

# More Than One Thing

A Practice-Led Investigation into Transdisciplinary Free Improvisation in  
Sound and Movement

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Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a practice-based investigation into my artistic practice of Transdisciplinary Free Improvisation (TFI) – a performance practice of live improvisation integrating expressive sound and movement, enacted concurrently by one performer (myself), as well as in collaboration with other artists (performing with co-improvisers). Within the conceptual frame of TFI offered as a form of performative world-making (see Hayot, 2016; Bench, 2016), and underpinned by the epistemological principles of Transdisciplinarity, I explore the emergent characteristics and qualities of my practice across text and audiovisual documents, presented side-by-side in a multimodal exegesis of improvisation practice-as-knowledge. In Part I, situating my practice genealogically at the crossroads of multiple improvising cultures, I draw intersectionally on feminist and critical race theory in addressing the impact of hegemonic masculinity and whiteness upon the aesthetic development and discourse of sound and movement improvisation in the western transatlantic context, considering the way in which the human body and corporeality have been both foregrounded and occluded in performance practices from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. Moving from an acknowledgement of its historical and cultural precedents, Part II of the thesis foregrounds emergent aspects of my own performance practice, presented as a non-linear series of interreferential mini-chapters. These sections integrate conventional academic prose, reflective writing, participant interviews, and annotated audiovisual practice documents (constituting the portfolio component of the thesis) in a syncretic whole. Part III proposes open conclusions regarding improvisation as/in contemporary epistemology, and offers thoughts on a critical trajectory for developments in practice-based improvisation studies. Throughout the thesis, my own voice is interpolated with quotations from practitioner-colleagues with whom I have undertaken documented interviews and informal conversations, as well as practical sessions in studio and online, across the course of this research. These voices, largely uncited elsewhere in academia, are included in a pragmatic effort to better represent the diversity of the global community of improvisers within the academic arena, and to recognise intersubjectivity as an essential, rich, and insightful aspect of artistic research.

## PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

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This thesis contains newly written text, drawing upon ideas from the following articles, presentations, and video-essays which have been produced across the course of the research period.

### SOLE-AUTHOR:

McPherson, D. H. J. (2020a). Ways Without Words: Thoughts on Presenting About Improvisation. *Vision 2020 - Postgraduate Conference, University of Huddersfield*. [Video-Essay]  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= V YMSYvzTI&t>

McPherson, D. H. J. (2020b). Considering the Fixed Naming of Entities: Towards a Transdisciplinary Approach to Free Improvisation. *CeReNEM Journal, No.7 (Performing Stuff: Human-Entity Interactions in Contemporary Artistic Practice)*, 16–40.

McPherson, D. H. J. (2021a). Meanings in the Moment: Nonsense and Narrative Interactions in Transdisciplinary Free Improvisation. *The Improviser's Experience: Knowledge, Methodology, Communication, University of Huddersfield, in association with the Royal Musicological Association*.

McPherson, D. H. J. (2021b). "Spinning out world after world": Considering transdisciplinary free improvisation as a practice of performative worlding. *ReCePP/CMCI Research Colloquium, University of Huddersfield*.

McPherson, D. H. J. (2021c). Sounding-Moving Emergence in Transdisciplinary Free Improvisation. *Emergence/y. A Sound Difference. Orpheus Doctoral Conference 2021*. [Video-Essay]  
[https://youtu.be/Ft\\_LakEKDqY](https://youtu.be/Ft_LakEKDqY)

McPherson, H. (2022). This, Here, Now: Invitations to Improvise.

### CO-AUTHOR:

McPherson, D. H. J., & Sappho Donohue, M. (2021). Inventing the Language of Mush: How to Improvise a World. *Cross-Genre and Locality. Rethinking Borders Symposium, Osaka University (JP), University of Huddersfield [Online]*. <https://youtu.be/9crzJBhlgJU>

### IN PRESS:

Weiss, R., Sappho Donohue, M., McPherson, H., Catherin, B., MacDonald, R., (in press). Foutraque: Immersive cyber spaces through AR and telematic music performance with the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra

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# 1 MORE THAN ONE THING: RESEARCH DESIGN, AIMS, AND METHODOLOGY

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## 1.1 BASIS IN PRACTICE

As is expanded upon in detail throughout Parts I and II, as a practising artist, I sit at a juncture between several cultures of live performance. My work draws conceptually, culturally, practically, and aesthetically, across the domains of free improvised music, experimental sonic performance, western instrumental art music, western (postmodern) theatre-dance (and its associated forms of movement improvisation), to name its primary genealogical strands. In my practice, I explore instruments, my voice, and my body, in the creation of spontaneous expressive performance (whether for camera, in the studio, or for live audience; see also *Introduction: 4. Becoming More Than One Thing*)

Improvisation studies is an emergent field which has recently “exploded [...] with a surge in interdisciplinary inquiry across many artistic and nominally nonartistic fields” (Lewis and Piekut, 2016, p.2). This research project, distinct in its interactive, multimodal, and methodologically holistic contribution to this developing field of human knowledge, is rooted in my artistic practice of improvisation. The focus of this thesis, the subject of its investigation, and the point of departure for its unique contribution to knowledge, is my practice of improvising – a practice which I describe using the compound term Transdisciplinary Free Improvisation (TFI). This term I consider to be descriptive rather than definitive. TFI is a piece of *functional* terminology with which I have found I am able to effectively describe the particular qualities, conceptual underpinnings, and live performance outcomes of my work. Taking a broadly poststructuralist position opposed to reductionist and excessively taxonomical approaches to naming and defining, I hold that the affordance of TFI as a term lies in its relative conceptual slipperiness and its resistance to absolute definitions, generated by the polyvalence of its constituent terms (each one of which carries a plethora of applications and associations). This will be explored in detail across sections 2 and 3 of the Introduction. In order to provide the reader with sufficient context for the remainder of this section, I offer broadly that in describing my own practice, TFI denotes:

*A practice of improvisation as performance: in which the creative-expressive activity of the performer (myself) is spontaneous, immediate, self-determining, and self-referential; in which this activity is enacted both across and beyond the conventional aesthetic and performative delineations of Western/Eurological performance disciplines (Music, Dance, Theatre, etc.) in such a way that its content and qualities (its look, feel, sound, shape, etc.) cannot be effectively described or explicated using monodisciplinary terms.*

## 1.2 RESEARCH AIMS, QUESTIONS, AND METHODOLOGY

*Begin by asking a question –*

*And again, and again, and again ...*

Prompt #16 from *This, Here, Now* (McPherson, 2022)

The aim of this research is to present insight into the specific emergent characteristics of my artistic practice of Transdisciplinary Free Improvisation (TFI). This has been investigated through my solo improvising practice and in encounter with peer-improvisers as participants, and is articulated here within a theoretical frame of TFI as a practice of making improvisational *worlds*. Across the course of September 2019 to September 2022, I have pursued this aim: through the undertaking of a substantial body of improvisation performance practice-as-research, both as a soloist, and in collaboration with specific peer-improvisers chosen as research-participants (see 1.3.); through the gathering and subsequent experimental analysis of audiovisual and other media collected in and around practice, including video-recorded improvisations, reflections and commentaries, as well as interview-conversations with selected peer-improvisers; and through the contextualisation and contemporisation of the above in relation to relevant secondary sources, discourses in improvisation studies, contemporary theories of knowledge, the intersection of aesthetics and the social-political, disciplinarity, and the concept of *world*.

The two primary questions which have driven me throughout this project and shaped its trajectory are:

1. What are the core aspects – concepts, characteristics, qualities – of my performance practice of TFI, which are indicative of (and emergent from) its transdisciplinary nature and its position at the intersection of multiple performance cultures, and how can these be usefully articulated?
2. In what ways have the axiologies of the above performance cultures (their aesthetics and ethics) been shaped by their intersection with the social-political? In particular, with regards to way that performative and expressive activity of the human body has been ideated, discussed, regulated, and emancipated in sonic and kinetic contexts; and how does this intersect with my practice?

A further question, which has emerged through the course of the research as the project methodology has expanded into the audiovisual, is:

3. In what novel ways can the annotated audiovisual medium, in conjunction with my developing conceptual frame of improvisational worlds, serve as an epistemological tool to illuminate TFI within the practice-as-research context?

Moving from the assessments that improvisation is a distinct “way of knowing” (Goldman, 2016), that it represents (as a performance practice) a valid “means of investigating” (Vincs, 2010, p. 21) in the academic arena, and that it constitutes a unique form of experiential embodied knowledge (Blom and Chaplin, 2000, p. 16), this project draws across the sociological, political, aesthetical, ethnographic, videographic, and philosophical, as well as the practical and creative, while maintaining an essential grounding in my own lived experience of improvising practice. Recognising improvisation as a “social activity that cannot readily be scripted, predicted, or compelled into orthodoxy” (Caines and Heble, 2015, p. 2), I assert the necessity of a research approach to improvisation-as-performance which is holistic, and which acknowledges the entanglement of practice within a wider network of human

behaviours, relationships, and identities. In particular, due to the focus of this work on my own performance in expressive sounding and moving as mediated by *the body*, a discursive approach considering the impact of culturally prescriptive conceptions of the performing human body and its associated racial, gendered, sexuality and ability-based identities forms a prominent component of this thesis (see Part I: Chapters 1 – 4)

I recognise what dance scholar Elizabeth Dempster identifies, in relation to the exegesis of performance practices within academia, as the “risks and dangers in becoming inter-disciplined, insofar as that may entail learning to embody and enact a powerful discipline’s discourse and genres” (2018, p. 43).<sup>1</sup> Throughout this project, therefore, in lieu of adopting a single methodology from an external discipline – for example, the application of a specific theoretical lens to improvisation, derived from an established, non-performance discipline (i.e., psychology or sociology) – I have strived to develop a medium-specific methodology which is emergent from, directly informed by, and reflective of my experience of improvisational practice. To this end, this project has assumed an experimental, adaptive, and multimodal research model drawing upon: the established principles of rhizomatic knowledge as outlined by Deleuze and Guattari, wherein knowledge is understood as a non-linear, de-hierarchised network of interconnected entities, points, concepts and multiplicities formulated upon the botanical structure of the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 7); and on the basis that improvisation can be understood as the performing of a complex dynamic system (Cobussen, 2017, pp. 13-14). Bringing together several distinct modes of research across a variety of media and semantic registers, the project takes each one of these as constituting part of a dynamic, generative, and evolving *network of knowledge*, in which all modes are inter- and intra-active, -reflexive, and -informative. Throughout this project, the central practical element of the research (live improvisation-as-research), therefore, has been rendered porous to all other modes.

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<sup>1</sup> Dempster is referring to interdisciplinarity here explicitly with regards to the use of words in describing kinetic and somatic knowledge; she does not dismiss interdisciplinarity (or other forms of supradisciplinarity) wholesale.

I have undertaken my improvising practice in conjunction with: the audiovisual documentation of live improvisation; subsequent experimental annotation and analysis of these audiovisual documents, following Spatz' propositions on videographic annotation as "illumination" (Spatz, 2021; see also Part II: Introduction); reflective commentary upon recorded improvisations (and its transcription); recorded interview-conversations undertaken between myself and peer-improvisers as research participants (and their transcription); textual reflection upon work in-studio; as well as the critical evaluation and socially engaged analysis of secondary sources (see Fig.1).

Practical sessions took place between studios and performance spaces in the University of Huddersfield, UK, home environments, and two small arts venues in Edinburgh (where several participants are based). Each session involved an iterative cycle of improvisation and conversation, which was documented by two cameras and an audio recorder, positioned at the diagonal to capture the greatest area of the performance space. Textual transcriptions were processed by the AI-driven transcription software Otter.ai, before being proofread and edited by me. In quotations from these documents throughout this thesis, extraneous repeated words/utterance have been removed. Interview-conversations with participating improvisers were semi-structured; I provided a list of interests to each improviser, with a short series of questions to which they could respond if they chose. All but one participant, who elected to respond via email, chose to undertake interview live (in person, or via Zoom).

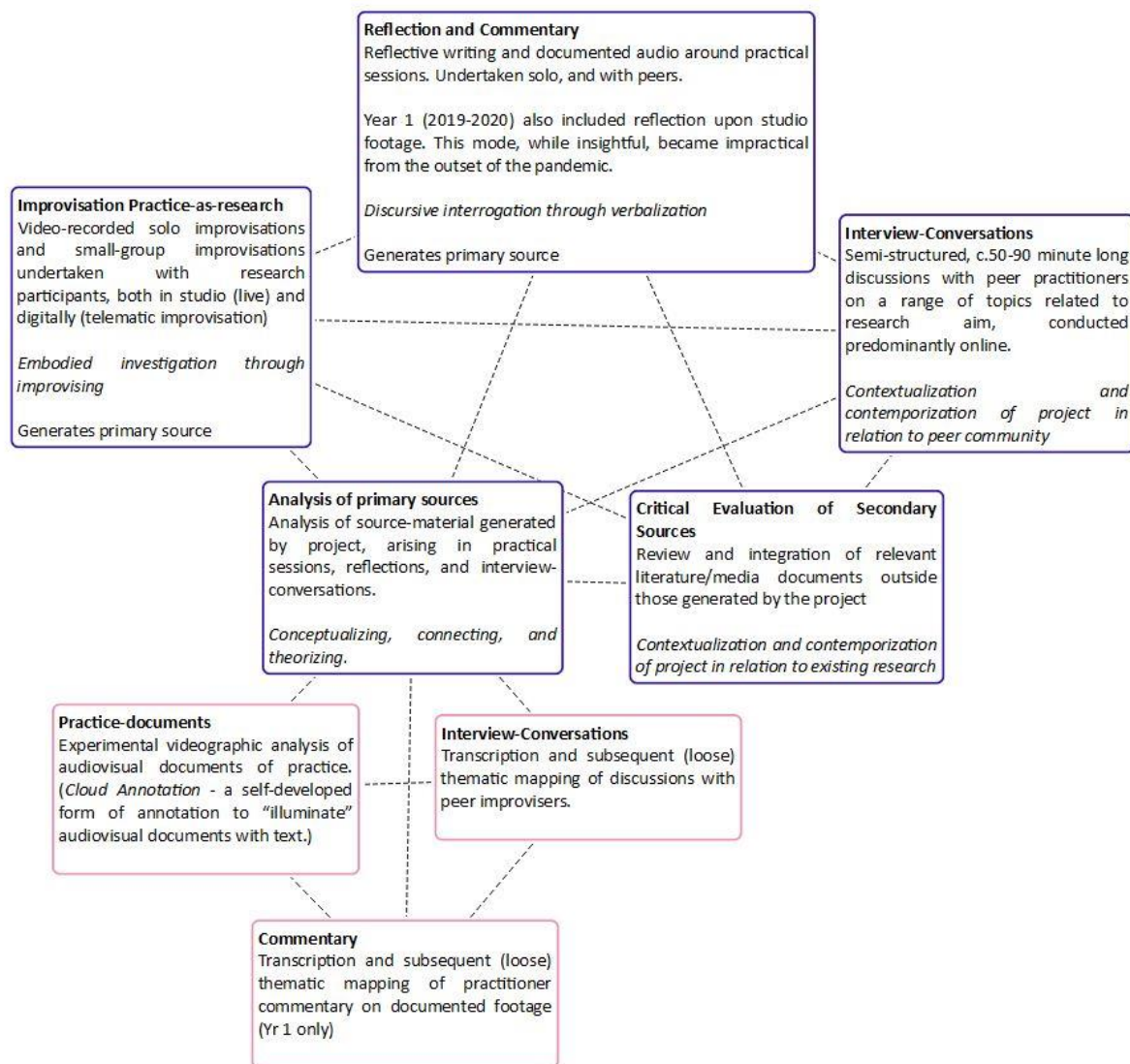


Fig 1. Network Research Model

There are two points I wish to highlight regarding my methodology. Firstly, with relation to the practical stream of this research, my practice of improvisation does not generally speaking involve prior decisions about the specific content of performances. This tendency is common in the culture of free improvisation, and therefore in both the solo and group practice presented in this thesis, the improvisations are un-scored and un-planned (the exception, owing simply to practical constraints of studio bookings and virtual meeting lengths, being the occasional prior discussion of rough duration).

Secondly, I wish to comment that the pragmatics of this research were markedly impacted by the onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic in late 2019. Having initially planned to spend three years working in studio spaces, both as a soloist, and with a cohort of peer improvisers brought into the project as research participants, from March 2020 until May 2021 I worked exclusively at home, performing in bedroom spaces, outside, and online with peers via telematic improvisation over teleconference software.<sup>2</sup> While some specific aspects of this period are addressed in Part III (see Conclusion 2), recognising that improvisation is a practice inextricably engaged with the immediacies of its situation – with performance emerging spontaneously in the “here and now” (see Part II: Immediacies) – I hold that this shift of environment, while unprecedented and unexpected, did not fundamentally undermine the essence of my improvising, its transdisciplinary characteristics, or my ability to connect immediately and perform with peers. As is discussed in Part III, my own response to the pandemic involved a direct and attentive engagement to the new conditions of my situation *as the ground* of practice. My portfolio, presented in Part II as integrated audiovisual documents, therefore includes footage recorded before the pandemic, during the UK lockdowns, and following the easing of restrictions (indicated accordingly); I do not consider these to be portfolio separable into pre-, during, and post-pandemic periods, but as a single trajectory of continuously developing, adapting, improvising practice-as-research undertaken across the last three years.

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<sup>2</sup> An exception to this were sessions I undertook at home with participant Colin Frank, with whom I (conveniently) shared accommodation during the pandemic.



### 1.3 PARTICIPANTS AND ETHICS

The cultures of improvisation performance to which my practice owes its existence are buoyed by a community of practitioners who collaborate, discuss, and make performances together. As is interrogated across Part I, the economies of free improvisation and postmodern theatre-dance improvisation differ markedly from the paradigm of single work-authorship and authorial compositional/choreographic attribution common to cultures such as western instrumental art music, gallery-based fine art, or conventional published fiction. Working as an improviser invariably entails performing and generating work spontaneously with other practitioners and sharing the labour of creativity; improvising cultures of practice therefore often demand the fundamental recognition of collectively generated and collectively attributed performance.

The focus of this research is my own practice. It is through my personal lens that the trajectory of my improvising across the last three years is being investigated, and the body of work this thesis presents has been shaped entirely by my own desires, compositional and philosophical interests, and my subjectivity as an artist-researcher (including the specific terminology I choose to describe my work, and in my position as the sole editor and annotator of audiovisual documents). However, while I perform regularly as a soloist, my practice also frequently involves improvising with others. I therefore deemed it essential from the outset of this project, in order to authentically investigate improvisation within the specific cultural context(s) in which I practice, and to faithfully represent my field within the academic arena, that I approach peer-practitioners and invite them into the studio to improvise with me on camera. My practice portfolio therefore includes solo improvisations, as well as group improvisations generated in collaboration with selected peer-improvisers.

These individuals I have come to know through practice, and through the community networks of improvisers across the UK and beyond. The participants in this project all, in one form or another, have a proximity to my practice of TFI – either through their self-identification as free improvisers, as transdisciplinary (or otherwise supradisciplinary) artists, in their similar contributions to improvised cultures of practice in sound and/or movement, or their similarity in research and aesthetic interests.

The participants in the project can be split broadly into two groups – eleven individuals who have practised with me in studio and online in collaborative improvisations which are presented in audiovisual documents in Part II (Sky Su, Skye Reynolds, David Yates, Maria Sappho, Colin Frank, Brice Catherin, Catharine Cary, Michael Schumacher, Juan-Fran Cabrera, Laurent Estoppey and Faradena Afifi), and a further twelve individuals with whom I undertook recorded interview-conversations between the period of October 2020 – July 2021, whose contributions to this research take the form of quotation and discussion (Anna Montpré, Chris Parfitt, Giorgio Convertito, Jaak Sikk, Jer Reid, Jolon Dixon, Lise Baeyerns, Simon Rose, Tim Tsang, Zoe Katsilerou, Rachel Dean, and Anke Ames). Not all of these participants are quoted directly in this thesis. However, the themes emergent in these conversations have led me to structure discussions and foreground particular aspects of my practice. It is my hope that further publication examining the breadth of these interviews might be possible in the future.

Due to the basis of my practice and this thesis in the principles of transdisciplinarity, I am not going to place a fixed identity upon these artists by ascribing to them a single performance discipline. Across the spectrum, they work in movement, in sound, with instruments, with voice, with text, and in other artistic domains (performative and otherwise). Some tend towards movement only, and others more towards sound, in improvised performance. However, as is apparent across the video documents presented in Part II, all of those who have collaborated in the studio with me have explored the blending of different modalities concurrently within their own embodiments, and across ensembles. In my engagement with these peer-artists, all ethical procedures and clearances of the University of Huddersfield have been followed. Participants have consented to their respective contributions being included in the thesis (either in audiovisual, textual format, or both).

## 2 FINDING THE WORDS: PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSDISCIPLINARITY

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### TRANSDISCIPLINARITY: IN ONE PHRASE

Both across and beyond the scope of the disciplines.

### TRANSDISCIPLINARITY: SUCCINCTLY

An approach to thinking about and ‘doing’ disciplines – understood as systems and fields of knowledge, institutionally sanctioned “for the generational transmission of intellectual practices” (Barry and Born, 2013, cited in Osborne, 2015), and in the case of the performing arts, as particular domains of artistic expression – which encourages (and privileges above other things) epistemological and practical innovation through the synthesis, blending, reconfiguring, and the rendering non-distinct of extant knowledge-systems into something different and new, which cannot be effectively described by existing (mono)disciplinary terms.

