slow, refine, magnify and focus in on the fullness of what is already happening that may otherwise take place beyond the threshold of attention. She uses the example of listening to birdsong. At first she notices the racket the birds are making in her neighbourhood, and hears it as noise. In her practice of doing nothing, she stops what she is doing, and leaves her otherwise distracted attention open for capture. She begins to focus her attention on the bird noise, and what was once ignored opens to a lively world of bird activity. As she learns to identify individual bird calls, the singular noise is magnified into a symphony of many different and identifiable bird songs, each with its own timbre, pitch, melody, and meaning. Her practice of birdwatching, or bird listening as she specifies, changes her granularity of perception to a higher resolution. Odell no longer hears bird noise, but instead, the discrete song of a goldfinch mating call or a robin defending its territory.

This project's creative research may look like doing nothing, but it is a doing nothing by Odell's definition, of slowing down and stripping down, in order to discover the density and dynamism that is already happening. The subject of this research is what exists between and

within performing bodies before the extra “performance stuff” is added that makes it recognizable as dance or theatre - or before it is made complicated. In the 1970s, iconic American choreographer and dancer Yvonne Rainer said a peculiar thing: “Dance is hard to see. It must either be made less fancy, or the fact of that intrinsic difficulty must be emphasized to the point that it becomes almost impossible to see” (1968, p. 386). What I believe she means by this is that there is an implicit fullness to a body before it even starts to move. The intricacies or choreographies of the blood stream or nervous system are a lot to begin with. Once the body moves through space to perform simple actions like reaching, crouching, or walking (what Rainer would call “found” or “pedestrian” movement), there already exists a dance complicated enough to behold, worthy of an audience. The magnificence of a body in movement, and even more so, a body in relation, is often upstaged by fancier components of performance, and the dance gets lost, or in her words, becomes “hard to see”. Rainer is credited as one of the grandmothers of post-modern dance, and she adamantly abandoned many of the defining qualities of Western concert dance (and perhaps theatre) of the time, such as character, phrasing, climax, variation, and rhythm. Rainer’s post-modern approach to performance states that what the dancer is doing is more interesting than the character that the dancer is portraying. This research does not necessarily align with her assumption of a “neutral” dancer or her priority of what the dancer is doing over their identity, but it does attempt to strip performance down to a simple improvisation, and make it “less fancy” so that the intrinsic complexity of two dancers in relation is so apparent that the “dance” almost looks invisible by way of its concentrated slowness. My downstairs neighbour, if she happened upon the improvisation, would hardly see a dance; she would simply see two people locked in a gaze, frozen in time. By making

performance less fancy, the invisible charge between and within two performers is magnified so that it is easier to locate, study, and practice.

As a scholar of nothing, Odell refers to the “architecture of nothing” as a device often used by artists who work in the medium of nothing. She names artists like James Turrell, who has a series of works in which he cuts a hole in the ceiling of a room, creating a real time cinema of the sky above; and Richard Prince, who removes company logos from advertisements to bring attention to who or what the advertisement is exploiting for profit. Using a simple gesture (cutting a hole in the ceiling or removing a logo), what might go unnoticed (the sky above or the landscape being torn apart by a Ford truck), is suddenly pulled into focus and reframed, fresh. Odell refers to this as the architecture that helps to support the reframing of an easy to miss subject. In this research, paradox is the architecture of nothing. It is the improvisation’s paradox of commitment and failure that scaffolds its own nothingness and brings to light its easy-to-miss subject - the affect potential between us. The basic rules of the improvisation set up a paradoxical premise. How can a dance unfold if both dancers are followers and there is no leader to instigate the movement? How can they move in perfect, mirrored unison, and at the same time?

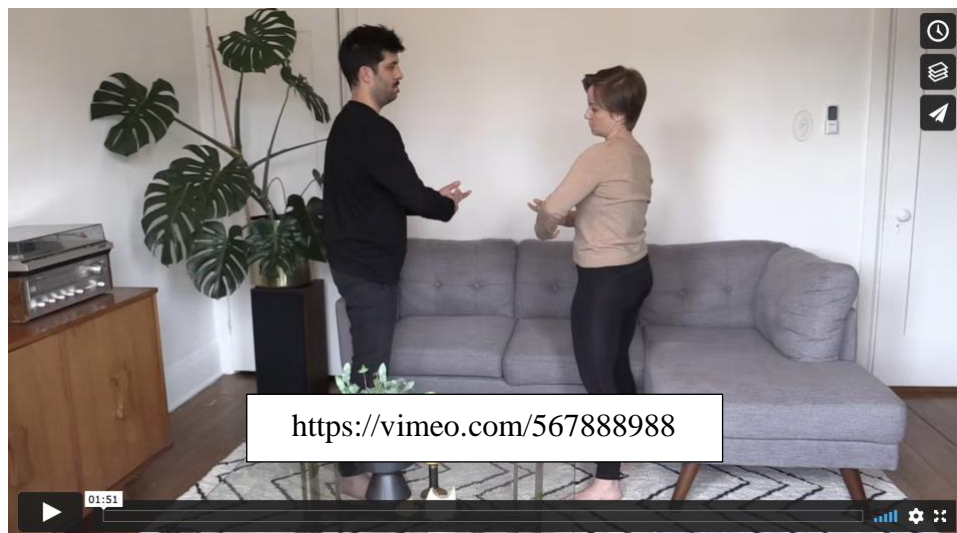
To conduct this research, I’m using the paradox of the improvisation’s impossibility to frame the “nothingness” of my focus, the invisible subject of my study, which is locating the mechanisms at work within and between each performing body during a performance. This could be understood to exist as a charged “bloom space”, which the nothingness of the improvisation calibrates towards. In this research, we are doing “nothing” in order to magnify the bloom space.

BLOOM SPACE

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Committing to the impossible rules arrests my attention and balloons my focus. While performing the improvisation, I am in a constant state of failure. I cannot intentionally lead movement, but my mirror response to perceived movement coming from my partner, as minuscule as it may be, will never be on time. There will always be a chasm of perception registration. That chasm confuses the leader-follower relationship. Does the delay of my mirror-response make me a follower or a leader? Did I mimic my partner as best I could, or did I instigate a new movement for my partner to register? This paradox has the surprising ability to slow time, zoom into presence, and in my experience, make the sensory hierarchy precarious. Like feeling the hair on your body stand on end, so too is the sensation of instant body-listening. I'm cast into a timeless, weightless, placeless space of attunement. I lose a sense of autonomous identity because representation and meaning are replaced by being, feeling, and sensing.

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This feels unstable, risky. There's no ground to put my feet on, no anchor. There's never the satisfaction of getting it right, because I'm always suspended in failure. The tension of concentration feels so strong that I'm exhausted by doing nothing. There's no sweet relief of the "aha" moment, because it's designed out of The Improv's creation. There are moments that I think. I think, "I'm doing it", and my well-honed performance skills kick in, like second nature, and I want to be in control. Leave the performing shell of the body, go inside, to the helm. Push buttons, pull levers, and perform this body well. And that's when I lose it. I stop "riding" affect, or the bloom space, and lose it. The "flow" is hard to pick back up. Once the buzzer on my phone goes, I can feel myself project backwards in space, my vision, hearing, bodily sensations come back and I realize that I'm cold, I'm sore, there are birds chirping, the sound of car tires crunching the gravel beneath them as they pass the alleyway that hugs my temporary and haphazard covid-studio. My hair is in my mouth, I'm standing on a concrete tile. There are the vines behind Patricia. That's Patricia, and we're in my back yard. This is the spot where the picnic table goes, and maybe one day I'll have a dinner party back here again. The sun is in a different spot. I think. The light seems different. How long was I out? I'm flooded with vulnerability. I could have been seen - by my neighbour, who happened not to leave her apartment this time, or her partner who happened not to come visit. I've been somewhere, and that feels tender somehow. I see my dance partner again, as if for the first time, or perhaps after a long time. I have returned from my retreat, but really we were there together, but not as us, or not as the us that I recognize.

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This improvisation leans into paradox. What is central to the technique is avoiding prescription or prediction. It is difficult to listen. The body wants to lead, but to stay with the improv, you must continually keep in the activated unknown, the amped potentiality, referred to in this research as the “bloom space” (explained below). Once you ‘get it’, it’s gone. Like affect, it, too cannot be captured. Here, the aim isn’t to ‘get it’, the challenge is how to stay *with* it. In this practice, “knowing” gets in the way, and belies possibility and potential. The improvisation attempts to locate and practice what is meant by “performer presence” by diligently attempting to stay in the bloom space as a way to understand and practice “being in the moment”.

What is the bloom space? In the context of this research, the bloom space is the placeless space that contains the charge between two performers. It could be understood as the well of affect where undetermined performance energy is drawn. One of the defining qualities of affect is that it’s hard to describe, but is often described as the charged ‘stuff’ that may or may not actualize into an emotion or a feeling. It is important to note that affect is excess intensity *without* specificity, and once it is captured or recognized, it is no longer affect by definition. In *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), Gregg and Seigworth refer to this activated liminal space of

potential as the bloom-space - a charged, dynamic, fertile space of intensities. The bloom-space is figured throughout their anthology in many cryptic ways, characterized by the Spinozan “not yet” of affect as promise or potential. It is described therein as “excess, as autonomous, as impersonal, as the ineffable, as the ongoingness of process, as pedagogico-aesthetic, as virtual, as shareable (mimetic), as sticky, as collective, as contingency, as threshold or conversion point, as immanence of potential (futuraity), as the open, as a vibrant incoherence that circulates about zones of cliché and convention, as a gathering place of accumulative dispositions” (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, p. 9). This passage illustrates the many ways the bloom space is described as containing the “not-yet” potential of still not-yet knowing what the body can do, while also making evident precisely what affect theory is often criticized for: its vague, confusing, and self-consciously imperfect parlance. It encapsulates everything and nothing, it is full of paradox and potential - and it all happens in the placeless space called the bloom space.