### TRANSDISCIPLINARITY: COMPARATIVELY

In relation to other supradisciplinary terminology,<sup>1</sup> transdisciplinarity can be identified by an emphasis on multireferentiality, syncretism, and holism (see Nicolescu, 2002; Craenen, 2016; Jensenius, 2012; Choi and Pak, 2006).<sup>2</sup> Whereas *multidisciplinarity* indicates the presence of multiple disciplines within a given arena and the combining of disciplinary knowledge in an additive manner (but wherein the boundaries of disciplines are not transgressed); and *interdisciplinarity* indicates interactivity and inter-informativity of more than one discipline and a permeability of disciplinary knowledge (where disciplines remain readily identifiable but are open to and affected by interaction with others);<sup>3</sup> *transdisciplinarity* can be identified as the point at which disciplinary language and schema become

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<sup>1</sup> Choi and Pak (2006) refer to “multiple disciplinary” as interactivity of disciplines where the precise means of interaction is unknown. I favour the term *supradisciplinary*, in its prefix-noun format, as an umbrella term to describe varying types of disciplinary interaction.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Jensenius (2012) has usefully schematized disciplinary approaches across a spectrum from the monodisciplinary to the transdisciplinary, where disciplines are understood as interacting with varying degrees of proximity, to the point at which they blend (yet remain largely distinct) at the interdisciplinary level, moving into total convergence at the point of transdisciplinarity.

<sup>3</sup> Melinda Buckwalter indicates that Penny Campbell’s approach to teaching improvisation across movement and sound is an example of interdisciplinarity, wherein dance and music are “integrated yet independent”. (2010, pp. 105-106)

ineffective in describing what is happening, where the wholeness of activity is recognised as a blending of existing knowledge systems and expressions in the creation of something altogether different and irreducible (not able to be explained by splitting it into parts).

Any attempt to reduce the human being by formally defining what a human being is and subjecting the human being to reductive analyses within a framework of formal structures, no matter what they are, is incompatible with the transdisciplinary vision. [...] An excess of formalism, rigidity of definitions and a claim to total objectivity, entailing the exclusion of the subject, can only have a life-negating effect. (Nicolescu, 2002, Appendix 1)

The above statement from Basarab Nicolescu, one of the prominent advocates and theorists of the transdisciplinary, perhaps ironically represents a fairly *summative* account of his influential vision of transdisciplinarity as proposed during the first *World Congress of Transdisciplinarity* in 1994. Nicolescu proposes transdisciplinarity as an ethos of thinking, structuring, and practising which is markedly antireductionist, anti-formalistic, and anti-absolutist. To this end, Peter Osborne has identified that Nicolescu's propositions on transdisciplinarity "to a significant extent discredited the concept [...] of transdisciplinarity] [...] within science studies, as tending towards a mytho-poetic discourse on the unity of nature" (2015, p. 10) – a tendency which directly battled against prevailing scientific empiricism.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding this particular arena of dismissal, the term "has been increasingly used to frame cross-disciplinary research and approaches to complex problems where solutions cannot rely on disciplinary thinking alone" (Craenen, 2016), in an era where disciplinary thinking itself has become increasingly "problematized" (Osborne, 2015). Paul Craenen claims that a move into transdisciplinary represents a distinct "sign of the times", a response to "a world of increasing complexity" in which "there is a need for perspectives that enable us to deal with the complexity around us in a meaningful way" (2016). He writes:

We have two options here: one is the denial of complexity in the search for simplistic answers or superficial flexibility, the other one is trying to enhance

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<sup>4</sup> One of the chapters in Nicolescu's *Manifesto* (2002) is entitled 'The Grandeur and Decadence of Scientism', which indicates his opposition to hard-line empiricism.

awareness of multiple dimensions of reality and integrate differing perspectives in our lives. (Craenen, 2016)

A transdisciplinary approach is one which seeks an ‘enhanced awareness’ through the acknowledgment and adoption of multiplicity as a state of being and thinking, which entails “the recognition of the existence of different levels of reality governed by different types of logic” (Nicolescu, 2002, Appendix 1). This necessitates an open approach to boundaries and to definitions (at the semantic, philosophical, discursive, and practical level) which aims both to reflect and address the “complexity around us” by *inhabiting* and *embodying* that complexity across its multifarious registers. This openness is something which characterizes my approach to talking about, writing about, and ‘doing’ improvising practice.

### TRANSDISCIPLINARITY: IN PERFORMANCE

As I lay out in *Considering the Fixed Naming of Entities* (McPherson, 2020b), demarcations of discipline within the western performing arts are intimately connected to the domain(s) of expressivity which artists employ (and are expected to employ) in performance. Notwithstanding the plethora of developments into supradisciplinary terrain across artistic fields since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (as detailed across Part I), there exist extant confluences within western cultural consciousness between certain ways of expressing on stage and certain disciplines, through the hierarchisation of which the boundaries of the individual performing arts are demarcated and reinforced. By engaging what I refer to as particular Expressive Modalities in performance – by ‘doing’ sounding, moving, singing, narrating, acting, etc. – artists are drawn into systematising and evaluative relationships with disciplines and their respective axiological frameworks. Contingent on a number of intersecting contextual factors framing performance,<sup>5</sup> in employing a particular modality, artists can be marked as ‘belonging to’ or ‘other to’ a discipline contingent on whether or not their activity conforms to and accurately performs an inferred discipline’s “favourite discourses, myths, and narratives” (Threadgold, 1996, p.281) (for substantial discussion, see McPherson, 2020b). Disciplinary terminology, therefore, when applied within

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<sup>5</sup> Including, for example, the disciplinary context of the performance event, their self-professed identity, and the naming of an event as anything like inter, trans, or multi-disciplinary.

performing arts contexts, not only indicates ‘discipline’ understood as a particular (and abstracted) field of knowledge, but also practically encompasses the relationship between discipline and the given hierarchies of expressive modalities to which they are beholden. The naming of discipline in the performing arts is involved with how a performer’s activity *looks, sounds, and feels* – what they are doing on stage – as much as with the theoretical frameworks and systematisation of knowledge which formally and discursively underpin it.

On the basis of the above, then: what does transdisciplinarity in improvisation look/sound/feel like? At its most pragmatic, the term transdisciplinary as applied to improvisation performance indicates an improviser’s performing in a way:

- (1) which is no longer solely indicative of a single discipline (to the extent that monodisciplinary language becomes insufficient to describe or articulate their activity)
- (2) which palpably transgresses received aesthetic and expressive boundaries of discipline(s)
- (3) which generates a sense of synthesis across aspects of disciplinarity (including expressive modalities, as well as certain aesthetic qualities, structures, and techniques related to disciplines) towards an expressivity which reads and is experienced as *holistic*.

Paul Craenen relates that this performance of transdisciplinarity could be identified in the experience of a hypothetical cellist discovering and exploring the performativity of movement on her instrument. He writes: “Once the musician starts adapting her playing to the choreographic possibilities of movements on her instrument, she is becoming ‘a kind of’ dancing musician or music-making dancer, while the music is transformed into a choreographed music or a sounding choreography” (2016). For Craenen’s explorer-cellist, sounding and moving become no longer separated and hierarchised aspects of *musical* performance, but are potentialized concurrently such that the terminology of music alone, or dance alone, does not efficiently describe the kind of activity that is now occurring, hence Craenen’s resorting to hybrid terms. Choreo-musicking, musicking-dancing, sounding-moving, dance-musicking, *musiktanz* (to invent some neologisms) are now taking place. He clarifies:

This is clearly not a multidisciplinary situation in which a dancer dances to a musician's music. Neither is it an interdisciplinary collaboration where the musician learns something from the dancer and applies it to her practice. What happens here is an *integration of the possibilities of sound and movement into a new approach to what a cello performance could be*. This example also reveals a condition that gets little attention in the thinking on transdisciplinary collaboration: the move from music to dance is more than 'tourism' on the part of an adventurous musician. It is a move that only that musician can make. It is beyond their discipline but starts from the awareness, sensibilities and instrumental technique that have been mastered within the context of a former discipline (playing a musical instrument). There is always a starting point. (Craenen, 2016, emphasis added)

The above indicates an important nuance of transdisciplinary thinking applied to improvisation performance which might well be overlooked – that it does not negate disciplinarity wholesale, advocate the total dissolution of (mono)disciplinarity,<sup>6</sup> or reject the premise that disciplinary knowledge is valuable or indeed present (in individuals, in collaborations, in institutions, etc.).<sup>7</sup> Instead it takes disciplinarity as a given, but strives to look beyond it. Craenen indicates that the cellist is able to step beyond the boundaries of discipline *because* of the presence of discipline within her embodied knowledge; her disciplinary experience in fact affords her a place from which to transgress.<sup>8</sup> While I certainly do not subscribe to the premise of disciplinary “mastery” as a prerequisite to transdisciplinary exploration (a cellist need not be a “master” in order to explore choreographic cello-ing any more than a dancer need be a virtuosic soloist to explore the use of voice), Craenen's comment highlights that the transdisciplinary 'beyond' is accessible to *individual* performers, and is not dependent on the assuming of structures or thinking from outwith the performer's home-discipline accessed *only* in collaboration with other artists or art-forms. In this sense, transdisciplinarity can emerge not only within collaborative practice, but also in solo practice. This recognition of the capacity for solo transdisciplinarity, in addition

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<sup>6</sup> As Osborne writes, “the reduction of Transdisciplinarity to ‘fuzziness’ of disciplinary boundaries is a serious intellectual collapse.” (Osborne, 2015, p. 15)

<sup>7</sup> Nicolescu writes that “Transdisciplinarity *complements* disciplinary approaches. It occasions the emergence of new data and new interactions from out of the encounter between disciplines. It offers us a new vision of nature and reality. Transdisciplinarity does not strive for mastery of several disciplines but aims to open all disciplines to that which they share and to that which lies beyond them.” (2002, Appendix 1, emphasis mine)

<sup>8</sup> Purely semantically, it makes sense that in order for transgression to occur, the performer must start somewhere.

to a more readily assumed group transdisciplinarity, is critical to my own improvising. As an important qualification however, I would stress that recognising and permitting the emergence of the transdisciplinary (whether in solo or group performance) requires the *conscious deprioritising* of monodisciplinarily entrenched analytical and discursive behaviours such as taxonomizing, categorising, reducing, and definitizing, on the part of the viewer, observer, researcher, writer (etc.), as well as the practitioner. A requisite to transdisciplinary thinking is the adopting of an openness to definitions and to boundary-drawing which, by necessity, errs away from the fixed naming of entities and towards murkier, less stable semantic terrain.

While, in the quotation above, Craenen refers to ‘tourism’ in the pejorative, the transdisciplinary undoubtedly invokes a spirit of travelling. It suggests a field of disciplinarity which, regardless of a performer’s given ‘starting point’, is open to be traversed. For me, this spirit of travelling also suggests an exciting variety in what a performance conceived as transdisciplinary might contain, that it need *not only* be the constant innovation of hybridised and synthesised forms of expressing, but also might include various points at which a recognisable disciplinarity coalesces, and then breaks down again, or points at which a performer explores a moment in a given disciplinary space, before departing again across a terrain of transgressions. This geographic approach to transdisciplinarity is, as Nicolescu puts it “multireferential and multidimensional” (2002), encompassing and enfolding existing disciplinarity while it also, to borrow a phrase from Donna Haraway, “unfurls and extends it” (2016, p. 58).

## TRANSDISCIPLINARITY: METAPHORICALLY (“SOUP”)

To give another perspective: it’s not the ingredients, but the soup that sits in your bowl once the ingredients have been cooked and blended. If I asked you what you had in your bowl, you probably wouldn’t point at it and say, “this is a bowl of blended tomatoes, broccoli, seasoning, stock and onions”, you would say “this is soup”. We have a word for it – “soup”. We don’t always have a word for transdisciplinary performance; I often just call it improvisation, or practice, but I might as well call it “soup”. What I don’t call it is “tomatoes, broccoli, seasoning, stock, and onions”. If I did that, I’d just be telling you what I had in the kitchen, not



what's in the bowl. I suppose you could also just say "the whole doesn't equal the sum of its parts".

Explanation of transdisciplinarity to an improvisation student during a workshop in Glasgow, UK (McPherson, March 2022)

### **TRANSDISCIPLINARITY: CAUTIONARY**

Osborne cautions that there is a danger in what he terms "re-disciplinarization via the new 'discipline' of a methodologically standardized transdisciplinarity" (2015, p. 12), a statement in the same vein as Dempster's warning there is inherent danger in becoming "interdisciplined" due to the hegemony of certain textual and epistemological registers, certain forms of knowledge-production and dissemination, which come hand in hand with certain disciplinary frames (Dempster, 2018). I consider that the effectiveness of transdisciplinarity is, at least in part, dependent on its unboundedness; its resistance to absolute categorisation and reducibility. Therefore, while I use the term explicitly in describing my practice, I remain conscious of the need to interrogate the motivation behind definitizing (even in such broad terms). Adopting the term transdisciplinary within my practice is, at least to some extent, a means of 'linguaging' my practice for the academy. I recognise the efficacy of this terminology to illuminate the complexities of experience in a pragmatic, verbalizable way, and I have found it useful in articulating my practice and its specificities within this epistemological context, considering my practice in terms of its role *in and as* knowledge. However, I also acknowledge that the term can only ever be functional and relative, and never absolute.

### **TRANSDISCIPLINARY FREE IMPROVISATION (TFI)**

In trying to find suitable terminology to describe my practice, I have stumbled into murky territory. This research has been, in many ways, driven by the process of questioning: *how to describe an activity which, while drawing recognisably on the rich history of a variety of improvising cultures of practice, is bounded by neither, fits neatly into neither, and aspires beyond both?* My response to this conundrum has been to position three equally loose terms – improvisation, free, and transdisciplinary – in proximity to each other, pursuing the affordances in their slipperiness, recognising their capacity (in their similar

insubstantiality) to inter-inform each other and reflect each other, while offering their own subtleties, nuances, and associations.

It has become apparent to me that qualities of the realms of epistemology and experience to which each one of the constituent words of TFI refers individually can also be found deeply embedded in the other two. Within the discourse of transdisciplinarity one finds calls for the liberation – the freeing – of knowledge, of bodies, of communities, from delimiting or systematising structures; for an opening of minds, institutions, and cultures towards ‘ways of knowing’ across the boundaries, delineated fields rendered porous (Osborne, 2015; Ljubec, 2015). One finds also an advocacy for the mutability of structures, for radical experimentations with non-linear and non-hierarchised modes of being and interaction (Alliez, 2015), these representing variously espoused emergent properties of improvisation (see Leybourne, 2010; Bell, 2014; Nevrein, 2018), and at various levels of community, valued aspects of improvising practice. There is a growing and tangibly contemporary understanding that improvisation is manifest as a transdisciplinary and trans-contextual process in itself, as is perhaps typified in the public agenda of the *Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice* project (ICASP) and its associated publication, the *Journal for Critical Studies in Improvisation* (“Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation,” n.d.). Furthermore, discussions of freedom find themselves entangled within histories of spontaneous (improvised) political individual and communal acts towards emancipation (Fischlin et al., 2013; Caines and Heble, 2015), towards the transformation of selves and communities as enacted through a creativity which is responsive to the now, and which carries world-shaping potential. These terms are already, to some extent, enmingled; the mutual embeddedness of these words, their conceptual closeness, and their inter-informative nature, invites them to be understood and explored in relation to each other.

On the basis of the above, each one of the constituent terms in my acronym TFI can be characterised by its similar resistance to concrete definition and by its contextual mutability. While functionally, in the context of this practice-as-research PhD, improvisation as a noun can be understood as referring to

something like ‘acts of spontaneous art-making in and as performance’, in accordance with improviser-academic Simon Rose’s comment that “improvisation is a pervasive aspect of being human, in every sphere of life” (Rose, 2017, p. 5), such a delimitation also must be understood as permeated by a wider transcontextuality of improvisation as “a social activity that cannot readily be scripted, predicted, or compelled into orthodoxy” (Caines and Heble, 2015, p.2). Notwithstanding the range of contexts in which one finds mutations of ‘transdisciplinary’,<sup>9</sup> of the three constituent terms of TFI, the adjective ‘free’ as conjoined with improvisation is perhaps most markedly nebulous. Tina Krekels summarises the problem of the term ‘free’ succinctly when she remarks “not all free improvisers and experimental musicians agree on the same ideals of freedom” (Krekels, 2019, p.10), a comment which points both to the pervasive disciplinary alignment of the term ‘free’ as being applied predominantly within music, and to a diversity of meanings within the community of practitioners.

In a necessary push beyond an institutionally pervasive and problematically Eurological (Lewis, 1996) delineation of ‘free improvisation’ – being a distancing from author-figures in the pursuit of a nominal “aesthetic autonomy” (Borgo, 2004) qualified by an absence or rejection of ‘idiom’ (per Bailey, 1993), and a lack of “founding acts” or “schema” as a referent-free mode of performance (Canonne et al., 2011) – <sup>10</sup> I hold the term ‘free’ to be a multifaceted and context-variable qualification of improvisation as applied by practitioners, which, while it may speak to elements of the above positions, is mutable and rich in associations, ranging across the emancipatory and the social, to structural and conceptual. As outlined below, my personal application of the term ‘free’, entangled with the transdisciplinary, and with acknowledgement of improvisation’s broad applications, reaches beyond the frame of music, and into supradisciplinary terrain.

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<sup>9</sup> Including for example: its exaltation as a radical and aspirational world philosophy (per Nicolsecu, 2002); as an “imaginary organism of knowledge” representing promising epistemological future for academia (Ljubec, 2015); as describing functional relationship between forms of discipline in artistic practice (Styles, 2016; Rose and Reulecke, 2022); as a methodology to “expand space” for improvisational pedagogy in music (Johansen et al., 2019); or in future-proofing leadership, both academic (Leavy, 2012) and global (Volckmann, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> For a non-linear, networked exposition on the pluralities of ‘free’ that is critically aware of race and gender, see Sappho Donohue (2020a).

In drawing together T, F, and I, I hope to effectively yet non-reductively reflect the polyvalence of improvising practice in linguistic terms. As I offered during a presentation at the Orpheus Doctoral Conference 2021:

The particular structural and conceptual openness of TFI lies not just in the self-determining nature of improvisation as a spontaneous creative process (common to all forms of improvisation), but in the ideological and performative availability of improvisers towards plural modes of expressivity which may challenge perceived disciplinary identifications (McPherson, 2020); expressivities which are themselves reflective of and informed by the vast array of physical, architectural, sonic, social and contextual aspects which constitute the performance environment. Such an openness to whatever emerges, to be expressed in whatever domain, involves a *dropping of conceptual stringency* surrounding the form and validity of certain expressions as being performed by certain individuals in a certain way dependent on an inferred disciplinarity of person or situation; a move instead towards what could be considered *action that is pertinent in that context*, represents a deprioritising of disciplinarity in favour of emergent judgements and expressivities that cyclically arise through improvisation, condition its parameters and boundaries, and subsequently change through its processes.

(McPherson, 2021c, emphasis added)

Therefore, in lieu of presenting a summative definition of TFI, and following the precedent set by Tina Krekels (2019, p. 2) as inspired by Sara Ahmed (2017), I offer a coming-together of articulations of transdisciplinary, free, and improvisation as a manifesto.<sup>11</sup> These articulations are presented in the format “as” over “is”; in a move against boundary-drawing, each word is presented via perspectives recognised as partial and descriptive, rather than definitive. This text, for me, provides the most comprehensive and informative account of my practice while retaining a necessary conceptual openness which reflects the mutability of improvisation overall. In its specific offerings of ‘improvisation’ and of ‘free’, this manifesto reaches out across the lineages of practice in sound and movement improvisation to synthesise core aspects of these cultures, drawing upon the principles of democratisation and the dehierarchisation of qualities of movement which characterised

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<sup>11</sup> This Manifesto was first shared publicly (in text form) during my installation ‘More Than One Thing’ at hcmf// 2021. It was also included, in voiceover, during my presentation *Sounding-Moving Emergence in Transdisciplinary Free Improvisation* (McPherson 2021). It is (self) published online at [www.henrymcpherson.org.uk/manifesto](http://www.henrymcpherson.org.uk/manifesto)

postmodernist dance improvisation, through the emancipatory aspirations of free improvised music with regards to communities, structures, authorship paradigms, sound-worlds, and concepts. While doing so, it looks via contemporary scholarship which recognises the transcontextuality of improvisational processes, and via the remit of the transdisciplinary, to a practice of *now* which is syncretic, which recognises the entanglement between practice and situation, and which pursues new performative horizons.

# “AS OVER IS” – A MANIFESTO OF TRANSDISCIPLINARY FREE IMPROVISATION

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Improvisation as an artistic practice of making-doing-being now; of happening in and belonging to the moment (while acknowledging this moment as being connected to others, past and future).

Improvisation as performing spontaneous, creative, expressive activity; with people, with objects, with others, and with self, in and as environment.

Improvisation as a methodology of action and awareness that is situated, responsive, reflexive, and creative.

Improvisation as not *having to have* a plan.

Free as a structural and conceptual openness to emergences; to capacities and possibilities, as well as to ideas and propositions which arise and are expressed.

Free as allowing and being allowed to have concrete as well as nonconcrete ideas and desires, and to explore them without unnecessary limitation.

Free as freeing through the imagining and articulation of personal and collective emancipations (in whatever form they might take, whether known or unknown).

Free as the giving and receiving of space and permissions.

Free as a motivation to explore both independence and interdependence.

Free as expressing and embodying possible pluralities and contradictory identities; of affording and being afforded the capacity to exist as ‘More Than One Thing’.