I propose that to locate presence, and develop the skill of listening to it or becoming with the moment, the performer must stay in the bloom space. This means that The Improv must engage with affect *before* it is captured and recognized. Furthermore, this research proposes that this is a skill that can be practiced and honed, and responds to the common rehearsal hall direction of “be present”, or “in the moment”. Perhaps this direction could be re-phrased as “stay in the bloom space” or at least “attempt to locate the bloom space”. Often in performance what is ridden, or riffed on, is the captured affect, the emotion or feeling. In The Improv, the performer’s technique is about a deep body-listening, locating and staying with affect before it’s captured and categorized.

Here, I would like to compare a similar research project, which also uses improvisational movement practices to mine affect for performance technique, and explores the idea of “affective

thinking”, but differs in that it does not address bloom space and capture - which are fundamental to my research. Rebecca McCutcheon’s article is titled “Towards an ‘ever more worldly sensitive interface’: the affective turn and site-based and participatory performance training - a practice-led perspective” (2019). Similarly, it employs improvisational dance practices to study performer attunement, non-verbal participation, and the Spinozan notion of the body. However, her approach to and understanding of affect in performance differs from mine in two key ways: she approaches the improvisation as a neutral event (where affect needs to be “added”), and she conflates affect in performance with emotion and feeling.

In her project, McCutcheon enlists two common improvisational practices: contact improv and flocking. In both instances, she writes that in order to study affect in the two dance practices, it must be “introduced” through emotional or scenic directives. In the first instance, she uses contact improv, an improvisational dance form that usually takes place between two dancers who must remain in physical contact throughout the duet. During McCutcheon’s research sessions, drama, character motivation, and narrative are inserted to underscore the study of affect within the practice. She uses text from a 19th-century script, *The Massacre*, which is comprised of short and intense dialogue between characters. McCutcheon writes:

As an approach to partner-work, contact improvisation is an effective method to explore a core conflict between two characters through a physical structure, using a selection of one or two fragments of text per performer, which they can repeat within the improvisation as many times and in as many combinations as they wish...Each pairing identified possible affective drives underlying the scenario of their character and relating somehow to the fragment of text they’d identified, and they were encouraged to make use of these underpinning drives in both their movement and their use of text. (55-56)

McCutcheon applies the same method of “adding” affect to another group improvisation called flocking, in which the performers all face the same direction and each follow or mimic the person at the front. If that person’s improvised movements make the body swivel and the group faces another direction, it’s tacitly understood that the person at the new front of the group is the new leader, and the movement improvisation carries on this way. During the flocking practices, in order to “produce affect”, McCutcheon would

introduce an idea to the group - it might be the idea of a particular shared energy, such as anticipation or lethargy; emotion, such as fear or excitement; or environment, such as a busy street or a church. Once this quality was introduced the performers would physically imitate one another in their flocking formation, while carrying an awareness in themselves of the feeling of imitating that quality - warmth, fear or suspicion for example. They were asked to observe the flow of imitation back and forth, how imitating an action might begin to engender an internal feeling, emphasizing the porous connectedness of the group. (58)

Although McCutcheon’s research is similar to mine, in that both practices utilize simple and well-known improvisational movement protocols to study affect in performance, they differ in the way that they address bloom space and capture. The differences are key to understanding both the form and function of my research. McCutcheon’s directorial additions to the improvisational practices (provocative text from a theatrical script, or emotions, feelings, or scenarios like fear, lethargy or a busy street corner) imply that she assumes contact improv and flocking practices to be neutral, and that something must be added to the practices in order to produce and experience affect. Conversely, my project starts from the belief that a simple improvisational practice is already a non-neutral event, full of meaning and potential.

Furthermore, affect always, already exists in the bloom space, and does not need to be “added” through dialogue, story, or imaginary scenario. My project works to expose what is already there, *before* the performance is made “fancy”, as Rainer would put it.

The second way this research differs from McCutcheon’s is in the definition of affect under which it operates. In this research, affect is understood to be the charged stuff *before* it is captured and recognized as a particular feeling or emotion. It is potential, not-yet become. In my research, the object of study is the stuff that prefaces the performance “event” or dramatic moment. McCutcheon also sets out to study affect, but her decision to “add” it leads me to assume that her definition of affect is *after* it has been captured and recognized, thus converting it to something else, an emotion or feeling. While McCutcheon instructed the dancers to imagine flocking in a particular scenario, like a crowded subway station or in a breezy meadow, the dancers reported having felt angry, or peaceful, and that their emotions changed the quality and interpretation of their movements, thus transforming the group’s dynamic and choreography. McCutcheon refers to the porousness of the group of dancers, but the porosity that she observes is of the dancers in her research mimicking the same *representational* emotion or feeling or imaginary scenario. From where my research stands, hers misses affect and skips to what comes after it is captured and understood. By directing the ‘feel’ of the moment by orating text, with unmistakable meaning, the improvisation no longer exists in the bloom space, the not-yet of charged affect, but rather exists in the having-become, the captured space of whatever succeeds affect, in narrative and story. From the perspective of this research, McCutcheon’s practice is representational, fueled by outside didactic directives, according to which the improvisers perform emotion or feeling.

McCutcheon refers to her process as “affective thinking”, but this research would argue that her process, rather, is “thinking about affect”, not thinking *through* affect. In contrast, The Improv used in this research has no leader and no follower; there is no intentional stimulus to instigate movement, and no outside provocation toward a feeling or emotion. Performers are abandoned to the discomfort and awkwardness of real-time bloom space, ping-ponging between becoming (self) conscious to the task of mimicry, and needing to abandon the intellectualization of the moment in order to simply focus and react, rather than respond. With no outside directive to shape the ‘feeling’ or ‘motivation’, performers are left only with themselves and the charge of the moment, with affect, the bloom space.

This brings us back to the contradiction of this task - move in unison, starting from stillness with no leader. It seems the choreography shouldn’t unfold. But it does, and this is because a body is never still; it’s propelled by difference and relation.

THE BODY IS NEVER STILL

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There is so much tension in my body. But I'm hardly doing anything. It takes so much effort to be here. At the same time, this feels like this is all I do now, like I've always been here. In my concentrated lean even a tiny inhale sends my body into a backwards sway. It feels massive but it's likely not. It feels massive amongst the stillness it seems we're in. Every tiny movement, inclination, tick, breath feels massive. It feels like a cheat that I didn't consciously decide on. Locked in the impossible rules I feel myself blink, or I remember that I just did. It feels heavy, big. Did he register that? Is he closer now? Is that a dilation of my vision accounting for something I'm unaware of? I'll need to lean in too. Remember to breathe. My belly pushes my chin and my head floats. His head tracks. There's the dilation again. Was I moving in space? Were my eyes adjusting? Are we closer? Blink. I see his chest expand and it's a relief. I can breathe. Was I breathing? My belly pushes my chin again this time hungry for oxygen, eager, and his chest tracks this. We are breathing together. Moving together. From this close, from inside, breath motion is an undulation. This feels like a fun surprise. Like finding another dimension.

This is Adam and I in the first 60 seconds of a session. When viewed in real time, it looks like nothing is happening. However, the clip is edited to play 8x faster than the original. You can see that our bodies are full of activation, and we are not still - even when it looks like we are.

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To fulfill the conditions of The Improv, neither dancer can initiate movement, yet a choreography unfolds. I find that this is because bodies and the moment are never still; they are teeming with affect, and affect moves. To gain a better understanding about how bodies and the moment are not still, especially in relation to non-verbal communication and mimicry (The Improv's main instruction), I turn to Anna Gibbs, Carla Hustak, and Natasha Myers, who study the affective, relational body in an ecological, evolutionary-involutionary context. Contemporary evolutionary science can offer useful insight into the affectual enmeshment between the performing body and other performers, the audience, the space, and the "performance itself", as well as the non-verbal communication that take place within. It also provides a logical framework for further understanding what "tuning in" might mean in performance. Through the repeated practice of a well-used performance improvisation, I discover that this simple improv plays like a microcosm of the effects of evolutionary propulsion - or at least serves as a conduit for exploring the tenets of affective ecology. What I find is that the tenets of affective ecology are similar to the tenets of live performance. What allows for a "tuning in", or listening to that which cannot be heard in performance, may be of the same stuff that connects all species in an

affective ecology and propels an affective evolution. The simple improvisation is dissected in this research as such; its slowness and subtlety magnify what is happening within and between the two performers. The paradoxical nature of The Improv's instructions keeps the performers in the bloom space, or close to it. Next, to posit why the dancers begin moving at all, and why they continue movement, I borrow from affective ecology. I learn that bodies and spaces are not still; they teem with affect freneticism. We metabolize this, uniquely to ourselves, which creates differences despite our best performery intentions. Even when there is no "motivation" to move, the ping-pong between attempted mimicry and difference propels the dance forward through an affect conversation. The performers move because affect moves.

In "Involutionary Momentum: Affective Ecologies and the Sciences of Plant/Insect Encounters" (2012), Hustak and Myers stage a critical re-reading of the work of Charles Darwin and his successors around inter and intra species communications and relationships, specifically in regards to orchid pollination. They discover an undercurrent of affective relations between species that suggests there is more to relationships than the neo-Darwinist ethos of mechanistic, economic encounters based on a militarized logic of competition and domination. Hustak and Myers supplement evolutionary logics with an involutionary mode of conditioning, whereby an affective ecology unfolds based on pleasure, play and improvisation instead of maximized economy and fitness. Where evolution is understood to progress in a forward trajectory, Hustak and Myers define involution as "rolling inward to roll out", a spiraling trajectory of affectual enmeshment and reciprocity. They offer a reading of Darwin that "amplifies accounts of the creative, improvisational, and fleeting practices through which plants and insects *involve* themselves in one another's lives" (Hustak & Meyers, 2012, p.77), and tell a similar story of Darwin involving himself in the lives and behaviours of his plant and insect subjects. Not only

did he attempt to stimulate the pollination behaviours of orchids with a poke, stroke, or a touch, but Darwin also engaged in more involved methodologies, bending and folding his own body to mimic the movements of an orchid in order to glean experiential information as to why the flower behaves the way it does. In other words, Darwin made experimental, phenomenological orchid choreographies.