Free as the capacity to articulate specifics, as well as to transform.

Transdisciplinary as the gentle deprioritising of disciplinarity and its portents as defining the means and contexts of expression; while allowing that it forms part of individual practices, ongoing history, architecture, and culture in a variety of contexts.

Transdisciplinary as the practical transgression and questioning of boundaries concerning performed vocabularies of expression (modalities) held in belonging to disciplines and disciplinary axiologies.

Transdisciplinary as both the co-habiting and the blending of plural disciplines within single individuals, within groups, within performances, and within spaces.

Transdisciplinary as trans-epistemological; in the recognition of the existence of multiple kinds of knowledge and transmission, and of their capacity to inform each other, and coalesce into new forms.

Transdisciplinary as the invoking of potential knowledge arising in unnamed interstitial spaces and relations.

## BECOMING *MORE THAN ONE THING*

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I want to move, and I want to sound. I want to let my body speak as it works across vibrations of all kinds, on the floor, in the air, at the piano, in my mouth, in my hips. I want to carve shapes with my violin, to offer forms with my arm (with my back, with my ankles) as I draw sound from the string. I want to let the tightness of my shoulders feed the pressure of air across my larynx and spin out into something sculptural. I want them to look and listen more closely as I scuff my feet and drag my hands across the fabric of my trousers in the smallest way. I want to work with the magic of sounding and moving and not be drawn into boxing myself in. I want to grow and ebb and curl and transform across all dimensions. I want to be available to everything that comes.

Sitting at the intersection of two mature improvising cultures, my practice has become threaded with components of each. As I challenge both the structures and conventions in which my practice has grown, as well as my own patterns of thinking and behaving, by striving to unwind my performing history from fixed notions of discipline and salient binary concepts, acknowledging and striving to unmask, understand, and transform the structures of power by which damaging essentialisms are propagated, I move further and irretrievably into syncretic ways of improvising; I enter into moving-sounding, sounding-moving, unsure (in the best way) of which comes first.

Entangled in the rich history of practice across the rhizome of improvisers with whom I share common threads, conversations, and friendships, I am working at recognising myself as *More Than One Thing*. My improvising is showing me, always, that it is a practice of becoming, of exploring, of inhabiting complexities, pluralities, and indistinctions.

# Part I

## Precedents and Peers: A Genealogy of Practice



## 0 INTRODUCTION TO PART I

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In its most immediate context, my practice owes much to developments springing from the northern transatlantic families of postmodern theatre-dance improvisation and free improvised music from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day.<sup>1</sup> While there have been over sixty years of cross-pollination, collaboration, and experimentation drawing together these two broad strands of improvised performance, and while both share some common political, social, and structural aspects, there exist differences in practice-culture informed by established norms in disciplinised music and dance, their respective axiologies, and the particular social contexts surrounding both, which have shaped the development of these improvisational forms in subtly different ways. In order to provide suitable historical, cultural, and disciplinary context for the performance work presented in Part II of this thesis, in Part I I will outline some fundamental concepts which emerge through the history of these two cultures from the mid-century to the present. These I consider forerunners to my own practice, and it is in relation to these cultures of practice that I invite the practical component of this thesis to be considered. While I explore these cultures across four separate chapters, I write with explicit acknowledgement of their interrelatedness, their intersections, and the existence of numerous practitioners (including myself) who traverse the spaces in between them.

In Chapters 1 – 4 I identify conceptual and practical precedents to my own work by outlining contributions from specific practitioners in sound and movement improvisation, and through discussing foundational aesthetical and ethical (axiological) concerns of improvisation (and related forms) in both musical and dance cultures. The first two chapters focus on cultures of sonic practice. Chapter 1 considers the body, corporeality, and expressive kinesis as a concern within sound-centred performance, via free improvised music alongside western instrumental art music. Chapter 2 explores the entanglement between aesthetics and socio-political power structures, offering a race and gender-

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<sup>1</sup> More specifically, the particular culture of free improvisation in the British Isles, where I was born and have grown up, and the significant influence upon this culture (artistically and otherwise) from the United States, has informed the trajectory of my practice and my perspectives as presented throughout this thesis.

aware perspective on expressive kinesis employed within sonic-centric contexts. The next two chapters focus on the development of the movement improvisation culture which emerged from mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century American postmodern theatre-dance. Chapter 3 details the conceptual shifts which characterised practice in this culture, namely the move towards democratisation (in practice, in economy), distributed creative agency, and the irruption of the 'ordinary' within movement improvisation. It also addresses the role of the choreographer, and the relationship between choreography, visibility, power and control, once more from a race- and gender-aware perspective. Chapter 4 overviews the emergence of sound within movement-centred practice, including the use of voice, and considers the role of instruments as used by 'movers'.

As I note above, throughout this section I address a variety of social-political factors which have influenced the development of improvisational cultures, explicitly situating this thesis and my practice in relation to discourses on race and whiteness, gender and performativity, as well as more generally within discussions of hegemonic power structures as related to disciplinary axiologies. I undertake this as a necessary exposition of the entanglement between artistic practice and the wider human world, as well as a means of contextualising my own lived-experience and salient identities as a queer, white, European individual. In doing so I acknowledge my privileged voice as a white, Anglophone scholar, while aiming to utilise this platform as a means to address systemic inequalities within academia and in wider social consciousness through rigorous critical exposure and discursive commentary.

# 1 SOUNDING-MOVING: BODY AND CORPOREALITY IN SONIC PRACTICE-CULTURES

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## 1.1 A CORPOREAL TURN

The use of expressive, creative body movement as the site of aesthetic exploration is something which, while ubiquitous in dance practice and movement improvisation, has been historically rendered subservient to sonic expressions in free improvised music, and indeed in performed music in the western concert-music context at large.<sup>1</sup> A reiterative interest in the corporeality of instrumental performance has represented a tangible through-line in western experimental music-making, composition, and musicology in this arena since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century (Aszodi, 2017), and a variety of authors and artists have highlighted corporeality as an important aspect of recent expansion of musical praxis (see, for example, Rebstock, 2017; Torrence, 2019; also the contributions to the 149<sup>th</sup> volume of *MusikTexte*, 2016), contributing in no small part to what Marko Ciciliani has described as “music in the expanded field” (2017) and what Jennifer Walshe has influentially coined “the New Discipline” (2016). However, while the body of the musician represents an abundant site of interest in contemporary compositional approaches and performance studies, such developments must be recognised, and their discursive potential contextualised, in relation to a pervasive culture of kinetic subservience to the sonic which has historically informed the structures, the conventions and the axiology of disciplinised music across western cultures to this day. This has consequence on the development of free improvisation and its culture(s) of practice, and impacts the way my own improvising practice, as one in which the body and its expressive kinetic qualities are positioned on the horizontal with sonic expressions, relates to this culture. Paul Craenen cautions that while one can trace “increasing significance attached to the presence of the music-making and listening body in musical experience”, such “awareness of the

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<sup>1</sup> As Björn Heile comments: “It just so happens that we are normally conditioned to disregard any physical activity exercised in favor of the resulting sounds in the case of the performance of music, whereas we tend to focus on body movements in the case of theatrical actions (e.g. we say that ‘an actor crosses the stage’ rather than that she ‘creates a regular beat with her feet while walking across the stage’)” (Heile, 2013, p. 338).

corporeality inherent to musical experience” is “nascent”, and “research into the place, function, and meaning of the body in music practice” represents “above all, an attempt to disentangle the roots of a *contemporary theme with hindsight*” (2014, p. 73, emphasis mine; see also McPherson, 2020b, pp. 33-34). In order to expose the genealogy of my own practice, it feels necessary to outline not only the experiments in sounding practice by which body has been rendered tangible, but also the basis of exclusionary structures by which the body and its politicised aspects have been (and perhaps still are) obscured.

## 1.2 TWO CULTURES OF PRACTICE

In this section I will discuss the situation of expressive movement, and the explicit presence of the human body, in two cultures of sonic-centred practice: free improvised music (free improvisation), and what I am terming western instrumental art music.<sup>2</sup> I describe these as two cultures while recognising their interpolation; there is substantial blurring, overlay, even functional indistinction at times between the two; they share practitioners, histories, venues, publications, records and programmes. However, for the purposes of this chapter (and as will be addressed further in 1.4) I am going to name them separately on the basis of their relationship to the terms ‘improvisation’ and ‘composition’, and the way these cultures have constructed themselves differently around these words.

Drawing a harsh polarity between composition and improvisation is unmindful, and I would argue is not particularly useful. As Simon Fell comments correctly: “hard lines, neat categorisations and clear differentiations are almost impossible when discussing improvised music; categorisations overlap and bleed into one another in a way which reflects the protean polyvalence of improvisation praxis” (2017, p. 65). This extends into improvisation’s relationship with the term composition, and despite the propensity of some (including improvisers themselves) to define one against the other, there are numerous examples of perspectives which indicate an essential non-opposition between the two

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<sup>2</sup> This is also variously referred to as ‘Western Art Music’ (a term I use when indicating the combined traditions of Instrumental Art Music together with Opera, Lieder, Art-Song, etc.), ‘European Art Music’, ‘Euro-American Concert Music’, ‘(Contemporary) Classical Music’, ‘Music in the White Racial Frame’ (Ewell, 2020) or any permutations of such terms.

terms. One of the earliest albums released by Anthony Braxton, for example, which is titled *Alto Saxophone Improvisations* (1979) features thirteen tracks, ten of which are explicitly titled 'compositions'. The presence of so many 'compositions' within an album of 'improvisations' epitomises the lack of opposition between these terms as conceived by one of free improvisation's most influential figures.

I argue that attempting hard-line differentiation between such terms (considered as oppositional and definitive) can distract from rich and relevant conversations which can be had about the *cultures* which coalesce around these words. Much in the same spirit as George Lewis' acknowledgement of the different sociomusical contexts represented by what he terms the Eurological and Afrological streams of improvised practice, and the manner in which these condition differing discursive language and identification even when practitioners are ostensibly discussing "the same music" (1996, p. 93; for further discussion, see 1.2.2), I offer that it is the at times subtle difference in practice *culture* between western instrumental art music and free improvisation at the broadest level which impacts the manner in which 'composition' and 'improvisation' intersect in their respective discourses. The functionality of these terms is relative to each culture, and does not derive from an essentialist opposition in process.

I offer that free improvisation can be described broadly as a *culture of improvisation*; it is a coming together of economy, community, sociality, aesthetic sensibility, philosophy and practical performance strategies which privileges the idea, the concept, the process, and the ethics of improvising and its most prominent connotations ("making it up", spontaneity, unpreparedness, "spur of the moment" invention, etc.) at its very heart. By contrast, I describe western instrumental art music as a *culture of composition*, one which privileges (and historically has privileged) the idea, the iconography, the mythology, the processes, and the economy of composing at its core; this includes the predominant role of the composer-author, the composed-authored work, the work as represented by the score-document, and its repetition in performance. While both 'improvisation' and 'composition' as processes of creation (which I recognise are themselves not always distinct) are present and active

within *both* cultures, it is manifestly apparent that free improvisation has defined itself for the greater part in improvising as its *modus operandum*, to an extent that, although it also maintains a history of improvisation in a variety of guises (many of them in either markedly historical or very recent performance practice contexts), western instrumental art music has not. I will return to this distinction in part 1.4, relating it to the body and corporeality in these practices. First, however, I am going to explore the means by which body and expressive kinesis have (and have not) been afforded presence and validity in both of these cultures.

### **1.2.1 Western (Instrumental) Art Music: a culture of composition**

In the culture of Western Art Music and Western Instrumental Art Music (hereafter ‘WAM’ and ‘WIAM’), the foregrounding of body and the expressive use of movement represents a challenging of entrenched ‘sono-centricity’, confronting an embedded *hierarchy of expressive modalities* in which sounding has been historically privileged as the primary site of expressivity. I have previously outlined that there persists an extant connection between dominant western conceptions of performance discipline and such hierarchies, whereby the privileging of certain domains of expressivity (for example, ‘sounding’, ‘moving’, ‘vocalising’) in relation to others represents an entrenched aspect of delineated disciplinary axiologies within patriarchal, Eurologic-dominated practice cultures. This in turn affects processes of naming whereby individuals can be marked as *belonging to* or *other to* disciplines, and their action subsequently evaluated in relation to these disciplines, by dint of their concession to, transgression from, or subversion of these hierarchies (McPherson, 2020b). Rosenbaum comments that within musical contexts “when movement becomes too salient to ignore, it changes its role and function from an auxiliary means into an artistic end” (Rosenbaum, 2014, p. 2). A shift from what in Godøy and Leman’s topology of musicians’ gestures are described as “sound-producing”, “sound-facilitating” or “ancillary” physical gestures towards “sound-accompanying gestures” (2010, p. 13), and even towards gestures which are not defined by their relationship to sounding at all, amounts to what Rosenbaum asserts is a “manipulation of the conventions of [...] genre” which subsequently “can affect

the openness of the audience to the artistic language of the performance and to the operations taking place in it" (2014, p. 23).

Rosenbaum's characterisation of the foregrounding of body as a kind of *linguistic* divergence implies issues of intelligibility, legibility, and the fluency concerning both practitioner-community and public. Craenen identifies that the foregrounding of body also constitutes a "disappearance of the transparency of [musical] performance, a phenomenon through which the performance situation becomes audible" (2014, p. 97).<sup>3</sup> This disappearing of transparency which *reveals* the performance situation represents one motivation by which expressive movement (and corporeality more generally) have been harnessed as an explicit mechanism for invention, critique, and subversion within the music discipline historically, with renewed interest in recent decades (Shlomowitz, 2016). The very fact that foregrounding movement *is subversive* in itself within the culture of WIAM proves testament to the more general repression of the body and body-li-ness within its sono-centric contexts.

A common strategy for musically composing movement within WIAM has been the extension, fragmentation, satirising or subverting of physicality inherent in practices of (largely instrumental) music-making (Torrence, 2019; Shlomowitz, 2016). Craenen notes that this kind of instrumental theatre,<sup>4</sup> "not only opens up a new domain in art music but above all attempts to come up with ways to breathe new life into the already inherently theatrical dimension of musical performance." (Craenen, 2014, 57).<sup>5</sup> Historically, within the transatlantic avant-garde: the absence of performed instrumental sounding in Cage's *4'33"* (1952) for example, the intermedia elements of Nam Jun Paik and Charlotte Moorman's *Human Cello* (1967) , *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1969), and *Chamber Music* (1969) and

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<sup>3</sup> In an imaginary performance of Cage's *4'33"* he writes: "The pianist makes herself and the public present through her non-playing." (Craenen, 2014, p. 50)

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to reflect that the term 'theatre' is often adhered to the term 'music' when nominally musical performances foreground the performer's body in a noticeably way. Consider the wording of commentary in (Walshe, 2016; Heile, 2013; Torrence, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Walshe ends her text on the *New Discipline* by writing "Maybe what is at stake for the New Discipline is the fact that these pieces, these modes of thinking about the world, these compositional techniques - they are not "music theatre", they *\*are\** music. Or from a different perspective, maybe what is at stake is the idea that all music is music theatre." (Walshe, 2016)

later, the prop-centred theatricality of Stockhausen's *Herbstmusik* (1974), or Mauricio Kagel's music-theatrical *Sonant* (1960), *Antithese* (1962) and *Staatstheater* (1970) (to name but a few pieces) represent early and explicit exercises in focal shift where the presence and the kinesiology of the human body are invited as a site of audience attention. Replete with gendered significations, politicised potential, nominal 'pedestrianism' or inferred virtuosity, always with *physicality* and *corporeality* (even if the former qualities are not explicitly evoked), the body is asserted within the frame of music, and is consequently brought into dialogic counterpoint with the axiology of that discipline.

More contemporarily: Celeste Oram's *third person* (2014) is a recent work which involves a collaging of instrumental gestural vocabularies and 'non-musical' actions (such as drawing the string of a bow-and-arrow) which are superimposed and transferred across a trio of flute, double bass, and guitar, with additional audiovisual projection (Oram, 2014). In a similar vein, her *Toccata and Bruise* (Oram, 2016) also employs projection, this time mapped onto the curvature of a grand piano; the audiovisual display features top-down images of hands imitating familiar pianistic hand-shapes and extensions, playing out silent rhythms upon the outer body of the instrument, with which the performer moves in counterpoint between the keys and the upper body of the instrument as a percussive interface (Oram, 2016). Further examples which are very much explicit in their foregrounding of the whole body and its gestures within WIAM include the various works which exist for solo conductor, in the absence of any sounding musicians at all. Francis Schwartz' *Concerto for Solo Conductor* (2006), Thierry de Mey's *Silence Must Be!* (2002), and, earlier, *Nostalgie* (1962) by Dieter Schnebel, all present the heightened, disciplinarily and culturally charged movements of the conductor-figure, ordinarily so intimately connected to the performance of concert music, as isolated from the sonic medium.

The point of tension at which works tip beyond the overt manipulation of the physicality inherent in musical performance within WIAM and its codified gestural vocabulary, and towards something somehow other, is an interesting threshold of transgression which is a subject of reiterated investigation for composers and performers. Thierry de Mey's *Musique de Table* (1987) is a work which



features a highly stylised lexicon of precise hand movements and their resultant sounds, performed by three percussionists on three slabs of wood (table-tops).<sup>6</sup> While the paratext which indicates disciplinary framing of work is predominantly musical – the work is explicitly *scored* for “percussionists”, *notated* largely using a graphic vocabulary derived from western standard notation, and generally performed with the score in front of the performers – the piece represents in many ways a synthesis, in both instructional material and performative presentation, of affected elements of both concert music and concert dance. Instructions for the performers include illustrations and precise details concerning the position and shape of the hands, the degrees of extension of the fingers, the angle of the hand in relation to the forearm, as well as various movements involving non-sounding elements, which invite a sensitivity to the visibility and spatial aspects of each gesture.<sup>7</sup> Each gesture in the work is also named with a title evocative more of physicality than of sounding quality,<sup>8</sup> and the sound of the gestures themselves is, in fact, rarely described in the supplementary pages of the score. Despite the underlying musical disciplinarity of the score (notwithstanding the decidedly kinetic focus of its instructional pages),<sup>9</sup> the overall effect of the piece is that both the sound and the movement of the performers are privileged horizontally as sites of attention in the work. Within the hierarchy of modalities, visibility and spatiality as connected to expressive kinesis are raised alongside sounding. A more recent example in a similar vein is Hannah Hartman’s *Termite Territory* (2019), which features some discrete sections in which the performers – again, a percussion ensemble – tilt up different coloured sheets of cardboard in synchrony. The aspect of visibility is brought to the fore in this gesture of turning, which has no sonic component whatsoever. Nor does it apparently serve a conductorial

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<sup>6</sup> Videos of the piece lit in such a way as to highlight the hands, can be found here: <https://youtu.be/J91emaxq0iY> (Evan Chapman, 2013), and here: [https://youtu.be/NGF\\_QhZKx\\_s](https://youtu.be/NGF_QhZKx_s) (RePercussion Trio, 2020). Note, in the former, at 3:37, the lighting design change to illuminate the heads of the performers.

<sup>7</sup> An example being the “pass”, where one hand crosses the other (resting), and where the relative position of the hands has no bearing on the sonic event of striking, yet forms the basis of the gesture itself.

<sup>8</sup> Examples include “le chiquenaude” (the flip), “la pierre” (the stone).

<sup>9</sup> The score itself is notated using an extended version of (musical) western standard notation, set across a four-line staff, complete with rests, time-signatures (etc.) in addition to unique graphic elements representing the visual trajectory of the hands.

function; it is a defined, composed, visual-kinetic gesture within an otherwise sonic-centric work and performance context.

Theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann describes how, in what he has coined influentially as the theatre of the 'postdramatic':

[...] the body becomes the centre of attention, not as a carrier of meaning but in its physicality and gesticulation. The central theatrical sign, the actor's body, refuses to serve signification. Postdramatic theatre often presents itself as an auto-sufficient physicality, which is exhibited in its intensity, gestic potential, auratic 'presence' and internally, as well as externally, transmitted tensions. In addition there is often the presence of the deviant body, which through illness, disability or deformation deviates from the norm and causes an 'amoral' fascination, unease or fear. (Lehmann, 2006, p. 95)

The question of what affordances might arise when the musician's body, as a central musical-theatrical sign (to paraphrase Lehmann) refuses to signify in the "usual way" – as being involved primarily in the production of expressive, sonic material, mediated via instruments or voice – is central to Jennifer Torrence's comprehensive thesis *Percussion Theatre* (2019). Throughout the text, she charts her re-orientation towards the body and its presence as a rich kind of *metamorphosis* for the performer. She describes how "a shift towards a renewed awareness of the physical performance situation" contributes to:

[the creation of] conditions for a more ambiguous music practice: where sound is but a strand in a braided performance practice, where the instrument becomes but one element in relation to an artistic identity, and where what we understand training to be shifts from the acquisition of external skills to a slow process of extension in existing dispositions and abilities. (Torrence, 2019)

Torrence clearly advocates this "ambiguous music practice", and contends ultimately that such work demands a *new* kind of musician – "namely [...] a performer" – and a *new* kind of artistic practice "that is "as well as", rather than one that defines itself through exclusions and the strategies offered by "either/or"" (2019). She also evokes the spirit of the transdisciplinary by advocating a reconditioning of the concept of 'training' from external acquisition towards digestion and personal expansion, and

claims that “the task for the [contemporary] performer is to begin to recognize what types of skills and activities are necessary for building their practice and how they can best be cultivated” (2019). In this sense, she recognises the mutability and specificity of the idea of ‘success’ or ‘skill’ as being relative to each individual performer and context, an emphasis which I hold to be emblematic of a transdisciplinary approach to performance. In a similar vein, Jessica Aszodi, while, like Torrence, indicating a desire to be ‘good’,<sup>10</sup> offers a pragmatic caveat:

For those of us making forays into music that requires so much beyond what we were trained to do, shouldn’t we be getting more serious about how to get good at it (whatever that might mean)? [...] As more music-identified practitioners take up residence in the interdisciplinary space between theater, dance, and sonic arts, and as the inclusion of embodied and theatrical elements become more normalized in new music, musicians must develop new criteria for evaluating our methodologies and performances. Can we faithfully execute this music using only our musical training/thinking? Should we seek to integrate learning or methods from outside of music? Do we even have the words to accurately communicate what we’re doing here? (Aszodi, 2017)

Setting any idea of an objective perspective on ‘good’ and ‘evaluation’ aside, I would draw from the above quotation a salient point made by Aszodi, namely that within the field of what she terms *Undisciplined Music* – the burgeoning and messy “space between” that she describes – there are “an unusually high number of A) female-identified composers, B) composer-performers, and C) vocalists or movers” (2017). Aszodi proposes that this is in part due to the more welcoming nature of performance spaces aligned more closely with vocal and theatrical performance to these individuals, being more receptive and less exclusionary than institutional composition departments (which are markedly sonocentric). As such for some people of marginalised identity, as well as those actively foregrounding the body within the culture of WIAM, Aszodi’s *Undisciplined Music* offers “a place to work through ideas of gender and body politics that conventionally notated music, with its historical and patriarchal baggage, may not be well-suited to accommodate” (2017). This assertion is significant because it indicates that

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<sup>10</sup> Torrence comments, paraphrasing Mauricio Kagel, that “through this work [she] became suspicious of music pieces that threaten to turn a good musician into a bad actor” (Torrence, 2019). Occasionally, her emphasis on the idea of “good” treads close to what Ferrett has indicated is a disciplinary discourse in music “dogged by the sanctity of technical skill as the prerequisite of ability and excellence!” (Ferrett, 2018, p. 83).

an increased focus on corporeality – even the base permissibility of corporeality – afforded by the opening of WIAM to contexts, ideas, and behaviours conceived as belonging to ‘theatre’ or ‘dance’, attracts and empowers individuals whose relationship to the body involves the lived experience of societal oppression and/or abjection.

There is a direct linkage between the visibility of the body in performance, and those whose bodies are societally regulated. For female-identified composers, for example, whose contributions have long been undervalued within a canon of (largely white) compositional patriarchs, this undisciplined space is one in which an abjected feminine body is afforded presence, both conceptually and physically. What is exposed in Aszodi’s comment is the existence and impact of a dominant kind of *masculinity* within the established culture of WIAM from which Undisciplined Music diverges; there is a connection between a hegemonic form of masculinity and the exclusion and suppression of the body and corporeality within WIAM’s spaces, rhetoric, and mythology. One can consider, on this basis, how WIAM’s culture of composition (which, it bears iterating, is a dominant object within western cultural consciousness) has constructed itself in *a-corporeality*, privileging complexities of mental abstraction over physicality and fleshiness, as exposed in the very practical and performative suppression of the bodies of composer, performer, and audience alike.

The common convention of all-black ‘concert-dress’ (with the ordinary exception of soloists), for example, quite deliberately defeatures the individual bodies of musicians, rendering them backgrounded to the sonic experience;<sup>11</sup> although bodies are (of course) present on stage, the audience is directed not to focus on them and the myriad of individual identifications they possess or might suggest. The uniformity of ‘concert-black’ engenders a forced visual *ordinariness* (a concept which is problematically entangled with racial and gender hegemonies; see Chapter 3), by which the significance of body is neutralised. The rituals of silence, of sedentary directed listening, scheduled and

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<sup>11</sup> A brief but thought-provoking piece advocating the de-gendering of traditional concert dress can be found in Cote (2021). See also, 3.3. *Bodies Being Seen: Individuality, Visuality, and the Company-Dancer*.

‘proportionate’ expressions of appreciation – which Steven Kazuo Takasugi indicates are made ritual by “the presence of a human on stage” (Takasugi, 2016) – also *contain* the movements of audience members and cultivate an atmosphere of bodily and kinetic regulation (of both self and other) in service of an ephemeral, disembodied sonosphere. The composer’s body is also conventionally absent from the stage, save in the case of the few ‘virtuoso’ composer-performers who fulfil the role of ‘genius figure’ for each generation (something Reardon-Smith argues contributes to the myth of “masculine subjectivity” (Reardon-Smith, 2020, p. 12)). This absence is reinforced by the conventional workflow-process of score-creation; the creation of the physical score, its material being, and the actively physical role of the composer in making it, is defined by processes of inscription and engraving which one infers have already happened – they don’t happen on the stage, but elsewhere, before. All these factors, no doubt subtended by the often-professed intangibility of sound as a medium, constitute a framework of corporeal occlusion, and ultimately control, by which bodies are conditioned into regulated forms, functions, and expressions, by which they are rendered into the background, and at the very strongest into absence.

The systemic control of bodies is by all accounts a ready-made tool of hegemonic oppression, the efficiency of which lies largely in the rendering tacit of both its means and function, followed by the subsequent complicity of otherwise unwitting participants. I would argue that, via the construction of a culture of concert music that is fundamentally a-corporeal, and the reinforcing of this a-corporeality as unremarkable through its internalisation as convention, a discreet yet persistent form of patriarchy (which is also related to other hegemonies, as addressed in 2.1) has been able to assert itself under the guise of appropriateness and normalcy. The weight of tradition against which the corporeal turn in WIAM moves therefore, is substantial.

The ongoing task of re-incarnating the body of performer within the realm of WIAM requires, as with any form of opposition to established norms, what Ferret, Hayden and Thomas have described as necessary “illegitimacy”; this being something “unlawful, illegal, unfathered and nameless” (2018, p.

99). “The challenge,” they write, “for all thinking and playing bodies is how to purge the acerbic voice of the law-makers” (2018, p. 94). The direct and performative engagement with the *viscerality* of the body (its fleshiness, its material being, its physical presence and dynamism) within the codified disciplinary frame of music might well facilitate such a purge, but not on its own. In order for this to be in any way effective or empowering I argue it is also necessary, within the broader practice-culture and discourse, to identify and explicitly critique the stance that corporeal suppression be viewed as an unremarkable aspect of the culture’s aesthetics. The conventions of WIAM’s bodily suppression are not immune to scrutiny, and “acerbic voice of the law-makers” must be named and exposed in order for it to be combatted. While this necessitates significant effort on the part of creators, scholars, and cultural commentators within the discipline of music, it need not be considered an insurmountable challenge; as Jennifer Walshe offers hopefully at the end of her statement on the New Discipline: “Perhaps we are finally willing to accept that the bodies playing the music are part of the music, that they’re present, they’re valid and they inform our listening whether subconsciously or consciously. That it’s not too late for us to have bodies.” (Walshe, 2016)

### 1.2.2 Free (Improvised) Music: a culture of improvisation

While there are various accounts of well-known free improvising artists collaborating with practitioners from the disciplines of dance and theatre, the exploration of expressive movement was patently not an ideological focus of early free improvising musicians, whose primary interest – although certainly entangled with concerns beyond the aesthetic, such as the political, economic, and social (see Toop, 2016) – was manifestly sonic.<sup>12</sup> Seminal groups about whom much has already been written, such as Chicago’s AACM and Art Ensemble of Chicago, London’s Spontaneous Music Ensemble or AMM (see Lewis, 2004; Callingham, 2007; Lewis, E. in Straw et al. 2017, for discussion) engaged sonic improvisation as an experimental and *transgressive* musical practice. This practice aligned with what George Lewis has presciently identified as a dominant Eurological or Afrological “musical belief system”

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<sup>12</sup> I would suggest that, for the sake of brevity and following George Lewis (1996) and Edward Neeman (2014), the period from 1950 onwards be considered the loose starting point for Free Improvisation as referred to in this thesis.

(1996, 93), indicating respectively: a means of combatting restrictive norms of performance ossifying within the “transnational European-based tradition” (1996, p. 92) of concert music (in which the patriarchs of composition retain(ed) totemic status); and/or an exercise in sonic emancipation which emphasized “personal narrative and the harmonization of one’s musical personality with social environments, both actual and possible” (Borgo, 2004).

Simon Fell has coined the term *somatic improvisation* to describe the practice of first-generation British free improvising musicians,<sup>13</sup> who, he remarks, “derive[d] a great deal of their inspiration and motivation from the *physical act* of playing their instrument” (2017, p. 70, emphasis by author). However, despite Fell’s usage of ‘somatic’ (a term more readily applied in dance than in music), beyond its generative and functional relationship to sounding as mediated through the instrumental body, the extent to which these performers’ attentiveness to physicality as a motivation for sounding translates subsequently into an invitation for an audience to view the body and its movements as a site of independent aesthetic and artistic interest is *questionable*. Cultivating somatic awareness or a kinaesthetic sensibility in instrumental sounding does not, in and of itself, equate to an improviser’s explicit offering of movement as a domain of expressivity – as something to be “received as [a ‘sign’] in the sense of a manifestation or gesticulation obviously demanding attention” (Lehmann, 2006, p. 82). Derek Bailey, for instance, Fell’s prime example of a *somatic player*, without question navigated an intimate and sensitive relationship between body and instrumental performance; this was particularly relevant during the last years of his life through his diagnosis with Motor Neurone Disease, culminating in the release of *Carpal Tunnel* (2005), and also in his collaborations with Min Tanaka during the late 1970s, which brought him into explicit dialogue with the dancing body. However, despite these aspects of his practice, it would be tenuous at best to suggest that Bailey’s movements, as expressive aesthetic artefacts in and of themselves, are considered a prominent (or even a recognised) aspect of his legacy.

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<sup>13</sup> He names Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, Tony Oxley, Barry Guy, and Paul Rutherford among these (Fell, 2017, p. 70). All but Bailey and Rutherford, both deceased, are still actively performing as of the date of this thesis.

The question, per Lehmann's above assertion, of what might constitute an *obvious demand*, is a complex matter of hermeneutics. It is greatly contingent on the given situation of the performance event, and has no single, straightforward, or consistent answer. It involves the interpretation of the relationship between the improviser's action, with what could be called their performative 'idiolect', their public profile, and the entanglement of social, cultural, disciplinary, political, and otherwise contextual elements which *frame* the performance event; these at the very least *inform* and at the most *define* the expectations and permissibility of certain kinds of activity within the container of performance.

As Björn Heile notes, "it is often the framing of the spectacle that draws attention to the actions [of performers] and their discrepancy from the ostensible context" (2013, p. 346). Following Heile's comment, I would highlight some significant factors which historically have constituted the *framing* of free improvisation and consequently impact the way in which performers' bodies and movements are read. These include: free improvisation's status as a relatively liminal musical practice with low-audience numbers —<sup>14</sup> in comparison to mainstream genre musics, or even contemporary classical music (which has become a familiar feature of concert programming even for large national institutions and venues);<sup>15</sup> a resistance to genre codification; an aesthetic focus on sonic experimentation and the exploration of extended and non-conventional instrumental playing techniques; DIY instrument-building and the use of found-objects; and the privileging of spontaneous musical or sonic invention. Toop describes improvisers as "a stoic, stubborn bunch" who "despite factionalism and feuds [...] build enduring if precarious communities and support each other's efforts even when those efforts are not

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<sup>14</sup> *The Guardian* recently published a short video entitled *Free Improvisation: Still the ultimate in underground music?* (Guardian Culture, 2017), alluding to its general absence from mainstream appreciation and criticism. However, while David Toop claims that "what [free improvisers] do is so out of step with prevailing ideas of value or media excitement that it fails to register on any known scale of attention", he recalls also that there have been periods of time where various figures in free improvisation have been notably promoted on the mainstream stage — such as when AMM featured in *Vogue* magazine in 1966 (2016, p. 8). Today, Corey Mwamba's *Freeness*, an evening broadcast on BBC Radio 3 (a national broadcaster) is dedicated entirely to the performance of free jazz and free improvised music.

<sup>15</sup> Abrams-Husso notes, for example, that across the 12 established large orchestras in her 2018-19 dataset, between 17% and 50% of concerts featured contemporary music programming (2018).



to their taste” (2016, p. 8). The development of free improvisation therefore also owes much to community initiative and peer-to-peer organization at the local and international level and through close-knit networks of collaborators and supporters, as well as to the use of and promotion through small hospitality and live music venues such as bars, clubs, and cafes.<sup>16</sup>

Of this non-exhaustive set of factors, there are two which are particularly significant when considering body and expressive movement within free improvising contexts. Firstly, the ideological primacy of sonic experimentation and its relationship to the bodies of performers and instruments; this is because it is generally speaking the movements of the improviser, informed by experience, mediated through the tactile interfacing of the instrumental and human body, which facilitate vibration to create audible expressions.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, the development of free improvisation in relation to the dual sociomusical contexts of free jazz and European experimental music within the WIAM tradition (aligning loosely with the Afrological-Eurological distinctions Lewis has identified) and their politics of body, as influencing the kinesiology of performers. Both of these factors invite the interrogation of race and gender politics upon the impression of the human body, which will be addressed in Chapter 2. Before returning to the relationship between human and instrumental bodies in more detail, however, I want to clarify some terminology and, on the basis of the abovementioned aspects of framing, highlight the slipperiness of the relationship between free improvisation and free jazz.

### **1.2.3 On Terminology: Free Jazz ≈ Free Improvisation**

In relation to free improvisation, free jazz can be considered at once a distinct, a related, or at times even an indistinguishable practice; for this reason, I maintain that to attempt delineation in a hard-line manner is not a useful exercise. The reality is that, for some seventy-plus years, individuals who one

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<sup>16</sup> Through subsequent decades such small venues have been maintained as physical and spiritual homes of free improvisation. The Vortex, and Café Oto in London represent two prominent examples which remain almost synonymous with the British experimental free improvisation and free jazz scene. Elsewhere in the UK, free improvised performance is promoted regularly at low-capacity venues such as Old Hairdressers (Glasgow), Fuel Café (Manchester), The Golden Lion (Todmorden), Minerva Works and Centrala (Birmingham), among others.

<sup>17</sup> Mashino and Seye do comment that: “Although sounds are produced by body movement, some performers may concentrate only on the sound, not on the body movements through which it is generated.” (2020, p. 33) While this statement is true, it does not negate the entanglement between sound and body; it only indicates that it is not at the foreground for some performers.

might name as ‘free improvisers’ have shared spaces, platforms, friendships, records, and academic articles with those who might more readily self-identify or be named as ‘free jazz’ musicians.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, performers might identify with either term, both, or none, dependent on the given context. A recent broadcast on BBC Radio 3’s *Late Junction* in January 2022 (“BBC Radio 3 - Late Junction, Ben LaMar Gay’s mixtape,” 2022), for example, featured a duo performance by myself and collaborator Brice Catherin. Though neither of us would self-identify explicitly or consistently as ‘free jazz’ musicians, it was by this term that presenter Verity Sharp introduced our performance, and as such it was in relation to this (rather than ‘free improvisation’) that audiences were invited to listen to our work. Research participant and free improvisation scholar Maria Sappho sums this issue up succinctly in the following:

You know, when I'm working with Raymond [MacDonald], we've completely gone entirely ridiculously free in many aspects. And there are no boundaries. And all of the work that we do is absolutely ridiculous Because of that, but it's context based. But then again, he plays a lot of jazz and so when I play with him I play jazz too, yeah. I respond to what I'm with. (Maria Sappho, interviewed by McPherson, October 2020)

Tina Krekels asserts that free jazz and free improvisation are terminologically close, representing arenas which throughout time have mingled, and that the artistic practices of both fields overlap. However, she distinguishes, drawing on Lewis (1996), that the former term is “deeply entangled with the Black Power Movement” and that more overtly than the term free improvisation, carries this particular, racialised “political-activist meaning” (2019, pp. 11-12). She also highlights David Toop’s perspective that free improvisation emerged later than (and one can infer also to some degree *out of*) free jazz (Toop, 2016, p. 14). Lewis proposes the Afrological and Eurological models of musical “belief systems” as a means of making explicit divergent perspectives on key issues impacted by different social and

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<sup>18</sup> It’s noticeable that many prominent figures in British free improvisation – for example, Steve Beresford, Derek Bailey, Maggie Nicols, Evan Parker (et al.) – populate McKay’s *Cultural Politics of Jazz in Modern Britain* (2005), without any delineation of their being *either* jazz *or* free improvising musicians. A brief search of the hashtag #freeimprovisation on Instagram is also revealing, as it is frequently paired with both the hashtags #freejazz and #experimentalmusic.

cultural experiences informed by experiences of race. In doing so Lewis reveals the need for his specific terminology – although the music might be essentially ‘the same’, the context, including the words by which performers articulate their experience, identify community, and generate culture, is different.

Lewis’ terms do not set up a polarity between free jazz *versus* free improvisation, and in fact he highlights “the reality of transcultural and transracial communication among improvisers” which makes any attempt to *essentialise* either term on the basis of race erroneous. However, he does make clear that the “ethnic or racial component of a historically emergent sociomusical group must be faced squarely and honestly” (1996, p. 93). Dawn-Smith similarly comments that “neither free jazz nor free improvisation existed in a vacuum; neither, however, were they completely interchangeable. It is important to recognize that the hybridity and mixing of the practices did not obscure the differences, especially in regard to the intersection of aesthetic freedom with race and class” (2014, p. 264).

The term free jazz pragmatically conjures a lineage of practitioners whose artistic invention is deeply informed by the specific experience of the ongoing African American struggle for civil rights and liberties; as such its application to performance contexts and practitioners can and should bring them into relation with this broad ‘sociomusical’ culture, its history, and its politics. But to suggest that all practice named as free jazz might also be named free improvisation by all its practitioners in all contexts, or vice versa, would simply be incorrect. In this thesis, particularly when discussing practice in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century context and examining the body-politics of gender and race in the section below, the context of free jazz is more neatly demarcated for clarity; however, I maintain an acknowledgment of its confluence with free improvisation at large – it is, perhaps counterintuitively, *both* a parallel stream and a tributary of this practice.

Because of this double-nature, the names of free jazz musicians and free improvisers sit side-by-side throughout this thesis. For me, the slipperiness and ‘not-quite-straightforward-ness’ of the relationship between free jazz and free improvisation points directly to the heart of this culture’s playful troubling of dualistic thinking – that is, its destabilising of ways of conceiving of entities and concepts founded on

neat delineations and either/or (see also *Part II: Non-Dualistic Perspective*). Free improvisation is a culture of practice whose boundaries are shaped intimately via contestations, by context-specificities and singularities of situation, community, and person, by interstices, and non-exclusive relationships. It must therefore be researched and discussed with an acknowledgement of its contextual mutability and a necessarily open approach to definitions and to naming.

### 1.3 INSTRUMENTAL BODIES: INTERACTIONS, FUNCTIONS, IDENTITIES

The kinesiology of instrumentalists is intimately linked with performing acts of sounding, with using the human body with-through-on-against the bodies of instruments to generate sonic expressions.<sup>19</sup> As such, for an instrumental performer, any extension of expressions from the sonic into the kinetic involves a pragmatic recontextualization of the relationship between these bodies. In a practice context such as free improvisation which has not only privileged the sonic as the primary performance arena but in which *experimentation* in the sonic represents a substantial aspect of its framing, the movements involved in the sounding act have a particular gravity by dint of their functionality in sonic production, and are imbued with a kind of axiological ‘responsibility’ to sound. If sonic experimentation is of primacy, it follows that sound-producing movement should ordinarily best facilitate its processes.

Sonic experimentation using instruments (whether improvised or composed) is usually complicit with a degree of deviation from kinetic, as well as acoustic, norms. So-named ‘extended techniques’ of instrumental performance, after all, are categorised by their divergent kinetics and tactility – the abnormal grip, hold, strike, interfacing, contact, muscle-contraction, pressure, weight, speed, direction (etc.) – as much as the unorthodoxy of their sounds. The use of objects and materials inserted and wedged into, rested or clamped upon, dragged across or placed within instruments as a component of such techniques is, in essence, a manipulation of the instrument by which the shape, position, size,

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<sup>19</sup> François Sarhan goes as far as to say that: “The relation instrumentalists have with their physical body is of a particular kind. Their body is substituted by the instrument, at least during the performance.” (Sarhan, 2016). Stene comments that “especially in fields carrying long instrumental traditions for their canonical instruments, the way in which musicians approach their instrument is a highly evolved and defined practice, which is to say it is a practice that often precludes other ways of thinking.” (Stene, 2015)

complexity and resonance of its *body* is changed. Perhaps most acute in the case of disassembly, the spatial dimensions of the instrumental body can be altered. In so doing its visuality, as much as its materiality, can be asserted just as much as in the case of the human performer's employing of visually significant kinetic expressions. At a fundamental level, the precedent for expanded corporeality is seeded in the very idea of 'extension'. Håkon Stene describes how performers working across the contemporary-experimental musical continuum undergo "continuous re-orientation", often at the work-specific level, of instrumental "technique", constituting an "adaptability to heterogenous settings" which overtly transgresses established norms of kinetic instrument-performer body-body relationships. He notes that "in particular, percussionists performing so-called multi-percussion setups, that is, collections of instruments varying from work to work" foster "the ability to recalibrate [...] technique and movement to these setups" as a valuable and necessary skill (Stene, 2015).

As is clear from composers' harnessing of movement as experimentation and subversion within the domain of WIAM (see 1.2.1), the moment at which the physical movement of an instrumentalist transgresses sonic functionality to become a kinetic-aesthetic artefact represents a rich and at times challenging threshold for instrumental practice. Torrence writes that the contemporary-experimental musician's "displa[cing] their instrument as the core of their artistic practice" indicates that "fundamental systems are being shook" (Torrence, 2019). She points here to the dominant linkage by which culturally embedded ideas of instrument and of instrumental musician are co-definitive; both are predicated on some understanding of their function in relation to the other in the performance of music, and both can be named accordingly. Changing the relationship between human and instrumental bodies involves the reconsideration of both bodies' functionality, identity, and their ordinary modes of interaction.

Torrence's suggestion of displacement is articulated as process (as a developing of praxis) rather than an isolated event; as mentioned above, she describes it in terms of a reconfiguration of musical (and disciplinary) identity towards a new 'performer'. But if one considers how this might manifest at a very

explicit and performative level, for an instrumentalist to ‘detach’ themselves entirely from their instrument during the course of a performance – to put it down, to walk away, or to appear without instrument at all – in a manner which is not consistent with contextual norms of instrumental practice (such as a percussionist changing stations in an orchestral concert, a saxophonist switching from tenor to alto instrument, or the changing of positions between sets during a gig), is undoubtedly significant. In the first two cases (putting down, walking away), this act can both foreground the human body of the performer and, through the separation of human and instrumental bodies, intensify the significance of the body-to-body relationship between performer and instrument; the observer is invited to view the bodies in a new configuration which suggests something more, something different, or something other than an ‘ordinary’ sounding relationship. In the third case (appearing without instrument), the instrumentalist’s identity, as bounded in the performative relationship to instrument-objects, is troubled at its core.

The in-performance detachment or estrangement of the instrument from the musician (as the one who sounds upon-through-with-against them) could well be read, in the Heideggerian sense, as a breaking of the *tool* (Heidegger et al., 2008); a process by which the materiality of the instrument moves from a state of invisibility to visibility (what Heidegger calls ‘Conspicuousness’ (Hale, 2013)), by dint of its lack-of-sounding or no-longer-sounding nature. This constitutes an aspect of what Craenen refers to as the performance situation being revealed (2014, p. 97), and is the tacit underpinning of pieces such as *4’33’’* (Cage, 1968),<sup>20</sup> or Erwin Schulhoff’s *In Futurum* (1919) (the score for this earlier work being somewhat more playful than its successor). However, as Kevin von Duuglas-Ittu asserts, following Harman’s now well-known propositions in *Object Oriented Ontology* (Harman, 2018), “objects regularly become visible *through* their performability”, and not only through their ‘breaking’ (von Duuglas-Ittu, 2009). He writes that:

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<sup>20</sup> Kyle Gann summarises Cage’s most famous work, on the basis of Cage’s own writings, as “an act of framing” (2010, p. 11).

We do not only notice our body when it breaks down. In fact, and dancer knows [sic], inhabits with great visibility its own body, increment by increment, capacity by capacity, in such a way that the dance itself becomes visible, as an excellence. (Duuglas-Ittu, 2009)

That an instrument might be ‘visible’ in its performability (and not only in its ‘breakage’ in the absence of sounding) is evidenced by the array of examples in experimental and improvised music in which the instrument is engaged with viscerally and often non-normatively while there remains an understanding that this neither undermines nor indicates divergence from its ordinary role *as an instrument* – that is to say, as a body which, via the interaction of the performer, generates audible artefacts which are contextually privileged as sites of expression.<sup>21</sup> While specific qualities, such as the materiality of instruments, can be particularly foregrounded in these experimental contexts by non-conventional performative engagement (as well as at the discursive level – in paratextual writing, programme notes, post-performance discussion, etc.) the functional identity of instrumental bodies can in fact remain more or less stable. As noted above, the culture of free improvisation, as well as experimental concert music, has included widespread performance on DIY instruments and found objects. The contextualising of these unconventional instrument-materials within the frame of free improvisation as an experimental sonic performance practice affords them the functionality of instrument even if they might not ordinarily be named as such, or be made or manufactured for this utility. Within such contexts, performing on-with-through a hand-blender, a suspension coil, rubber piping or a set of playing cards is not actually a particularly unusual activity.

Where the presence of unsounding instruments often demands acknowledgement (particularly within the disciplinarily charged architecture of the concert hall, the bar-stage, or similarly delineated musical space), the total absence of instrumental bodies, but the nominal presence of instrumental ‘musicians’ in a musical context, offers equally fertile ground for discussion. In particular, one can consider how the

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<sup>21</sup> See for example, usage of instruments in: Steen-Andersen, 2018 & 2019; The Vape, 2021 & 2022; Frank, 2019; Rowe, 2012; Muzica de Vest, 2017; Hinds et al., 2018; Haller and Ensemble Modern, 2020, all of which represent instrumental musical contexts. Consider also the performances of Cornelius Cardew’s Scratch Orchestra, or the instrument making practices of Iner Souster and Ken Butler, for example, which also involve divergence in technique/construction while the conventional role of the instrument is maintained.

framing of the event or work conditions how one might or might not infer the identity of instrumental musician even in the absence of instrumental bodies. Consider the following: Trisha Brown's *Accumulation* (1971) is an additive work for the body with resonances of early minimalist compositions.<sup>22</sup> Its repetitive, rhythmic quality lends it a distinct sense of musicality in performance. It has a score, and it is performed on stages. However, its roots lie, according to Brown, in the personal *kinaesthetic* experience of the performer; it is grounded conceptually (on the part of the author) and experientially (on the part of the performer) in the counterpoints and polyrhythms as *felt* in the "kinaesthetic system" of the body, rather than in a more abstracted phraseology of punctuated musical time. Its essence, if we accept Brown's intentions, is kinesiological, rather than aural.<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion's *Both Sitting Duet* (2003) is a work for the body executed in similar fashion to *Accumulation* (although seated). It involves a vocabulary of stylised and direct movements which are rhythmically punctuative, additive, and repetitive. It also has a score, and it is performed on stages. However, the work emerges conceptually, according to Burrows (festivalpanorama, 2015), from the discipline of music; despite its being ostensibly a 'movement piece' with no instruments, it is in relation to the axiology of music, and not dance, that we are invited to experience the work. While one could, in the spirit of interdisciplinarity, reasonably apply an analytical lens derived from either music or dance to examine either work, the disciplinary specificity of terminology used to describe the works by their authors, we understand, forms an important aspect of their framing. It is this paratextual language, perhaps more than the kinetic nature of the content of these pieces, which informs our understanding of them as works, and which suggests therefore a recognisable identity marker for the performer.

While the contemporary reassessment of fundamental ontology of objects (including instruments) and their affordances (per Harman, 2018) represents a useful challenge to anthropocentric practices of

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<sup>22</sup> Glass's *Two Pages* (1969), *Music in Fifths* (1969), Reich's *New York Counterpoint* (1985) and *Electric Counterpoint* (1987) in particular come to mind.

<sup>23</sup> On *Accumulation*, Brown writes: "One simple gesture is presented. This gesture is repeated until it is thoroughly integrated into my kinesthetic system. Gesture 2 is then added. Gesture 1 and 2 are repeated until they are assimilated, then Gesture 3 is added. I continue adding gestures until my system can support no further additions. The first 4 gestures occur on the first 4 beats. The subsequent gestures are packed into that one measure." (TBDC :: *Accumulation* (1971), n.d.)



both thought and writing, it bears acknowledgement that a dominant aspect of the hermeneutics of performance is the often-subtle (at times unconscious) inference of individuals' identities – disciplinary, gendered, racial, political, etc. – traced in some part in the gestic activity of human bodies (hence the palpable voracity with which contemporary artists seek new identitarian language to describe themselves). The “inextricability of technique, identity, and place” (Spatz, 2021) both as *embodied* and as *read* forms a fundamental aspect of practices involving the human performer. How one conceives of and describes this *who* can greatly impact how performative activity such as the transgression from sonic into kinetic expressivity is ‘read’, interpreted, and critically then, positioned within any extant axiology – within the ethical and aesthetical value frameworks to which performance within a given genre, style, discipline, or social context is held in relation.

Torrence, who I refer to again because she is a skilful and articulate author on the contemporary body-instrument relationship in experimental music, accounts that while she encourages her collaborators to “start with the idea of no instrument”, the recently coined term *post-instrumental* does not,<sup>24</sup> for her, indicate a practice that is essentially without or beyond instrument entirely; in fact, she actively rejects this. She writes that:

much of the work [in the Percussion Theatre project] is hyper-instrumental in the sense that it is self-consciously aware of a unique bodily relation to the instrument. This is not music without instrument. Even when it is absent, the instrument haunts the work. What is at stake in post-instrumental music is not the end of the instrument but rather in questioning what constitutes an instrument and what constitutes the musician's relation to it. It is not a rupture but a decision to reinterpret what an instrument is and how it relates to a musical practice. (2019)

For Torrence, we are to understand that the lifelong practice of instrument-oriented sounding conditions the body so essentially that the shadow of the instrument (whatever it is) is always there. The idea of this instrumental omnipresence is echoed in comments by James Andean on the work of his Interdisciplinary Improvisation Research Group, who writes that: “In the same action undertaken by

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<sup>24</sup> Torrence attributes this term to Håkon Stene in *This is not a drum* (2014).

different performers, one catches a glimpse, at least some of the time, of an increased focus on that performance action as theatre, or as sonic art, or as performance art, or dance, and so on, possibly revealing, to the attentive spectator, something of that performer's background" (2014, p. 178). In Torrence's text, this instrumental shadow reads not as a handicap, but rather an affordance by which established body-to-body relationships and norms of the discipline can be revealed discursively and explored artistically in performance.

However, while on the one hand, to be named as 'musician' (or 'pianist', or 'percussionist', etc.) in the absence of instrument might well afford a new and exciting creative space in which the individual's 'musician-li-ness' can be explored in other non-instrument-centric aspects of performance, as Torrence suggests, it also risks an *othering*. Extending from Ramsay Burt's assertion that "marking individuals according to a recognizable identity can reduce their interests to a particular identity politics" (2009, p. 6), I have proposed that in practice such as my own, in which individuals might navigate an array of different expressive modalities (sounding, moving, vocalising, etc.), and as such in which the parameters for invention encompass a wide range of potential embodiments, interactions and relationships, then the imputing of a fixed disciplinary identity (musician, dancer, painter, etc.) upon an individual may functionally delegitimise activity that transgresses this normative marker (McPherson, 2020b). As a 'musician', for me to express in the kinetic, the verbal, or the visual domains may be unfairly assessed as less skilful, less effective, aesthetically less valuable than were I to be named as 'dancer' or 'actor', *even if the substance of my articulations – the sonic, kinetic, and visual artefacts of the body – is virtually or actually indistinguishable* from that of others who might carry such markers.

As we expand into the interstitial spaces between disciplines and recognise the rich potential therein, and critically as we seek new terminology to describe what it is that we are doing– be this *post-instrumentalism*, *post-percussion*, *New Disciplinary*, etc. – I would challenge that it is vital that we analyse the applicability, and the normative-politics of our disciplinarily bounded language, and explore the possibility that in generating spaces in which the boundedness of discipline and expressive modality

might be consciously, if only momentarily, disentangled (not only at the practical but at the textual and conceptual level), we might encounter a rich field of unnamed hermeneutic and discursive potential.<sup>25</sup>

#### 1.4 CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND THE BODY: AUTHOR, WORK, AND INVISIBLE BODIES

Having largely discussed the practices of WIAM and free improvisation side-by-side, here it feels necessary to address some significant differences, and how these impact the position of the body. While these cultures have some overlay in terms of common practitioners, venues, literature and, at various times, shared aspects of aesthetic focus – sonic experimentation being an obvious one – they do also differ in a number of ways. Firstly, methodologically (in how it is the ‘art’ generally comes to be) which is certainly linked to the temporality of its creation (a well-cited though not uncontended difference) but also involves essential differences in the established culture of authorship, and the historical prevalence of collaborative generation within free improvisation in particular. Secondly, discursively (in *who* has been documenting, criticising, and talking about the practices, and in what contexts). And thirdly, economically (in terms of the forms of institutional support, class-structures, norms of authorial attribution, and different media of recording and dissemination by which they have been shaped). Critically, these divergences impact the way in which the body and expressive kinesiology have been afforded presence or rendered absent in each culture’s performance practice.

As has already been outlined, the body has represented a critical site of interest in WIAM for some time. An important nuance to this, however, is that the manner in which movement has been conceived of and incorporated into such music has been for the greater part choreographic in a very conventional sense – the movement has been *composed*. Since the foundational work of Kagel, Stockhausen, Schnebel et al., the predominant method of writing movement in concert has been to treat it as a compositional parameter; as an aspect of performance which, having been recognised firstly to some degree as inherent in the performance of music, and secondly as something of aesthetic interest and

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<sup>25</sup> For further discussion on naming and disciplinarity, see *Considering the Fixed Naming of Entities* (McPherson, 2020b).

potential, is subsequently *utilised* (it is made tool), and can be laid down in notation, treated to some degree as fixable material. In its composition, it can be harnessed, made consistent and largely predictable – movement in concert works can be, for want of a better word, *tamed*. One could speculate very pragmatically that this might be as a result of a lesser familiarity on the part of composers with the realm of the expressive-kinetic (as opposed to the sonic); although some prominent composers I have previously mentioned also had lived experience of or proximity to dance practice, it would be a stretch to suggest that music’s patrilineal composition pedagogy in Western conservatories and universities through the last century or so has, at large, embraced the experience of expressive movement as a requisite component of its teaching. One could also consider the suspicion on the part of movement-inclined composers that musicians (as nominally ‘non-trained’ movers) might need specific and precise direction in how to move their bodies in a ‘non-sounding’ capacity; I recall, as an undergraduate composition student, this particular criticism being levied in numerous workshops with visiting ensembles, whose members often called for clarification of the motivation behind, and the specific execution of, movements. Also of relevance is the modernist-descendent compositional ideology which privileges the exertion of precise control over musical material, and consequently (whether movement is explicitly composed or not) over the bodies and movements of instrumentalists. This school of composition, whose roots stretch back over some seventy years, has engendered a remarkable complexity in scoring by which the minutiae of diverse parameters are meticulously laid down.<sup>26</sup> Paul Craenen links the development of this kind of scored virtuosity in instrumental music from the modernist period onwards explicitly to the dominating figure of compositional authority:

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<sup>26</sup> Consider: Brian Ferneyhough’s *String Quartet No.2* (1979/80), Michael Finnissy’s *English Country Tunes* (1977), Aaron Cassidy’s *I, purples, spat blood, laugh of beautiful lips* (2003-6), Dan Tramte’s *degradative interference* (2014), Rebecca Saunders’ *Cerulean* (2010/11), Liza Lim’s *Voodoo Child* (1989), Chris Dench’s *Severance* (1994), Mark Andre’s *durch* (2004/5), Saman Samadi’s *Ahunavaiti Gāthā No.1, Stanzas I, III and III* (2018/19), Chaya Czernowin’s *Sahaf* (1995), Mary Bellamy’s *beneath an ocean of air* (2017), Alwynne Pritchard’s *Don’t touch me, you don’t know where I’ve been* (2008), and Jason Thorpe Buchanan’s *all-forgetting-is-retrieval* (2019), as just a few examples of the meticulous parametrisation and inscription of performing aspects.

Postwar virtuosity is an ability that no longer belongs to the performing body. In modernist style, virtuosity is fundamentally composed. It is a product of a musical system that generally puts music into practice from the top down. (2014, p. 129)

He offers further that, in such a compositional practice, “instrumental virtuosity becomes a compositional concept or a strategy with which the composing body *forces* access to the performing body” (2014, p. 130, emphasis mine); the moving body becomes the subject of a notated framework of control exercised by the work’s composer-author.

This is one of the arenas in which free improvisation diverges from WIAM, where, by dint of a difference in functional and conceptual nuance surrounding composition, the idea of authorship, the ‘work’ and its documentation, a different relationship to body, movement, and control emerges. The culture of WIAM has historically defined, and one could argue still does largely define, its composed *works* in the fixing of a variety of performable parameters (be they musical, visual, theatrical, or otherwise) into a repeatable score-document which is in some way *recognisable in its reiteration* (be this structurally or temporally, harmonically, texturally, or in the inclusion of certain sonic objects or materials, etc.). In this recognition, the work is nameable as a work (a composition) and attributable, ordinarily to a single person. This idea of the work is, in part, a question of economics. In the capitalocene, the identification and attribution of *works* to individual composers serves as a recognition of compositional and cognitive labour, of intellectual property, and as an income generator; the ownership of the work-creation represents a form of cultural and economic capital. However it is also a question of disciplinary mythology; this culture holds close to its chest a canon of individual composers whose works and lives can be positioned proximally into lineages of harmonic, structural, ideological, and pedagogic transmission.<sup>27</sup> These lineages have been historically explicitly patriarchal, and one can reasonably assess that the privileging of *works* and their attributions forms at least part of the long-standing

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<sup>27</sup> I recall how, with glee, my first composition teacher at university commented on how I should feel “privileged to be one of Igor Stravinsky’s great-grand-children”, referring to the compositional ‘pedigree’ with which I was now apparently endowed.

process which have maintained this specific cultural hegemony. The idea of the art-work and the work-author reinforce each other within WIAM's cultural consciousness.

Divergence from these norms of the author-work relationship invariably precipitates: ideologically charged conversations concerning the significance of author-identification (including the position that advocating non-attribution indicates or stems from forms of economic or social privilege); questions as to the desire (or lack thereof) on the part of the nominal 'composer' to control the outcome (the interpretation of the score) of performance; and the evaluation of the legitimacy of the given artistic creation in relation to a work-centred axiology which has matured over centuries, and which consequently has very deep roots. While the disruption and subversion of this conception-attribution-ownership paradigm represents a tangibly contemporary trend in this musical culture,<sup>28</sup> this must be acknowledged, just as in the case of the renewed interest of composers in movement and the body, as an altogether *recent* process, and not a universal one. In comparison to the broad historical and global reach of the system against which it positions itself, this countercultural zeitgeist has not yet reached maturity.

Free improvisation has not subscribed in quite the same way to the privileging of the authored and interpreted score-work as the *dominant* process of its economy and ideology. In practice, it is the distributed creativity of group improvisation (MacDonald and Wilson, 2020, p. 36), and the distributed ownership of the art-product that is generated spontaneously in performance which have been salient. This is not at all to suggest that titled *works* or the idea of authoring do not exist within the culture of free improvisation, but the nuance is different. Consider, for example, John Steven's *Click Piece* and *Sustained Piece*, George Lewis' *Voyager* (1987), Pauline Oliveros' *Sonic Meditations* (1974), or the recent *Foutraque* (2021) from my own improvisation trio the Noisebringers, all of which are titled, attributed, and subsequently are interpreted by musicians (including those other than the authors) in

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<sup>28</sup> This is evidently manifest, since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, in the turn towards collaboratively generated and co-created works, inter-/poly-/multi-/trans-disciplinarity, the proliferation of graphic or otherwise 'open' notations, and critically in the re-evaluation and re-insertion of improvisational praxis into the WIAM framework.

performance. The different nature of these pieces as *works*, I offer, is that they are infused methodologically and therefore hermeneutically with free improvisation's ethics of practice which derive from its nature as a culture of improvisation; it is the spontaneous invention of performers which is privileged as the primary site of aesthetic attention, and in which the agency of the live performer, rather than the conceptual voice or singular identity of the composer-author (as is the case in cultures of composition), is generally foregrounded.<sup>29</sup>

Stevens' *Click Piece* and *Sustained Piece*, according to Martin Davidson, emerge directly out of his improvisation methodology, later codified and named (but not dated) for the purposes of pedagogy. For Davidson, they represent "radical and original concepts that became commonly used in performance and workshop situations by both himself and countless others" (Davidson, 1996). An essential aspect of Oliveros' *Sonic Meditations* (the immense influence of which I cannot hope to summarise here) is neither to prescribe nor describe (to borrow from Kanno's delineation of experimental notations, [Kanno, 2007]) but to enable live creation; they provide stimulus, ostensibly accessible to all, which fosters individual and group creativity through text-prompts framed as invitation, rather than instruction. *Foutraque*, with which I am understandably most familiar, is perhaps the most instruction-heavy of these: it has a two-page time-score with an advised duration of 45 minutes, indicating means by which performers can self-select to play at a certain point, dependent on their self-identification with social-political identities prompted by the score.<sup>30</sup> Concurrent with these shifting 'identity' sections (which essentially constitute an orchestration which is person, rather than instrument, centred), certain 'content' prompts are included, such as "a small dance on your own", or "imitate someone in the orchestra". Critically, having been commissioned and first performed by the *Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra* whose methodology famously includes "follow the score but do whatever you want" (Raymond MacDonald, personal communication with McPherson, 2021),

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<sup>29</sup> It's worth noting that *Foutraque*, as a work, was also collectively generated by three people.

<sup>30</sup> For example, there is a section in which anyone who identifies as a "mother" is invited to play for a number of minutes.

*Foutraque* is conceived with the *expectation* that performers will diverge, ignore, differently interpret, challenge, abandon and/or subvert the instructional material entirely; the essential creative agency of the performers – their improvisation – rather than the score, is the fundamental substance of the work.