Re-reading evolutionary theory through an affective lens, according to Hustak and Myers, “helps us to get a feel for affective push and pull among bodies, including the affinities, ruptures, enmeshments, and repulsions among organisms constantly inventing new ways to live with and alongside one another” (2012, p. 97). Theirs is a model of “relationality and a ‘becoming with’ across difference” (Hustak & Myers, 2012, p. 96). Similarly, the paradox of *The Improv* exposes the affectual “push and pull” between two performers in space. The choreography of mimicry without a leader brings to the fore the corporeal responses to what is usually an invisible enmeshment, explained through the logics of involutory ecology as the “gaps between bodies [that] teem with energies, affects, and propositions” and where the “air hangs heavy with significance” (Hustak & Myers, 2012, p. 105). Not only are bodies never still, but neither is the moment or the “air”. The “gap” between the two dancing bodies teems with propositions. A dancer may dip into that “heavy air” to take up a proposition, but as well, the proposition may take up a body. Since the body and the moment are never still, the body is constantly metabolizing these propositions, which leads to the “motivation” of the improvisation - relationship and difference.

In “After Affect: Sympathy, Synchrony, and Mimetic Communication” (2010), Anna Gibbs theorizes mimesis and communication among human and non-human species, and although she takes an affective approach, she uses a neo-Darwinian framework that arranges

those in communication through a hierarchy of motivation: mimesis is performed by a “mimic”, who copies a “model”, often to misdirect the “dupe”. For example, an organism from a harmless species (the mimic) might imitate a member of a harmful species (the model) through behaviour, chemical signals, or camouflage, to fool an oncoming predator (the dupe) into retreat. The origin of communication is clear and travels in a forward trajectory. In this model, there is less likelihood for intimacy, subtlety, and emotional banter between the organisms as motivation. Hustak and Myers propose that mimetic communication is not solely driven by competition and deception, but instead unfolds as a cacophony of relational impulses through which momentum travels circuitously. Here, the origin of the encounter is harder to place, as it is contingent on, and relational to, preceding interactions. In *The Improv*, both performers are mimic, model and dupe all at the same time: there is no clear instigation or motivation. Even when there is little to no discernible movement observed in the duet, each dancer is a living, breathing, moving site of constant affectual metabolization, which means that the body and the moment are never truly idle or still. In Gibbs’ words, “bodies move in bursts of polyrhythmic expression that allow intricately timed pulses of muscular energy in harmonious pulses of plastic transformations that push against the environment” (2010, p. 198). Each dancer is in a constant state of attunement with their partner, subconsciously reacting (a nervous twitch, a breaking smile, a grimace at discomfort, an inward lean with concentration), as well as consciously responding (observing and mimicking the partner’s twitch, smile, grimace or lean) with varying degrees of accuracy. Each dancer must observe, absorb and mimic the other’s movements, and in the process this interpretation becomes altered as it is performed through the new body. This sets off an oscillating and overlapping pattern of signals and responses between the dancers, the origin of which cannot be identified because they were never still to begin with.

Bodies are not still because affect moves. The body in the Spinozan-Deleuzian lineage is infinitely full of potential, with capacity to affect and be affected. It is a similar body as outlined in Hustak, Myers, and Gibbs' ecology, which is a dynamic, playful, shifting, relational entity. But "how does a body, marked in its duration by these various encounters with mixed forces, come to shift its affections (its being-affected) into action (capacity to affect)?" (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, p. 2). In other words, how does affect move? Julian Henriques proposes that "[a]ffect is expressed rhythmically - through relationships, reciprocations, resonances, syncopations and harmonies. Affect is transmitted in the way wave dynamics are propagated through a particular medium - which may be corporeal, or material, or sociocultural" (Henriques, 2010, p. 58). Affect is not static nor can it exist in a void. It is ricocheting between and amongst bodies, blooming, becoming, exploding. It resonates through the body, and the body transduces, or metabolizes that affect. The moment, or the present, is full of this charge. One might say it's the invisible material that can be read when you read a room. Similarly, it's the silent material charge that a performer listens to when they listen to the moment. The moment is not still, and the activation of it can be sensed, tuned into, or "intuited" as Kapchan would put it. To recall her quote, "What we cannot hear, we can sense. Intuition is this: awareness of the body perceiving, the senses moving..." (Kapchan, 2015, p.34). This is what a performer does (or doesn't do) well. If affect is expressed rhythmically, it also produces difference. Henriques continues: "Crucially, with the patterning of vibrations, there is no repetition without variation...not only does repetition not exclude differences, it also gives birth to them; it produces them" (Henriques quoting Henri Lefebvre, 2011, p. 77-78). The failure inherent in The Improv creates a ping-ponging of mimicry and difference, which produce a line of flight (Deleuze), a new trajectory for the choreography to propel itself toward, a new variation to build on. Difference initiates and

propels movement within the choreography. Here, we can understand the effects of a performer's body as metabolized affect, both resonating with their partner and also creating difference, propelling the choreography through a cascade of perception-registration, metabolization, mimicry, and mistake.

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We're never in perfect unison. We're together but apart, and it's difficult to stay focused and locked into the concentration and tension of relation. It's transfixing to lose your order, to not know if you are racing ahead or racing to catch up.

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Nothingness magnifies affect between the two performers, who are attempting to keep with the bloom space. They're locked in a cycle of mimicry and difference, because their bodies, and the moment are not still. The differences and failures that result initiate and propel the choreography forward. The two dancers are tasked to mimic one another, and in doing so, are bound in a reciprocal capture of kinaesthetic bonds. Mimesis and kinaesthesia are the motors of

the movement, and to elaborate on this, I continue with Anna Gibbs and incorporate Susan Leigh Foster.

Mimesis & Kinaesthesia

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From the inside, I sense a loss of agency and autonomy. Even when my body becomes tired of holding a certain posture, I can't move on. Any movement we make, we need to create together.

Will it ever happen? How long can I sit into my left hip? Am I holding my arm up? Is it suspended? Wait, is it higher than Patricia's, am I moving faster, am I initiating? Does it matter? Maybe we're the same body but mine is a different shape, so maybe it doesn't matter.

Here is a clip from a session with Patricia. The first minute is the edited, sped up version of the 10-minute improvisation that immediately follows. The accelerated first minute puts on display how much movement happens in the 10-minute improv, as well as our co-dependency as mimicry partners. Anything that is created is created together. The 10-minute, real-time improvisation shows how slow the improvisation moves. You don't have to watch the 10 minutes in its entirety to witness the succession of tiny failures and struggles our bodies endure to push forward and become with together.

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The Improv makes a performance of mimesis and puts it in the dance studio. However, mimesis happens all the time, consciously and subconsciously, discreetly and indiscreetly, and across and throughout species. Although this common performance improvisation may be overused or overlooked, this research has found it to be an eloquent exercise to magnify and study what is happening not only between two bodies in performance, but perhaps in any contact-relation experience. Here I explore the final integral piece of how and why The Improv works, which is via the functions of mimesis and kinaesthesia. In delving into how mimesis and kinaesthesia are always, already happening affectively across species, we vicariously explore not only how a performing body can mimic and connect somatically, but also how this practice can locate and flex the muscles of attunement, connection, tuning-in, and listening in a performance context.

Mimesis is complicated. The principle (and only) directive of The Improv is that each performer must mimic the other's movements, as precisely as possible and at the same time. Upon hearing the instructions, it seems that the simultaneity would be the most complicated part of the instruction; attempting to mimic your partner at the same time as they perform the action you're mimicking. While simultaneity is a complex dynamic, and already taken up in the section of magnification and bloom space, the most complicated act to perform is that of mimesis. Gibbs defines mimesis, most simply, as "the corporeally based forms of imitation, both voluntary and involuntary" (2010, p. 187), and later broadens her definition to include the "contagious process that takes place transversally across a topology connecting heterogeneous networks of media and conversation, statements and images, and bodies and things" (2010, p.187). This said, my research is most concerned with mimesis in its most simple definition, voluntary and involuntary corporeal imitation, yet I find that it is not so simple. Gibbs calls to "rethink mimesis not as

simple mimicry or copying dependent on vision (monkey see, monkey do), but as a complex communicative process in which other sensory and affective modalities are centrally involved.” (2010, p. 191). From the outside looking in, one might assume that a performer in The Improv is first seeing their partner move, then copying that movement (monkey see, then monkey do). Rather, mimesis, when understood through affect, can be understood as a subtle resonance that utilizes the senses of the entire body in addition to vision. Gibbs’ work on affect and mimicry embraces the synesthetic approach bodies take to being in and with the world. She acknowledges visual dominance, and shows that to understand mimesis as a primarily visual act is a fallacy. She writes that “vision rarely operates in isolation from the other senses, and its dependence on them indicates the importance of sensory cross-modalization - or synesthesia - in mimesis” (2010, p. 202). To expand on this, James J. Gibson (2015) would add that vision is also ecological. We see through our eyes, in our head, on our body, in an environment. In other words, vision is not an isolated process, and is mediated through a series of relations. This research argues that mimicry is not entirely a visual act but a whole-body *feeling* or sensing, or what Henriques calls a vibro-tactility. The Improv is not solely reliant on vision for its mimesis, nor is the performer’s mimicry merely producing a series of oscillating imitations, replicas or dupes. This research argues that mimesis is a complex process of becoming with, tuning into, and attuning; a swishing, stirring, and sharing of affects.