Some of the ethics of these improvisational scores can no doubt be attributed to what Borgo identifies (after Lewis) within the Eurological strand of improvised music as a desire to distance from the figure of compositional authority derived from the ‘art music’ context (Lewis, 1996; Borgo, 2004).<sup>31</sup> There is also the impact of the compositional and interpretational pragmatics descended from Afrologically aligned performance within free improvisation to consider, given that, for example, the established convention of in-performance interpretation of a Jazz standard involves extemporisation upon a composed harmonic structure which is semantically open; spontaneous, improvisational invention on the part of the performer is interwoven with the a priori fixing of a certain number of parameters on the part of the author (harmonic, rhythmic etc.), both effectively garnering attribution (and hence indicating the practical non-opposition within this culture between composition and improvisation).<sup>32</sup>

Of greater prominence than the score-object in free improvisation is the recorded album, which has represented the primary reproduceable product within free improvisation’s economy, as well as its primary form of documentation since its inception. It is audio recordings such as Braxton’s aforementioned *Alto Saxophone Improvisations* (1979), Evan Parker’s *Monoceros* (1978), Derek Bailey’s *Improvisation* (1975), Spontaneous Music Ensemble’s *Quintessence 1* (1973-4), the *Feminist Improvising Group*’s eponymous album (1979), or the Peter Brötzmann Octet’s *Machine Gun* (1968) which represent the most numerous identifiable documents which come anywhere close to parity of status with the score-work in WIAM. The importance of albums can be attributed in part to the already established practice of album-recording within Jazz, from which the early free jazz musicians emerged.

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<sup>31</sup> There is some irony, this being the case, in how free improvisation has managed to engender its own distinctly patrilineal tree of culture-defining practitioners, despite this nominally counter-authoritative turn. See Chapter 2.

<sup>32</sup> The same lack of opposition is true in a huge number of musics outside WIAM, including folk and indigenous traditional music, music for ritual use and storytelling; consider koranic improvisation, pansuri, or Sean Nós, for example.



Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* (1961), for example, often acknowledged as defining the name (if not the whole *shape*) of what was to come, represented a conveniently disseminable example of what Scott Currie has termed "paradigmatic performance" (2014, p. 38) – effectively, a performance which, through peer-approval and subsequent industry replication and dissemination, becomes genre-defining (I will return to Currie's point later). Paul Steinbeck, indicating the importance of the album format, claims that "Roscoe Mitchell's *Sound* (1966), Joseph Jarman's *Song For* (1967), Muhal Richard Abram's *Levels and Degrees of Light* (1968) and Anthony Braxton's *For Alto* (1969) were so revolutionary that the AACM's place in history would be secure even if the organization had disbanded at the end of the 1960s" (2019, p. 261). Since the early era of free improvisation, the album, rather than the score-work, has been the definitive artifact.

What audio-only albums cannot document is the visuality of live performance, visuality which critically encompasses the living and moving bodies of musicians. On the basis of the above, an important consideration therefore emerges: while WIAM since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century has identified and harnessed movement as a compositional parameter and laid this down meticulously in an array of notations and instructions, thereby forming a canon of movement-inclusive documents (notwithstanding the way this movement might be more or less 'controlled'), in the foundational documents of free improvisation – its albums – the moving bodies of musicians are totally invisible. Even in the case of improvisers such as the women of the *Feminist Improvising Group*, who are known to have incorporated movement in performance and extended their practice into the kinetic and beyond (see 2.2), the cultural privileging of the album-document (rather than, for example, the photograph, of which there are quite obviously many which show the bodies of improvisers) rendered their use of the *moving* body textually and anecdotally documented only – visually inaccessible.

This fact is of particular relevance when considering the intersection of the politics of the gendered and racialised body with the media and dissemination processes (what Currie articulates as "culture industries" (2013, p. 28)) of free improvisation's 'Art World' (to borrow a term from Becker, 2011). On

this topic, Miles White proposes that audio recording technologies have facilitated a “distancing of black music from its socio-cultural origins” (2011, p. 9). “In effect”, he writes:

[...] the advent of recorded sound allowed for the presence of black people and black bodies to become dispensable in the consumption of styles of music with which they were intimately associated, and whose primary creative impulses came from black aesthetic practices (White, 2011, p. 9)<sup>33</sup>

Although historically in the United States for example, ‘soundies’, which were effectively a precursor to the music-video, were in production as early as the 1940s, and as Ellen C. Scott comments, while they “perhaps unwittingly, produced a cinematic discourse on African American freedom unique in its moment. Motivated by music, [they] often figured black freedom abstractly, and their desire to mirror and extend music’s abstractions to the visualization of black life loosened the structures of stereotype and allowed for nonrepresentational projections of freedom” (Scott, 2016, p. 205), these three-minute audiovisual documents existed within an entrenched media backdrop of black abjection, caricature and stereotype (see also 2.2.1). Scott comments that they were limited in their consumability, in their capacity for diegetic discourse (owing to their short length), and the “black challenges to public space” which they afforded “did not often exceed white-authored narratives of black aberrance or exoticism (Herzog, 52; Cripps, 234-35)” (2016, p. 205).

This invisible body in the early era of free improvisation, I would propose, reinforced an emphasis on the sonic, and imbued this developing culture with a deemphasised visuality, and thereby a lesser potential for kinetic expressivity as a practical (if not always necessarily a consciously prescribed) norm. As explored further in Chapter 2, I contend that this early media-propelled absence of the visual body was further compounded by a practical, socio-culturally conditioned abjection and othering of divergent bodies – those which did not conform to normative, hegemonic ideals of corporeal efficiency

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<sup>33</sup> He continues: “a tension was [...] created between embracing an invigorating Africanist presence and the simultaneous need to erase it, between a desire to retain the broad outlines of a uniquely characteristic cultural production but deny its deep rootedness in the culture of African Americans. The historical love of black music by whites in the United States has always been troubled by the fact of blackness itself, by “the trauma provoked by the introduction of the black body into white space”” (2011, p. 9).

as articulated in conjunction with the exhibition of technical instrumental virtuosity. This othering and abjection was derived from both the Afrological and Eurological sociomusical contexts across which free improvisation's development can be charted, and its interpolation with the culture of WIAM. The irruption of the moving body in free improvisation can therefore be seen in many ways as a challenge to the aesthetic mythology, to the canon of (largely male) performers and their albums, and to the codes of practice upon which this culture has constructed itself.

## 1.5 VOCAL IMPROVISATION

Before addressing the social politics of the body in detail, and having spent some time discussing instrumental musicianship, I feel it would be neglectful not to touch on non-instrumental improvisation. Vocal improvisers, David Toop offers, navigate an "immediate and intimate relationship to the gendered body and its suppressed sounds" (Toop, 2016, p. 46). Improvisation in voice is often co-emergent with facial expressions and contortions (some of which seem even required, at the muscular level, in order to produce certain sounds), as well as gestures of the hands, arms and body, changes in muscle-tone, posture, gait and overall physicality reflective of and complementary to the timbre of the sounding voice. At times this can extend into rich characterisation, theatricality, or explicit evocations of narrative or persona.

Of individuals working today, Estonian vocal improviser Anne-Liis Poll notably navigates a spectrum of bodily-engaged theatricality in performance which ranges from subtle facial expressions, ticks, and movements across the upper body to greatly affected, quasi-operatic physical gestures with vivid narrative implications (see Pett, 2014; 2017; 2020). Similarly, Zürich-based Saadet Türköz extends the varied textures and timbres of her vocalisation through equally articulate movements of the arms. At times the strident, almost granular quality of her sounds manifests in the tensions, flicking and angularity of the fingers; at other times multiphonics and inhalations expand fluidly from the torso through the elbows to the hands, as the forearms trace lines across peripheral space, drawing the voice into the kinesphere in a full-bodied expressivity (see Türköz, 2020a; 2020b). While performing his *aaaa*

*variations* at the Kunstraum Düsseldorf, Phil Minton's face transforms through states of palpable tension and release in a manner which one cannot help but read as both characterful and expressive (Borodin, 2015)<sup>34</sup>. He, in similar fashion to Poll and Türköz, engages fluidity in the upper body which is not mechanically 'necessary' in order to sound, and which is not only reflective of the cadences and qualities of his vocalisation, but which *transforms* it through body as an articulation in the kinetic sphere. Mexican performer Rodrigo Ambriz's performances also demonstrate a rich variety of muscular tensions, gesticulations, and a marked sense of the coming-together of kinetic and sonic expressions – though largely in the seated body (see Vania Rocha, 2019; juanjorz, 2017).

Elaine Mitchener's performances, perhaps even more than those previously mentioned, demonstrate a palpably blended expressivity in which sounding voice and expressive movement are deeply entangled;<sup>35</sup> a 2017 solo performance at the *Wysing Arts Centre* sees Mitchener twist, contort, extend through and punctuate physical space in movements which seem to spring from her intense vocalisations, which themselves flit between fragments of words, characters, and deep diaphragmatic utterances (Wysing Arts Centre, 2017). Even in the context of a quintet performance at *Café Oto*, with limited stage-space, and a performance frame more conventionally musical than the white-wall gallery of the *Wysing Arts Centre*, her physical expressivity reads as *co-emerging* with her vocalisation in such a way as it cannot be marked as lesser to the sonic aspect of her performance (Kivurugu Sounds, 2020).

Other notable improvising vocalists who, though to differing degrees, engage some form of expressive physicality include Maggie Nicols, Alwynne Pritchard, Anthony Stillabower, James Bryce, Ken Ueno, Antoine Läng, Lauren Newton, Urban Mäder, Rylan Gleave, Kay Grant and Sarmen Almond, to name but a few. One could speculate whether, in the absence of movement, the vocal performance of artists such as Mitchener, Türköz, Ambriz and Poll would transmit with the same quality of viscosity. Perhaps

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<sup>34</sup> For a video in which Minton's face is shown in close up, see (helentonic, 2008). Urban Mäder's *Luftdruck*, an edited video-composition, also features close-up imagery of the face during vocal improvisation, in addition to various audiovisual effects (Mäder, 2015).

<sup>35</sup> Mitchener describes herself as a vocal and movement artist (Mitchener, n.d.). Philip Clark of the Wire Magazine comments on her practice that "any attempts at categorization are doomed to fail" (Clark, 2015, p. 16).

there is a certain level of bodily engagement concomitant with a ‘theatricality’ that is *expected* of vocal improvisers, reinforced by pervasive archetypes such as the vocal ‘front-man’, the ‘lead-singer’, the ‘soloist’ (roles which are noticeably well established in cultures of Jazz performance) as well as associations with the traditions of solo oration, declamation and public speaking in a variety of cultures,<sup>36</sup> which render their kinetic articulations somehow *part of* their sonic expressions.<sup>37</sup>

A point which Toop mentions but does not explore in detail is the aspect of gender and its historical association with singing/vocalisation as a primary sonic medium, and relatedly, its role in defining the permissibility of movement within performance. Musicologist Kai Arne Hansen has analysed singing as a form of “low status [...] musical labour [which] should be seen in relation to the close connections between the voice and the body (see Barthes 1977, Frith 1996, Jarman-Ivens 2011) vis-à-vis the centrality of the corporeal to dismissals of pop music as a feminine low culture (see Railton 2001, pp. 322–325)” (2021, p. 5). He continues:

it is partly the bodily aspects of singing that prompt a categorization of this activity as an inauthentic form of musicmaking: ‘mastery of an instrument becomes a badge of musical truth, while bringing music out from within the body itself is dismissed as facile and “inauthentic”’ (Warwick 2004, p. 193). (Hansen, 2021, p. 5).

Maggie Nicols, in a personal interview with George McKay, comments on her early career that: “I was socialised – we all were: women sing, men played instruments. It didn’t even occur to me that I could do something different. [...] All that passion for instrumental music got poured into my voice.” (Nicols interviewed by McKay, 2002, cited in McKay, 2005). Nicols’ comment is telling of a societal conflation

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<sup>36</sup> Türköz credits, on her website, the transmission via her Kazakh refugee parents of the “the rich oral and musical traditions of the highlands of Central Asia” alongside Koranic vocal improvisation, as well as European free improvisation and free jazz, as informing her vocal improvising practice. (Türköz, n.d.)

<sup>37</sup> Sappho Donohue writes accurately that vocalisation is “not a practice only used by singers, rather [...] often enacted by players spontaneously in performance.” (2020a); a coming together of vocal improvisation with instrumental playing can be found in the work of Fritz Welch, Keiji Haino, Anne Bourne, Faradena Afifi, George Burt, Takenori Saeki (佐伯武昇), and framed somewhat anarchically, within the self-proclaimed “dadaïsme extrême” of Michaël Potier, for example.

between femininity and corporeality which aligns the act of singing – the drawing out of sound from within the flesh of the material body – with the abjection of feminine bodies.

This itself represents, I propose, a foundational aspect of free improvisation's historically patriarchal axiology, as will be explored in chapter 2 in relation also to racial hegemonies and processing of othering. Perhaps however, it is as an unwitting affordance of this conflation that the undoubtedly expressive and 'not-purely-functional' movements of vocalists are not rendered always oppositional to their sounds; they are in some way less scrutinised, less challenging to ostensible norms of on-stage embodiment, than were they to be enacted by instrumentalists.

## 2 BODY POLITICAL, BODY SOCIAL: SOUND, RACE, AND GENDER

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### 2.1 HEGEMONIC AESTHETICS: TECHNICAL INSTRUMENTALISM AND BODILY DIFFERENCE

Simon Fell is quick to comment that within his taxonomy of improvisation, so-named *somatic improvisers* are “usually highly accomplished technicians on their instrument (or voice) and may have extensive experience of high-level music-making in more conventional idiomatic situations” (2017, p. 70). This comment, and its double iteration of ‘high’, betrays a valorising of *technical accomplishment as exhibited instrumentally* – and the related concepts of *competency*, *success*, and *skill* – which represents a contentious aspect of discourse in experimental music at large and particularly in free improvisation, as a field in which practitioners often seek to subvert dominant disciplinary paradigms and to question extant frameworks of value.

As I have previously outlined, the axiological structures of disciplines as conceived in the west are conditioned by “geopolitical power-structures and the architecture of privilege, typified in the establishing of disciplinary canons and theoretical frameworks dominated by machinations of patriarchy and supremacy, and processes of underrepresentation, exclusion, and erasure” (McPherson, 2020b, p. 22). D Ferrett comments that free improvisation, as with “any other arena of ‘serious’ ‘Western’ music” manifests “issues of practical and social inclusion and exclusion” which are “often based on technical ability, musical lineage, and ideologically loaded notions of musical control” (2014, 83). Such inclusions and exclusions are predicated on norms of aptitude which are as much bounded in the political and the social as they are in the aesthetic; one cannot consider the premise of an ‘accepted’ definition of accomplishment and its articulation in performance without interrogating the means by which such a definition is constructed, and critically, *by whom*. In the case of valorised technical instrumentalism, and its intimate relationship with the body, such an interrogation *must* consider the significance and significations of bodily difference – particularly aspects of gender and race – in any inference of *accomplished technique*.

Scott Currie contends that:

[...] the common stylistic commitments that make group improvisation possible and productive may begin with widely acclaimed paradigmatic performances, whose import is then encapsulated in the shared technical conceptions of artistic peer circles, broadened through articulation with the consensus aesthetic principles of cultures industries, and deepened by investment with the normative beliefs associated with audience identification and consumption. (Currie, 2014, p. 38)

Reading the above through Ferrett's comment on the early years of the *Feminist Improvising Group* which she notes "emerged in a male-dominated music scene where questions of legitimacy abounded in a discourse that defined free improvisation through the contested cultural history of jazz and the avant-garde and where hierarchies were woven through a series of *musical fathers and sons steeped in masterful mythology*" (Ferrett, 2014, p. 83, citing McKay, 2005, emphasis mine), one can apply a critical feminist lens and reflect upon the assertion that Currie's "paradigmatic performances", "shared technical concepts", "consensus aesthetic principles" and "normative beliefs" have been conditioned extensively by the dominance of hetero-masculinity, men, and masculine bodies in free improvisation's spaces.

The prevailing patriarchy in free improvisation, as is unmasked expansively throughout Tina Krekels' *Loosening the Saxophone* (2019), is tangible even at a cursory glance across literature, and is critically revealed through exposure in writing authored predominantly by women. Dana Reason Myers, in a dissertation now two-decades old, elucidates through commentary and analysis of a series of interviews with women improvisers what she terms "the Myth of Absence" (Reason Myers, 2002). She chronicles verbatim experiences of improvising women towards correcting a persistent and inaccurate retelling of their absence from the history of free improvisation. In doing so, she describes a culture of oppression, highlighting disparities in hiring practices at international festivals, claiming "the relative professional marginalization of women improvisers as an artifact of inequitable media coverage" (2002, p. 14), and within this, making note of the tendency in prominent magazines circulated within the realms of free-jazz and improvised music "to foreground physical descriptions, make overtly gendered remarks, or



advance theories as to the exceptionality of the woman in question (as though the woman is not part of a larger community of women improvisers)” (2002, p. 15). She touches also, albeit briefly, on intersectionality with regards to the privileging of white women within this already marginalised group. Ferrett’s more recent article foregrounding the work of Scottish vocal improviser Maggie Nicols, with whom I have recently had the privilege of performing, and whose pioneering contributions to the landscape of British free improvisation she identifies as critically undervalued,<sup>1</sup> echoes in one way or another *all* of Myer’s sentiments (Ferrett, 2018).

Such writing exposes an all-too-familiar entanglement between patriarchy and canonicity, wherein the self-foregrounding of men constitutes a constructed history in which particular individuals are afforded primacy,<sup>2</sup> and whose prominence exudes the aura of the mythologised culture-hero. Masculine self-canonising and the resultant marginalisation of the queer and feminine other within free improvisation is also addressed by Hannah Reardon-Smith, who comments on Derek Bailey’s well-upheld treatise *Improvisation: its nature and practice in music* (Bailey, 1993) that: “[w]hile Bailey did not set out to create a comprehensive survey of the most influential improvisers of his generation, it is notable that not a single woman was included in the first edition”; she qualifies this with the humorous caveat “the revised version of 1992 does include a secondary reference to vocalist Christine Jeffrey” (2019, p. 2). She notes further, in a co-authored paper, that another prominent publication, Gary Peters’ *Philosophy of Improvisation* (2009) “focuses almost exclusively not only on male practitioners of free improvisation but also on the work of a European male-dominated canon of continental philosophers” (2020). The

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<sup>1</sup> Nicols was a founding member of the *Feminist Improvising Group, Les Diaboliques* (with Joelle Léandre, and Irène Schweizer; their 2016 UK tour was titled *Foremothers of Free Improvisation*), *The Gathering*, was a member of John Steven’s *Spontaneous Music Ensemble*, currently features regularly in performance with the *Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra*, and teaches across the UK. Despite this, she has been repeatedly sidelined by British media outlets who, as Ferrett notes, “largely relegated her to such a position that her name is not known to the same degree as her musical [and one infers, mostly male] peers” (2014, p. 84) After a career spanning six decades, Maggie was featured, for the first time, on the cover of *The Wire* magazine in March 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Krekels asserts, as is evidenced through her thesis, that “[t]here is an element of practitioners writing themselves into academic canons by publishing, teaching and also practical workshops. Performers and thinkers like Prévost and Toop come to mind, both I know from workshops and conference presentations. As we will see through this thesis, it is/was men who ran and occupied the spaces of free improvisation, the socio-political fact is that these men controlled and produced these spaces, either by running their own labels, organising events and also their teaching.” (2019, p. 7). See also comments by McKay (2007, p. 246).

comorbidity of an exclusive focus on men-performers and largely European men-philosophers is evidenced, two and a half decades after Bailey's revisions, in Marcel Cobussen's *The Field of Musical Improvisation* (2017). Cobussen's theoretical propositions, while exploring what might be the exciting potential of improvisation as conceived within contemporary understandings of dynamic systems theories (something I have applied within my own thinking of practice through the conceptual frame of *improvisational worlds*; see Part II: Practice), are frustratingly undermined by the absence of a single case-study focused either exclusively or even prominently on women, out of the seventeen featured in the main body of the text.

Such omissions, while quite obviously neglectful, serve to expose the *continuing* tenacity with which a dominant masculine establishment indulges in exercises of self-perpetuating public fraternity; exercises underwritten, as is evidenced in comments made in interview by the well-publicised Eddie Prévoſt, highlighted by Corey Mwamba and Guro Johansen (2021), by a pattern of disturbingly overt misogyny:

In the interview with George McKay, Prévoſt is asked about the gender imbalance in British improvised music, and whether its male dominance is significant to him. Prévoſt responds by explaining why the musicians involved in AMM were all men. He stated that the women in the scene "were more involved in the feminist movement than in improvisation, and we would have felt that it would have been playing at politics. Also, AMM was quite a fierce, no-holds-barred experience, and it needed a strong personality to impact on the music. There were very few women musicians around then who could have done that (Johansen and Mwamba, 2021, p. 43 citing McKay, 2005)

Leaving what could become a much lengthier analysis of Prévoſt's comments, the internalisation of male-dominated culture manifest as the *reproduction of patriarchal aesthetics* in instrumental performance is of great relevance to the issue of body and movement. In what ways might it be that the very artistic output of free improvisers – the performance of improvised music – reinforces patriarchy under the guise of what Currie terms "consensus aesthetic principles" (2014, p. 38)? Krekels, again, interrogates the presence of patriarchal aesthetics throughout *Loosening the Saxophone*, summarizing her lived experience playing as a woman in free improvisation's "masculine spaces":

When I play music, predominately with men, then often these musical spaces become restrictive for me to find my own voice, my own performance techniques and also to develop my own creativity. It was men who congratulated me that I sounded like Peter Brötzmann, that I am louder than the drummer in our band, that I am more of a man than some of the men I played with. So I wondered whether my playing on the saxophone, copying other established playing techniques contributes to a reproduction of specific gendered sounds or genres of music? (2019, p. 3)

There is a clear link in the above between the performance of a kind of musical masculinity, and the nominal 'success' of Krekels' playing as assessed by men. By 'sounding like Brötzmann', her activity can be subsequently validated by male peers; by being 'louder than the drummer', by forcefully occupying sonic space, her legitimacy within the band is asserted. The performance of musical masculinity as a requisite marker of aesthetic legitimacy can reasonably be viewed as a foundational aspect of both free jazz and free improvisation, and the ramifications of this regarding corporeality and the use of expressive movement as performed in free improvisational spaces, are substantial.