No matter the breadth of Gibbs’ definition of mimesis, her basis for mimicry is affect contagion. Mimesis is a primary transducer of affect. She writes, “at the heart of mimesis is affect contagion, the bioneurological means by which particular affects are transmitted from body to body,” because each affect is connected to “particular physical sensations including muscular, glandular and skin responses” (2010, p. 191). She uses the example of a spontaneous

smile. A spontaneous smile from a stranger can trigger a spontaneous smile from yourself, which then “provides sufficient feedback to our own bodies to activate the physiological and neurological aspects of joy” (Gibbs, 2010, p.191). Another example is the contagion of a yawn. It is difficult to resist a yawn after having witnessed another’s yawn, or perhaps even having just read the word. A yawn increases blood flow to the brain, and stimulates the nervous system, which relaxes the body and gives more clarity to the mind. Mimicry, whether intentional or not, has bioneurological implications, and can change your chemistry, feeling, or mood. Mimicry transforms you. Affects can be contagious and express themselves in and through the body, which is never still. Not only might we consciously or noticeably mimic another, but a form of mimicry can also happen on a deeper level, subconsciously, and perhaps with greater or more lasting consequence. Gibbs continues that, “when we see an action performed, the same neural networks that would be involved if we were to perform it ourselves are activated. In fact we may actually experience something of what it feels like to perform the action, as when we watch someone” (2010, p. 196). Not only might we return a smile to a stranger as a social grace or pressure, the bioneurological impulse to mimic can also happen empathetically. Even if our bodies cannot be observed mimicking the movements of another individual (a returned smile, or shifting weight in The Improv), mimicry is happening on a deeper, empathetic level. Not only actions can be mimicked, but sensations too, meaning that mimesis does not have to be performed to be felt. For example, if you witness someone stub their toe, you might empathetically feel the pain or sensation of another’s stubbed toe, without mimicking the stubbing of a toe. Similarly to the emotional or chemical effects of your spontaneous smile returned to the stranger, so too should the mimicked sensation produce chemical or emotional changes in you, even if the event to produce the sensation did not happen to you first hand. This

type of mimicry, achieved by observing and attuning to another, does not merely produce an imitation, a fake, or a dupe, but instead allows for another way to *be with* one another through neuromuscular empathy, or kinaesthesia.

In her book, *Choreographing Empathy* (2010), Susan Leigh Foster writes about the bioneurological exchange of affects in the context of dancer and viewer. As she explains, “neurophysiologists are claiming an intrinsic connectivity between dancer and viewer based on the discovery of mirror neurons – synaptic connections in the cortex that fire both when one sees an action and when one does that action” (Foster, 2010, p. 29). Foster argues that a difference between sympathy and empathy is that one is detached and the other is enmeshed, one is a *feeling for* and the other a *feeling with*. Empathy is a *feeling with*, and relies on kinaesthesia as the connective tissue, since emotional and physical experience are inextricable. Foster goes on, stating that “any notion of choreography contains, embodied within it, a kinaesthesia, a designated way of experiencing physicality and movement that, in turn, summons other bodies into a specific way of feeling towards it” (2010, p. 31). This logic can extend beyond choreography as it is conventionally understood, to any and all bodily movement that is observed by another, both the obvious movements and the miniscule. Perhaps this could even be extended past perceivable movement observed in another to subtle shifts in one’s constitution. Through bioneurological mimesis and kinaesthetic empathy, there exists an affectual intimacy in being with one another and with the world. In my creative research, the kinaesthetic response is acknowledged, in real time, and the kinaesthetic process is foreshortened as the performers are bound to the task of continual mimicry. The impulses induced through the kinaesthetic effect of watching, feeling, listening to, and sensing one’s partner move are felt at a deep, neuromuscular

level. With the double mimicry-kinaesthetic response happening between the two dancers, affect contagion spreads with centrifugal force.

The choreography that unfolds through The Improv is one of infinite rolling inward to roll outward. The two dancers become attuned to each other's subtle movements and shifts in constitution, in a continual reciprocity of mimesis and kinaesthetic empathy. They must simultaneously observe and absorb. Each dancer is a porous body of affectual enmeshments, locked in a continuum of relations happening beneath the skin and between one another.

Afterword, Afterward, The After-time

Throughout this study, I grapple with a paradoxical improvisational practice. I posit that The Improv works because, even in subtlety, there is intense complexity; the body is never actually still but in constant process of mimesis and kinaesthesia. I have remarked that listening is important for a performer. We are instructed to listen to each other, the moment, the audience - all listening to that which cannot be heard. Presence is another quality that a performer is told to harness and master. *A je ne sais quoi*. We're told to tune in, and be in the moment, but we're not told how or what this means. The Improv, through a magnification of subtlety, is a meditation. From the duration and quality of attention, finer and finer frequencies can be discovered. This research posits that we are locked in a relational process of becoming. Perhaps to "tune in" is not only to become conscious of this process as it is happening, but also to use the information gleaned from it as performerly or prophetic intuition. Often, meditative practices are based on a simple proposal, or the paradox of "doing nothing", yet the simplicity of consciousness practices can be deceiving. In my experience, with both meditation and the arts, there is a novice impatience to 'get it'. In the case of The Improv, expertise or "know how" actually prevents the learning; you must stay with the activated unknown, with the awkwardness and discomfort of uncertainty.

This research is a study of real-life togetherness. Recently, in an attempt to connect and be together during covid-time, even more of our lives have gone online and have taken place over online conferencing platforms. We have been rendered in two dimensions, a fixed visual perspective from an unchanging environment, no smell or heat from another's body. Throughout this experience, I often think of *Boomerang*, one my favourite sound art projects by Nancy Holt and Richard Serra from 1974. In it, Holt is filmed wearing a microphone and headphones. When

she speaks, her microphone transmits the signal of her voice to the headphones she's wearing, but with a one-second delay. In the grainy, ten-minute video, Holt speaks in a stream of consciousness, describing her experience of this experiment in real time. From just a one-second delay in sound, she becomes disoriented, her sense of self becomes abstracted and less attached to an integrated, embodied reality. Holt's sensory motor skills begin to dissolve, and it becomes increasingly harder for her mouth to make the shapes it needs to pronounce words. With present-day spotty Internet connections, or audio-visual delays, it is difficult not to relate to Holt's out-of-body experience and loss of focus and concentration. Although created 20-odd years before the invention of the Internet, social media, and online conference calls, *Boomerang* is a prophetic study of the body interrupted by the very communications technology built and used to attempt to connect with others. Yet here we are, almost entirely dependent on the imperfect mediation of togetherness.

Covid-time isolation and social distancing also make me think of touch. If I cannot touch the world, where am I? This is my problem currently. It's difficult to place myself. In her aforementioned book on kinaesthesia, Foster recounts a story by Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, a French philosopher and epistemologist. In his *Treatise on the Sensations* in 1754, he imagined a hypothetical situation in which a marble statue was granted the sense of touch. He calls it 'fundamental feeling,' as it is the sensation that allows the statue to understand that she is alive. Foster writes that "touch offered the possibility of a double sensation, that of touching and of being touched. Once the statue touched itself and compared that with the sensation of touching something else, it began to establish both self and otherness" (Foster, 2010, p.86). Here there is a link between a sensual history and ontology. Instead of "I think therefore I am" (Descartes), "I sense, and touch, therefore I am in relation". In this research, I contemplate the relational body

with a boundary that is less stable than the skin (or marble surface). With that in mind, does it change what it means to touch and be touched, or to be (in relation)? Instead of skin on skin, can we touch via sharing in and of the bloom space? Can we touch via smell, or unconscious olfaction (Brennan)? Can we touch via sound and vibration (Henriques, Kapchan)? Can we touch at a distance, or over online platforms like Zoom? Where or what am I, in this covid-time, if I cannot touch?

Over the course of conceiving, conducting, and writing this research, the world transitioned from the before-time to covid-time. Covid is contagious. The new epidemiological context brings another layer to my research content, specifically the invisible “stuff” shared amongst bodies - contagion, indiscreet borderless bodies who become with and alike one another, whose togetherness has irrevocable consequences. Covid-time has been a time of isolation and bewilderment, metabolizing shocking headlines while tossed into a state of constant uncertainty where there is no longer ground beneath my feet. I have been encouraged to weave this experience into my research, but it feels difficult. Knowing is something that comes after the fact, in retrospect, but I’m still in it. Feeling is something that happens during the fact, and I feel weird. I feel unsure, unstable, and full of paradox. I sleep too little or too much. I find it hard to relax or enjoy, and I have a newly found social introversion. It feels bizarre to imagine life after covid, or the “after-time”. What will have survived this mess? What adaptations to our behaviours, patterns, and interactions will we find to have been irreversible? Will our relationships recover? How will we be(come) together? How will we touch? In anticipation of the after-time, we lean on the language of “going back”: when will we “go back” to normal, when do we “go back” to eating indoors, when will kids “go back” to school? Really though, there is no going back, and it’s impossible to accurately predict the after-time because we are

still in it; with answers come new questions. So for now, we are stuck right here, in covid-time, in the mess. In this way my uncomfortable experience of covid-time bears a resemblance to my experiential studio research of The Improv. In my puffy, knee-length winter vest, standing on cold concrete tiles, in the haphazard dance studio of my backyard, the heat of my breath turning into moisture trapped in my mask, standing six feet away from my dance partner, with the task of mimicry and presence, I attempt to stay in it, stay with it, in the bloom space. Living through these “strange and unprecedented times” is full of the activated unknown, no sense of what’s coming next, most of what you could rely on previously - whether it be your job, your health, your home, your relationships - having been rendered unstable and unpredictable. Sometimes it feels banal, but always it feels charged - vibrating threat each day (Massumi). This research addresses what is happening while we are together, in close proximity, but it does not answer the question of togetherness over significant distance or online platforms. I don’t know how to untangle covid-time, nor can I anticipate the after-time, so I will continue to be in, and with, the activated unknown, or the bloom space of uncertainty. An unanticipated result of my extended, rejigged, reworked research project, while the world changed so drastically, is the consolation that there is a way through the impossible.

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