From a historical perspective, tracing the significant influence of the American Black Power and Black Nationalism movements on avant-garde Jazz in the 1950s and 60s, Benjamin Piekut summarises that "black nationalism [...] dictated appropriate behaviour for men and women and prescribed desirable aesthetic qualities based on gendered codes of musical meaning." (Piekut, 2010, p. 29). In a mid-century climate which, he notes, was "hardly one of enlightened masculinity", Piekut contends that "the qualities most admired in this music were volume, "raw" and extreme emotion, dominating tone, and virtuosic displays of hand and breath control." (2010, pp. 29-30).<sup>3</sup> He describes peer-attitudes to trumpeter Bill Dixon, co-founder of the influential *Jazz Composers Guild* in 1965-6, and forefather of avant-garde jazz, whose playing, "avoided the tropes of dominant Free Jazz masculinity" generating some criticism from some prominent peer-artist figures from the Black Arts Movement. Summarising

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<sup>3</sup> Piekut notes a difference in understandings of the relationship between politics and the avant-garde Jazz scene in New York City between white and black members of the Jazz Composer's Guild. As he writes: "While most of the African American members understood [the Jazz Composers Guild] as a project of black self-determination, the white musicians were more inclined to view it as a concert-producing body for avant-garde music that had no chance in the commercial marketplace" (Piekut, 2010, p. 28). The difference in racial experience between black and white musicians in this context, and the intersection of racial politics and the aesthetics of practice, is clear.

derisory comments made by poet A.B. Spellman on Dixon's performance at "Four Days in December", Piekut writes the following:

Reading [Spellman's comments], we are to understand that Dixon is a shrinking violet (he is overshadowed by the men in his band), that he is not a real leader (his playing is too sparse), that he is weak, and that he does not have the sense of duty or work ethic to practice (he is lazy). (Piekut, 2010, p. 30)

It is Dixon's divergence from a normalised, competitive form of sonic masculinity – ultimately a performance of gender mediated via instrument, and musically parametrised – which provokes Spellman's disapproval. Through his inability to perform *sufficiently* prominently, loudly, stridently, technically, virtuosically, he is dismissed and ultimately emasculated. This essential competitiveness is reflective of what Ken McLeod has traced more broadly as a critical relationship between sportsmanship, physical prowess and the social construction of African American masculinity. McLeod reveals this through an analysis of the history of Jazz, Rap, and Hip-Hop (all three incidentally being sociomusical forms in which improvisation is commonplace), as involving the valorising of assertive, *physical* athleticism, virtuosity, competitiveness, as well as the creation and mythologising of culture heroes (McLeod, 2009). Charting physicality through similarities in practice-routines and performance in both sports and music, he proposes that these two arenas:

offer a highly visible challenge to stereotypes of [black] male bodily repression [and] have helped foster a hypermasculine image among black men [...] exemplified [for example] in the media-hyped sexual exploits of Wilt Chamberlain or the depictions of hypersexual appetites in numerous rap videos. (McLeod, 2009, p. 218).<sup>4</sup>

He identifies also that:

Male creativity, expressed in rap and dancing, required wide-open spaces, symbolic frontiers where the body could do its thing, expand, grow, and move, surrounded by a watching crowd. Domestic space, equated with repression and containment, as well as with the "feminine" was resisted and rejected so that an

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<sup>4</sup> He clarifies that: "though white musicians were also seminal participants in jazz, its liberating performative presence can be understood as representing a general resistance to the repression and silencing of black men" (McLeod, 2009, p. 218).

assertive patriarchal paradigm of competitive masculinity and its concomitant emphasis on physical prowess could emerge. (McLeod, 2009, p. 218)

The visibility of what constitutes physical prowess differs somewhat between performance in music and sports (and indeed within different musics and different sports); however within the instrumental context, one can identify the concept quite directly in the execution of virtuosic musical parameters – in the level of volume required to ‘out-play’ a drummer, in the visceral ‘high-fast-loud’ playing by which we infer Tina Krekels must have replicated the characteristic sound of Peter Brötzmann, in the harshness of timbre required to cut through what Brigit Hayden refers to, in a saturated soloistic texture, as “maximalist music” (Hayden, quoted in Ferrett, 2018). I recall in my own experience, during an early morning one-to-one ‘mentoring’ session with a well-established European free improvising pianist (who shall remain anonymous), how I was forced to match, on my own piano, the fortissimo dynamic, fast-finger work, dense clusters and heavy articulation of my teacher for over thirty minutes simply in order to be heard; despite having warmed up, after the session, I was struck by the pain I felt in my forearms. What I experienced directly and viscerally in my body at that time was an embedded value framework of free improvisation’s masculine musical athleticism.

While the “virtuosic displays of hand and breath control” (Piekut, 2010) that Piekut states were regarded as admirable qualities in early free jazz represent, at the physical level, a form of fine-motor dexterity, more pertinently they facilitate virtuosity across musical parameters; a sonic athleticism which can be considered analogous to kinesiological aspects more readily identifiable in a sporting or dance context – volume, dynamic and dynamism, strength, dexterity, flexibility, agility, precision (etc.).

Within the context of the masculine athleticism of early free jazz, Sappho Donohue (2020a) cites Kernodle in Brown (2010) who takes the position that African American women were “entangled with the opposition (heteronormativity, steady job, family etc...)”, and hence the contemporary avant-garde amounted to “freedom of the black *male* body, *his* sexuality and identity from centuries of racial and sexual ideologies” (emphasis mine); black women, in lieu of accessing this emancipation, were ostracised as agents of oppression (Brown, 2010, p. 85). Piekut writes that influential avant-garde jazz

musicians such as saxophonist Archie Shepp “reproduced the gender blind spots” of the black radicalism movement within the emerging sociomusical space of free jazz. He proposes that on the one hand, while one could read a male pushback against Kernodle’s domestic feminine “opposition” as constituting “a response to the [white] control of black reproduction historically and to perennial racist fears over black birth rates”, it also represented a form of patriarchal control which highlights “the degree to which black nationalist men based their liberation movement on a reactionary understanding of the family and black women’s roles as mothers and caretakers.” (Piekut, 2010, p. 31).<sup>5</sup>

One can consider that the ostracization of women from this context – which should not, following Reason Myers, be misnamed as benign *absence* but rather *exclusion* – represents not only the pragmatic rejection of individuals but of femininity itself; of anything that might embody, indicate, or betray it. It is unsurprising therefore that the black male liberation afforded by early free jazz was also a markedly heterosexual one. As Tucker comments, the history of Jazz overall “has been subject to “uplift” ideology that understandably claims it as a sign of dignity, genius, high art: a move that appears to remove sexuality from the discussion, but often cements particular and very narrow images of black hetero-masculinity into ideas about what jazz means” (Tucker, 2008, p. 4). In response to her own question “why are so few Jazz musicians gay?”, Irène Schweizer comments:

There are some emancipated men: George Lewis, Maarten Altena, Lol Coxhill, but gay musicians? Even if they were gay, they wouldn’t be showing it. With some exceptions like Cecil Taylor, but there are not many. (Schweizer, quoted in Dawn-Smith, 2014, p. 271)

Schweizer’s choice of words is telling. That a gay jazz musician would not *show* their gayness is to say that they would not in any way *embody* qualities or characteristics by which this divergent sexuality might be inferred; this undoubtedly includes the embodying of anything other than conventional heteromascularity. Peter Hennen has summarised a variety of global cultural perspectives on the

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<sup>5</sup> Piekut writes also: “In the words of Wini Breines, “‘man’ and ‘manhood’ were often employed as equivalents for the achievement of personhood, respect, and dignity. The black males stood center stage, strong, proud, and furious, a crucial building block in the imagery of black nationalism. His rage anchored the movement” (2010, p. 32).

concept of effeminacy and the means by which it is employed by differing societies to regulate the body, the relationships between men, and between men and women (2008). Critically, he identifies a familiar conflation between effeminacy and male homosexuality (which I would suggest as the driving force behind the ostracising of homosexual men within the free jazz and broader jazz contexts); interestingly, he also finds an association with a perceived excess of sexuality in heterosexual men who – through one mechanism or other – embody qualities that suggest “too much time spent with females”, resulting ultimately in a disempowered social status (2008, p. 36). Within the patriarchal heterosexual paradigm, femininity is to be avoided at all costs, even by association.

Piekut highlights that while the celebrated writer Amiri Baraka and his peers – whose social and political circles intersected with those of the early free jazz musicians and associated artists –<sup>6</sup> initially “joined their white comrades in resisting bourgeois, white normativity” which included “non-normative sexual practices”, Baraka was quick to admonish these “transgressive sexualities” as deviant and opposite to an ideal of black masculinity, upon his departure from the East Village. Through Baraka’s refiguring of the Village as a “white bohemia, the site of sexually deviant transgressions of weak, effeminate white men”, Piekut contends that “the discursive poles of a strong black male heterosexuality and a soft, white male homosexuality fall quickly into place” (2010, p. 33). Hennen expands that specific opposition to black male homosexuality which Baraka’s position encapsulates is compounded by extant oppressions on racial grounds:

Representations of ‘sissies’ and ‘Negro faggots’ suggest a deviancy that lies not in Black male promiscuity but in a seeming emasculation that is chosen” (Collins 2005, 172; emphasis added). While this is probably also true of white attitudes toward effeminacy, the ostensibly voluntary adoption of an effeminate disposition may be perceived as particularly repellent [sic] among poor and disenfranchised black men whose emasculation is experienced as coerced. (Hennen, 2008, pp. 37-38)

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<sup>6</sup> Baraka for example associated for some time with the likes of Ornette Coleman, the Beat Poets, Langston Hughes and other leaders of the Harlem Renaissance. He also spent some time studying at the New School, during which period he would likely have come into contact with the circle of artists surrounding John Cage and Merce Cunningham.

It follows that a sociocultural emphasis on physical prowess, sonic masculinity, and the particular ostracising of femininity, feminine bodies, and feminine corporeality inherited from free jazz, coupled with the European-descendent mythologies of the composer-patriarch and its role as bodily controller, the historical instrumental virtuoso, and the male genius-figure inserted from the Eurological context of WIAM and the European avant-garde,<sup>7</sup> readily conducted a foundational culture in free improvisation within which accomplishment has been constructed as the successful performance of two entrenched ‘paradigms of competitive masculinity’, to borrow McLeod’s phrase.

## 2.2 MEN WHO DON’T MOVE: MOVEMENT, EXCESS, AND ‘OTHERS’

Following the above, something which will be at least superficially counterintuitive is the relative *stasis* that the body must maintain in order to perform feats of sonic virtuosity in a manner which conforms to an ideal of corporeal efficiency and appropriateness, which I would identify is underpinned by structures of both heteromasculine and white racial hegemony. While Krekels’ *Manifesto of Feminist Free Improvisation* advocates “laziness in front of others”, admonishes “daily dedication to individualist practice routines of [...] chosen instrument[s]” and “male erected playing techniques”, renouncing “hard work” and professing commitment to “low-labour” (2019, p. 2) as a combat to heteromasculine musical athleticism, it is striking to witness just how little the patriarchs of free improvisation actually move in performance. If one observes with a choreographic eye, contemporary and archive performances of John Tilbury, Eddie Prévost, Keith Rowe, Evan Parker, John Edwards, John Russell, Anthony Braxton, Roscoe Mitchell, Terry Day, John Butcher, Ornette Coleman, Derek Bailey, Fred Frith et al., one sees bodies which are for the most part planted firmly on the ground and rigid in frame; the volume of their movements seems visually incongruous with the agility by which the musicians navigate extremes of register, timbre, and dynamic. With the marked exception of Cecil Taylor,<sup>8</sup> and later, to a

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<sup>7</sup> Reardon-Smith et al. comment that: “[...] masculinisation is founded upon two ideas: that artistic ability is intimately tied to masculine subjectivity (the maverick, the solitary genius) and that such ability is passed on generationally through the logic of the canon.” (2020, p. 12).

<sup>8</sup> Taylor’s performance from the Robert Mann’s 1981 documentary “Imagine the Sound”, re-released in 2007, showcases his bodily fluidity and very *physical* performance persona. A clip from around 57 minutes into the film



lesser extent, Peter Brötzmann and Tashinori Kondo (近藤 等則),<sup>9</sup> these canonised first and second generation ‘founding fathers’ and their ‘sons’ by and large did not and do not *move*.

The case can well be made that musicians do not *need*, at a mechanical level, to articulate sonic material more expansively in the body *in order for it to sound*; the majority of ‘sound-producing gestures’ (Godøy and Leman, 2010) involve fine-motor control and less ‘visible’ processes such as diaphragmatic movement or subtle shifts in muscular tone.<sup>10</sup> However, I would propose that the relative ubiquity of stasis, the absence of expanded, expressive bodily articulations in the work of these improvisers whose performances are upheld as emblematic of free improvisation, is also a symptom of a culture of corporeal suppression predicated on the construction and abjection of gendered and racialised others by which the axiology of free jazz and free improvisation, and the music discipline as a whole, have been impacted.<sup>11</sup> With the acknowledgement of the patriarchal underpinnings of free improvisation’s practice culture and its aesthetic paradigms derived from both its Afrological and Eurological streams, the marked absence of movement can be read not only as arbitrary or functionally justified, but as reflective of a socially conditioned avoidance of *physicality as excess* which might pose a delegitimising risk to the performer; this excess is something historically conceived within specific pejorative archetypes of gender and race which are dominant within the transatlantic sociomusical contexts in which free improvisation has developed.

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sees Taylor dancing, singing, speaking, running, jumping, stamping and gesticulating around the piano in addition to playing. While at the keys, his whole body remains palpably engaged (Mann, 2007). It’s important to recognise the implications of the non-normativity of Taylor’s embodiment from a queer perspective. As Piekut writes, the “ambivalent sexual presentation” of Taylor, “queering him in the eyes of others, was problematic in the context of what Hill Collins describes as “a hegemonic discourse of Black sexuality that has at its core ideas about an assumed promiscuity among heterosexual African American men and women and the impossibility of homosexuality among Black gays and lesbians”” (Piekut, 2010, p. 34).

<sup>9</sup> Both Brötzmann and Kondo demonstrate a real looseness in the upper body, although Brötzmann’s lower body remains largely stationary. In Kondo’s case, there is a mobility in the hips which accompanies frequent bending, falling, swaying, and rocking in the majority of his performances (Toshinori Kondo Recordings, 2018; Andrei Ionescu, 2009; Burdur1011, 2012). Improviser Steve Beresford commented to me on Kondo’s physicality – his “immovability” and “famously low centre of gravity” (Personal communication, July 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Having said this, Godøy and Leman’s taxonomy does account for ‘sound facilitating gestures’ as movements which, while not functionally sonic “facilitate[e] performance” (2010, p. 13).

<sup>11</sup> Here I paraphrase Stephen Amico’s assessment of Ethnomusicology as comprising: “a field-defining ideological-methodological matrix [which] has led to the production of a theoretical narrowness predicated upon and engendering the construction of “Others”” (2020, p. 32)

### 2.2.1 “Black Monstrosity”

The rhetoric by which nonwhite individuals – in particular those of the African diaspora – have been dehumanised and disenfranchised via an association with uncontained, uncontrolled, inappropriate or irrational physical excesses represents a cornerstone of the racist ideological framework. Colonialist depictions of African diasporic, native-American, Aboriginal, first-nations and other indigenous populations, have invariably involved a combination of racist physiognomic caricature as well as exaggerations of physicality and kinesiology, as differentiated against a norm of whiteness, in both visual media and in text. In the United States, the popularity of blackface minstrelsy through the 19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in combination with a proliferation of racist depictions in advertising illustration in which an animalised image of black Americans became widespread (Lemons, 1977, p. 104), engendered a grossly offensive stereotype of African Americans as embodying numerous kinds of physical excesses. Greatly oversized facial features and disproportionate limbs were paralleled by dangerous sexual appetites, overly energetic movements, and greatly affected speech, constructing an image of what Eric King Watts has coined “black monstrosity”, being an “excess of excess” (Watts, 2017). As Erle and Hendry write “monsters—by their very nature—confront us with excess”; they “embody fear or excitement and monstrosity represents amoral or uncontrolled behaviour” (Erle and Hendry, 2020, p. 2). Via the media-propelled rendering of darker-skinned bodies as physically and kinetically ‘monstrous’, the colonial project has been able to legitimise constructions of racial differentiation and subsequent abjection within white public consciousness. It was out of a climate of abjection that the early experiments of free jazz/free improvisation developed, and its impact upon the kinesiology of performers and the way in which bodies moved or did not move within public performance contexts requires investigation.

A now infamous cartoon from the Walter Lantz Studio – *Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat* (1941) – epitomizes the polarity of excesses in a racist stereotype of black Americans common to the wartime era, during which period, it is worth reflecting that Jazz, which at the time was a distinctly American

cultural export, was becoming both commonplace and propagandized across the Atlantic.<sup>12</sup> The film opens with a quasi-pastoral scene of the American south. The dark-skinned residents of “Lazy Town” – whose hands and feet are elongated, whose lips are enlarged and greatly discoloured in contrast to their skin-tone – are pictured going about their business with extreme lethargy, that is until the arrival of a light-skinned woman singing a boogie-woogie tune from Harlem stirs them into frantic activity. In contrast to the well-dressed white outsider, whose movements are presented with the same kind of characteristically muted sensuality as Betty Boop, the residents of the town are shown as hypermobile, hyperflexible and raucous. As they play their instruments in an ensemble which *physically* moves around the town, their bodies twist and contort in a manner which, while superficially plausible within the fiction of cartoon physicality, is in complete contrast to the restrained ‘sophistication’ of the visitor’s light-skinned body. A plethora of racist imagery accompanies the ‘frenzied’ dancing: an individual consumes a huge watermelon slice with a giant grin; a young girl with a jet-black dog-like button nose is voice-acted by a gruff man; townswomen with drawling, stuttering, deep voices appear with grossly enlarged hips, breasts, cheeks and buttocks.

Depictions such as this have been by no means limited to the realm of animation (although the extent to which racist caricatures proliferate in popular animation is of note (see Asión Suñer, 2021; Breaux, 2010; King et al., 2010)), nor to the American context. The same grotesquery of enlarged lips, eyes, the particular *hypermobility* and *hyperactivity* of the dark-skinned dancing body was dominant in minstrelsy performance, which remained a popular form of entertainment well into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century in both North America, Britain, and beyond.<sup>13</sup> The BBC’s controversial *Black and White Minstrel Show*, which featured blackface performance, song, dance, and parody of African American Vernacular English, aired its first episode in 1958 – the same year as the Notting Hill Race Riots. Its last episode aired,

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<sup>12</sup> The Nazi regime admonished Jazz – dismissively termed ‘Negermusik’ or “Negro Music” – due to its creation by African Americans and its connection to black experience (Kater, 2003), as well as its association with Jewish culture (Gillman, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Greaves, for example, makes the case for Irish participation in blackface from the time of the Famine as “carr[ying] tensions of land dispossession, national identity, and ethnic conflict in Ireland into American culture” (2013).

astonishingly, in 1978 (Grandy, 2019), two years before the release of Diana Ross' *I'm Coming Out*, the same year that Viv Anderson became the first black British footballer to play for England in an international tournament, and a whole decade after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in Tennessee.

Media such as the above have propagated a pervasive view of dark-skinned, African-diasporic bodies as being always 'more-than' – excessively lazy, excessively sexual, excessively physical, excessively proportioned – defined by extremes and polarities by which whiteness asserts itself as a sensible, reasonable, altogether appropriate centre. Furthermore, Peter Hennen has commented that even within the existing privileged structures of masculinity, whiteness upholds its status as a normative "middle-ground" (2008, p. 37).

The roots of these stereotypes of physical excess run deep, and they are still a matter of political and social contention in relation to which today's artists are producing critical work across diverse genres. Jennifer LeMesurier, for example, has undertaken an analysis of the choreographic subversion of what she terms "racially appropriate kinesilogies" in Childish Gambino's 2018 viral music-video *This is America* (LeMesurier, 2020). She argues that "assumptions about racially appropriate kinesthetics are manifestations of the same ways of thinking that conflate biology and race in terms of intellect or culture" which maintain the "erroneous view of Black bodies as more animalistic and primal, more uncontrollably exertive".<sup>14</sup> Throughout the video, Gambino raps and dances while moving through visceral scenes full of imagery highlighting contemporary oppressions facing African-Americans and other communities of colour – including gun-violence, drug-use, poverty, and police-brutality. The juxtaposition of these against Gambino's play with moments of stasis and the fragmentation of popular dance, LeMesurier writes, subverts the conditioning that the black male body must maintain a state of constant mobility, that it must conform to "tacit assumptions that Black male bodies are necessarily

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<sup>14</sup> Nadine George-Graves comments that, in an exercise in immediate free-associations during interview with Brenda Gottschild, Trisha Brown falls just shy of using the word "animal" when asked to describe 'black dance'. (George-Graves, 2005, 134). A troubling example of a recent trend towards biological-racial conflation, poorly disguised in the rhetoric of scientific hypothesis, can be found in (Winegard et al., 2020).

hyperaggressive and oversexualised”; this runs in contrast to the archetypes of racialised physicality constructed via centuries of white consumption and exploitation of African-diasporic bodies, from enforced dance as punishment aboard slave-ships or on plantations, to minstrelsy and black-face performance. The caricature of Jim Crow, whose distinctive gestures and gait Gambino alludes to during the video, LeMesurier holds as epitomising “the performance of [the] other-abled, other-raced, other-sexed (or hyper-abled, hyper-raced, and hyper-sexed), [whose] legitimacy is achieved via a kneebone bent [sic] that actively rejects white rationality”.<sup>15</sup>

Reiterating Lewis’ assertion of the need to acknowledge the “ethnic or racial component of a historically emergent sociomusical group” (1996, p. 93) one cannot sever free jazz/free improvisation from its roots in African American culture, and by extension from the specifically racialised inferences of body against which the physicality and kinesthetics in performance of African American musicians of various genders have been held in relation on both sides of the Atlantic. Against what was at the time a strident, media-driven misapprehension of black bodies as being terminally excessive, and in opposition to pervasive visual (illustrated) and dramaturgical (performative) stereotypes, the static virtuosity of Ornette Coleman, for example, could well be read retrospectively as effective subversion; an embodiment of “prowess” which doesn’t even break sweat, which doesn’t risk the indignity of association with degrading and dehumanizing images of grossly exaggerated corporeality.<sup>16</sup>

There is, however, an intersection of body politics at play here, and one could equally identify in the corporeal stasis of Coleman and his peers a suppression of kinesis whose basis lies not in personal and collective empowerment set against the oppressions of the era, but in processes of exclusion. The notion of kinetic excess is not limited to an association with othering on the grounds of race alone, it also represents a prominent aspect of gendered bodily signification. Given the established abjection of

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<sup>15</sup> She proposes an additional layer of potential othering in physicality of the Jim Crow figure, writing “the hand gesture that emerges from this crooked skeleton is deviant in its flirtation with effeminacy”. (LeMesurier, 2020)

<sup>16</sup> While it is unclear as to whether Coleman and the other early free jazz performers explicitly considered their performance-kinesiology in this vein, it’s unrealistic to suggest that the pervasive oppressions of the culture had no consequence on the way their bodies moved.

the feminine within the culture of free jazz/free improvisation it feels relevant to bring the above commentary on a mid-century climate of racial abjection together with commentary on gender and on femininity, considering how this might also condition the suppression of the kinetic within the body of the improviser.

### 2.2.2 Feminine Excess

In Susan McClary's pivotal application of feminist theory to the field of musicology, she traces the concept of *feminine excess* in western art music's operatic canon through the archetype of the 'madwoman'; a figure representing a dangerous form of often sexualised femininity (McClary, 1991, pp. 80-111).<sup>17</sup> McClary notes the blatant hypocrisy by which harmonic or otherwise musical structures which "are usually among the favourite techniques of the avant-garde" and which "are used without comment in our most complex, most intellectually virtuosic instrumental music" (1991, p. 101), when applied within the theatrical frame of opera, in which the body of the performer (and its gendered, racialised, etc. inferences) is visually foregrounded and thus inseparable from the dramatic action, become indicative of feminine 'hysteria'. This is oxymoronic, she claims, given that the female singers require highly refined vocal technique in order to perform these roles. McClary's analysis highlights an entrenchment within both western culture and the WAM canon, concretised dramaturgically in the opera context and musically parametrised in the tradition of notated score, of a societal wariness and conflation of femininity with excess. This conflation extends into associated notions of ornament, superfluity, irrationality, and emotionality (Negrin, 2006). Excess as feminine is held in opposition to an archetypally masculine composure, rationality, efficiency, and logic, against which femininity represents something dangerous, and undesirable.

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<sup>17</sup> She notes how, for example, in Strauss' *Salome*, the eponymous character's pathology "is signaled [sic] by her slippery chromatic deviations from normative diatonicism [...] a sister to figures such as Isolde and Carmen, who likewise play maddeningly in the cracks of tonal social convention" (1991, p. 100).

This phenomenon is not only the stuff of opera's theatrical fiction. Consider how the famed movements of cellist Jacqueline du Pré,<sup>18</sup> which Adam Whittaker states amounted to an "impassioned physicality [...] that channelled an intense communicative power." (2020, p. 2), were subject to substantial public critique throughout her career. Even in a recent retrospective article for *Gramophone* on du Pré's life and work, journalist Sarah Kirkup tellingly chooses language and quotations which reiterate a historic assessment of her movements as constituting *excess*; as transgressing a threshold of normative, efficient instrumental physicality and becoming something 'more-than'. She writes:

[...] her wild physical movements were not to everyone's taste. Perhaps English critics at the time weren't used to such overt displays of emotion; perhaps, as Kovacevich suggests, there was a certain amount of jealousy involved. Or perhaps there *was*, at times, an excess of emotion. But, as Barbirolli once said, 'When you're young, you should have an excess of everything. If you haven't, what are you going to pare off later on?' Barenboim agrees, adding that 'her excesses were always in very good taste'. (Kirkup, 2021)

While playing off her comments somewhat flippantly via Barenboim's anecdote, the established link between femininity, excess, and emotionality is reinforced by Kirkup. This is something Stephanie Shields identifies, through the lens of historical psychology, as part of a culturally ingrained and logically unsubstantiated dichotomy between 'emotion' and 'reason' pervasive in the Western context, which she maintains represents an impactful site for processes of gendered differentiation in Western social consciousness, serving an "important power maintenance", and conditioning social attitudes (Shields, 2007, p. 92).<sup>19</sup> She traces, through developments in the 19th century, how the "portrayal of women's emotion was paradoxically described as weak emotionality and as dangerously unregulated". She highlights a parallel gendered hypocrisy to that mentioned by McClary, commenting that "although ostensibly valuing women's emotional sensitivity as valuable in maintenance of the home, useful for child rearing, and promoting positive relations with men, the very same attributes were portrayed as a

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<sup>18</sup> Whittaker's article further comments on the recent balletic-dramatization of Du Pré's life *The Cellist*, which, he notes, navigates the *need* to "captur[e] her distinctive physical presence and musical identity, and the musical contexts in which it formed, whil[e] still achieving narrative cohesion in a balletic form" (2020, 5). Within the fictionalised frame of ballet, in contrast to the reality of her concert career, du Pré's movements are extolled.

<sup>19</sup> McClary also discusses this extensively throughout Chapter 4 of *Feminine Endings* (1993, pp. 80-111).

central defect in female character” (Shields, 2007, p. 106). She asserts that “the polarity of reason and emotion and the threat that emotion poses to emasculate reason are long-standing Western notions, even though dichotomizing these qualities is itself not logically based (Midgley, 1995)” (2007, p. 93). This deeply entrenched, gender-based polarity seeps into WAM through its nature as a “a socially organized enterprise” (McClary, 1993, p. 102), in which the bodies and body politics of humans are unavoidably present.

In Jacqueline du Pré’s performance, we are to infer that her moving betrays emotions that are somehow unchecked; not sufficiently contained or controlled. While her instrumental virtuosity is to be applauded, it must align with an appropriate and efficient bodily stasis aligned with rational masculinity; otherwise, irrespective of her technical expertise, it risks delegitimising commentary.<sup>20</sup> An example of such commentary can be found in a deliberately inflammatory opinion piece by polemical journalist Norman Lebrecht, who commits, as he puts it, “the unforgivable male offence of reporting what a female artist wears, instead of how she plays” (Lebrecht, 2021). Lebrecht undertakes a bizarre tirade against the varied concert-dress of pianist Yuja Wang, which he holds detracts at length from her legitimacy in concert. There is a palpable dissonance in Lebrecht’s analysis in which on the one hand he extols Wang’s technical instrumental proficiency, while concurrently indicating that somehow this is undermined by her choice of ‘inappropriate’ dress. I will not indulge Lebrecht’s position further here, other than to point out that it epitomises the masculine privilege and condescension by which visuality as linked with gender presentation is used erroneously in the assessment of instrumental competency within the concert context.

There is now an identifiable field of research into the role of visuality (including the visuality of the body) and its impact on the assessment of competency in musical performance. Griffiths and Raey (2018), and Griffiths (2010) represent two small-scale psychological studies in which the intersection of

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<sup>20</sup> The irony in all this is that ultimately, du Pré’s movements are far from excessive. Rarely does the lower half of her body shift from its seated frame, and the vast majority of her kinetic expression is limited to twists and jerks of the head, extension of the neck, and subtle turning in the upper body, while the arms remain confined to a standard playing position for classical cello performance.



clothing, inferred gender presentation and class,<sup>21</sup> is shown to affect perceptions of instrumental competency. Chia-Jung Tsay's short study reveals that research participants of both lesser and greater experience in 'assessing' musical performances used visual cues to make judgements about the perceived expertise of individual musicians in the absence of sound, based on both silent and audio-accompanied video (Tsay, 2013). George McKay, also, cites Wilmer's (1989, p. 40) comment that the mid-century import of "black American musical masculinity" to Britain (2005, p. 278) was a kind of visual sexuality which represented a factor in the growing popularity of Jazz in the post-war context.<sup>22</sup> As seen in the example of du Pré, delegitimising on the basis of gendered visibility is not limited to the aspect of clothing highlighted by Hayden, and the gendered inferences of physicality – the gait, stature, poise, the articulations of the body, *the very way in which a body moves or does not move* – represent a dominant interface of "corporeal signs" by which gender might be construed through performative "acts, gestures, enactments" (Butler, 2006, p. 185). Anna Ramstedt, in her research into conceptions of gender in concert piano performance from the perspective of emerging professional women pianists in Europe, notes the repeated connection drawn by her interviewees between women and corporeality; movements of the body are identified concurrently as something intrinsically feminine, and also as something that should be suppressed within the concert context (Ramstedt, 2019).

Judith Butler asserts that the "illusion of an interior and organizing gender core", constructed by the mechanism of gender performance, is "discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (2006, p. 186).<sup>23</sup> The intersection of a conflation between the corporeal and the feminine in Ramstedt's findings, and the interviewees'

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<sup>21</sup> Consider the case of violinist and classical music's *enfant terrible* Nigel Kennedy, whose choice of informal clothing is frequently the subject of conversation in interview or commented on by journalists in detail (see Meddows, 2017; Aitkenhead, 2013). In Kennedy's case, the association between informal sportswear and the disenfranchised working class, more so than gender, runs the same risk of delegitimising as Yuja Wang's choice of dress.

<sup>22</sup> A race-aware reading of this comment should also question the extent to which these Jazz musicians were exoticized not only on the basis of nationality, but also perceived ethnicity.

<sup>23</sup> I would extend this into white cis-hetero-patriarchy.

reported suppression of bodily movement, cannot be read as anything other than both a symptom of and a response to a *regulatory* musical culture.

Despite having grown up around a female musical role model where it was normal in my world for women to play music [...] because I was surrounded by father figures [in performance], I felt appallingly conscious of my body to the point where I almost tried to fold it up. Makes performance very difficult! I tried to be like a man to take the edge off. I am far more comfortable dressed in masculine clothes in performance. It's easier for the audience to imagine I might be able to play.

(Multi-instrumentalist improviser Brigit Hayden, in Ferrett et al., 2018, p. 98)

Extending from the heightened frame of the concert hall into the small venue improvisation context via Brigit Hayden's comment above, one can challenge that a body performing in a way which extends the role of corporeality beyond what is normalised within a patriarchal culture and axiology represents not only an aesthetic challenge, but also a social and a structural one. To move the body against a backdrop of suppressed corporeality is to disrupt the status quo, and challenge the normalcy of stasis, bodily subservience, and a-corporeality in direct terms.

In the 1970's improvising climate, the *Feminist Improvising Group* most overtly embodied this challenge in their performance of domesticity and 'women's work', as well as in their explicitly *tactile* relations with each other – their incorporation of touch, dance, movement and sensuality within an arena of disconnected masculine corporeality. Dawn-Smith writes that the permission to explore a distinctly feminine corporeality, and indeed intimacy, within this all-women ensemble can be attributed to the lesbian politics which she holds underpinned much of the group's activity, even for the heterosexual members (Dawn-Smith, 2014; also, 2001). McKay comments that these 'extra-sonic' aspects of touch and movement (which he labels "performative") allowed FIG to "militate against musical acceptance, which was a political position when what was deemed acceptable in improvisation was still largely a male evaluation" (2005, p. 291).

## 2.3 WORKING AGAINST THE IMAGINARY BODY

McKay writes of male evaluation in the past tense, but any ideological primacy which disguises itself as 'neutral' axiology – as objective, abstracted, disembodied, unremarkable – is not easily uprooted. As is clear from the recent writing of Krekels, Reardon-Smith et al., Sappho Donohue, etc., the degree to which patriarchy continues to impact the landscape of free improvisation – to affect its forms, dictate who participates and who is legitimised or canonised – is clearly a matter of critical interest and ongoing investigation for free improvisation's scholars. Certainly, if one takes the growing number of women, queer, and feminist identified authors rising in free improvisation's academia, one can hope tentatively that this indicates a discursive and decisive shift. The historic demographic of free improvisation is also recognisably changing, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that, by a broadening of access aided undoubtedly by the facilities of new technology to disseminate and inform (MacDonald et al., 2021), by the zeitgeist of un-disciplining across the performing arts which facilitates the performative strategies of those marginalised bodies (Aszodi, 2017), and by the incorporation of improvisational methodologies into institutionalised pedagogy at a variety of levels (Johansen et al., 2019), the power-structures of free improvisation's communities are being transformed.

My own part within this change intersects most directly with the troubling of disciplinarity and its definitive relationship to embodiment and axiology, with the acknowledgment and the naming of the explicit relations between the social-political and the nominally aesthetic, as well as the reading of free improvisation in relation to contemporary queer, feminist and posthuman epistemologies. It is in many ways comforting that the expanding and mutating field of free improvisation both resembles and informs the shifting explorations, diverging streams and coalescences of my own practice. However, as I move forward and deeper into my own practice in TFI, permitting the emphatic presence of expressive kinesis, of my own body and all to which it pertains, I feel it is essential to identify the persistence of prejudicial perspectives and processes of othering which have been woven through free improvisation's culture of practice since its earliest days.

The visual, physical, kinetic abjections and associations I have presented above condition not only the bodies of those upon whose subjection they are based, but also the impression of the human body, its kinesiology, and its aesthetic signification in performance at large across a wide geography, and across time. As dance scholar Brenda Gottschild has written “the black dancing body” which she proposes playfully is “a fiction based on reality, a fact based upon illusion”, and which alongside the ‘white dancing body’ represents a “cultural milestone” not a “racial marker”, has “infiltrated and informed the shapes and changes of the American dancing body” (2016, p. 14). Cole and Davis note, in their tracing of the diverse incarnations of blackface phenomena around the globe, for example, that the developing discipline of performance studies has enabled scholars “to perceive the recapitulations of repertoire echoing across time so that they are *identifiable in the merest gesture, musical lick, or intonation*, never mind the full-blown onslaught of burnt cork or its crease-paint progeny” (2013, p. 8, emphasis mine).

It would be incorrect to claim that specific gestural vocabularies or kinesiologies associated with specific gendered and racialised constructions might be entirely abstracted from their respective marginalised groups, and the premise of this section has been to suggest explicit connections, rather than obscure them. However, following Gottschild I would propose also that axiological processes of delegitimization, founded upon abjected bodies, are neither contained nor strictly essentialist in their targeting. The essence of excesses is divergence from a normative body – a white, heteromasculine, static, efficient, uncompromised body, which moves as it is meant to move and does not move too much. It is in relation and in conscious opposition to this *imaginary body*, one which has infused the sonic, conceptual, interpersonal spaces and the rhetoric of free improvisation for some seventy years, that I move in my practice (see *Part II: Identities in Practice*).

### 3 MID-CENTURY MOVEMENT: WESTERN THEATRE-DANCE, CONCEPTUAL SHIFTS, AND IMPROVISED KINESIS

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#### 3.1 GROUND TO MOVE FROM

Vida Midgelow opens the richly resourceful *Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance* by acknowledging that improvisation in dance “has been a long-standing and central approach within the choreographic processes for many dance makers; while for others it is a performance form in its own right” (2019, p. 1). As with improvisation in various musics, the generation of spontaneous expressive movement represents, whether tacitly or explicitly, a fundamental aspect of many practices of dance which fall outwith the much-researched, dominant canon of western theatre-dance and its associated discourses. Bodies moving together under the auspices of what might be named as social dance, (a term derivative of exclusionary as well earnestly delineative motivations), such as salsa, swing, breaking, voguing, tea-dance, bugg, or lambada for example, frequently involve the improvisation of particular steps, shapes or patterns drawn from socio-culturally established and often regionally specific kinetic vocabularies, in addition to the incorporation of dancers’ personal inflections and spontaneous embellishments.

Within the context of western theatre-dance (hereafter WTD),<sup>1</sup> improvisation in one form or another has been a recognisable aspect of choreographic practices since before the advent of modernism. Curtis L. Carter asserts that one can identify improvisation as emerging in earnest from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: from the commonplace spontaneous embellishment of set movement employed by principal dancers in classical ballet, to the in-rehearsal “on the spot” choreography of George Balanchine, to the explicit allowance for ‘natural’ or ‘impulsive’ idiosyncratic movements encouraged by Loïe Fuller, and

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<sup>1</sup> Here I refer to the discipline of dance for audience emergent from European and Euro-Anglo-American cultures. My preference for the term ‘theatre-dance’ is essentially interchangeable with other common terminology such as ‘concert-dance’ or ‘dance for audience’. For ease, given the music-specific terminology also present in this thesis, I err towards ‘theatre-dance’, rather than ‘concert-dance’, in order to invoke the specifically theatrical venue contexts and their respective architecture (for example, the proscenium-stage) to which dance is more closely in relation than concert-music.

even more explicitly to the experimental applications of improvisation as studio-methodology by Rudolf Laban, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze and Mary Wigman as a means of generating choreographic material (later to be fixed into repeatable ‘score’) (Carter, 2000, p. 181). Paralleling my own assertions on the essential non-opposition of composition and improvisation in music (see Chapter 1), De Spain cautions that claiming fundamental opposition between the terms *choreography* and *improvisation* betrays an unnuanced understanding of their fluidity. He identifies that:

while there have been diachronic and synchronic divergences and fluidities in the concepts of choreography and improvisation, our dualistic, literate culture tends to view them in opposition, and often privileges the idea of choreography while pushing improvisation to the margins (where the marginalized have often explored and mastered it in ways that are eventually reappropriated by the choreographic mainstream), but the dividing lines are not so clear. Even the most inveterate improvisers can set rigorous structures that guide their work, while choreographers who set every movement for performance may use improvisation extensively to create those movements. (2019, p. 689)

In music, drawing on Lewis’ Afrological and Eurological distinction of improvising sociomusical cultures (1996), and considering also the slipperiness of delineating between free improvisation and free jazz, I have outlined that in lieu of hard-line terminological definition, one can instead consider differences in practice-culture which infuse the terms composition and improvisation with diverging functionality. They carry different nuance and are privileged differently within different practice cultures and ‘sociomusical’ contexts of performance and/or discussion, contexts which themselves are informed intimately by the personal alignments and identifications of practitioners (see Chapter 1). Within dance, as De Spain summarises, one can also identify a similar fluidity of use and non-mutual-exclusivity of essential terms.<sup>2</sup> Where I commented in Chapter 1 that free improvisation in music was and is a transgressive practice (1.2.2), what is salient, reflecting upon the last century of WTD, and which reflects the motivations in what Lewis terms the Eurological stream of improvised music, is the

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<sup>2</sup> Testament to this is the simple fact that many of the most notable figures of movement improvisation mentioned throughout this text are also identified by academia, by practice-communities, and indeed self-identify, as ‘choreographers’.

subversion of hierarchical structures and power-dynamics within the historically entrenched processes, organisation, and economy of WTD, which movement improvisation has afforded the discipline.

For its role in the development of WTD through the advent of postmodernism, the idea and the practice of improvisation, beyond being something undertaken “in and as performance” (Elliott, 2021, p. 27), has also enabled a politics of questioning. It engendered organisational experimentation within its communities of practitioners, and was one method by which practitioners actualised the explicit irruption of the social-political within the hitherto insular confines of the traditional dance theatre. Joyce Morgenroth identifies that movement improvisation within this context does not “fall comfortably” into a lineage of broadly theatrical traditions in which improvisation was historically more commonplace;<sup>3</sup> instead, improvisation in and as performance within WTD was a distinct product of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century which flowered “in the rebellious sixties” (1987, p. xi). She comments:

[Improvisation] broke the rules of presentational decorum, violated traditional forms, and usurped the role of the choreographer and playwright. Few assumptions were safe. The artistic and political status quo were being assaulted. (Morgenroth, 1987, p. xi)

As I will outline below, improvisation within WTD has been a practice of structural and aesthetical renegotiation driven by the aspiration, if not always the wholesale actualising, of transgression from restrictive norms and normative structures.<sup>4</sup> To lay the ground of the conceptual and practical precedents to my own practice which emerge from the culture of WTD – in particular, the dissolution of conceptual boundaries, the idea that all movement carries potential, and the distribution of creative agency in performing practice afforded by the questioning and changing of organizational and performative hierarchies – in this section I will detail the contributions of some key practitioners by

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<sup>3</sup> Morgenroth harks all the way back to Commedia dell’Arte, and to the travelling performance of troubadours in the Middle Ages, as forming part of this bigger lineage (1987, p. xi).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to temper claims of radicality which often infuse the discussion of improvised movement in the WTD context with an acknowledgement of its entanglement within pervasive social-cultural frameworks of power and control. Particularly with regards to the way in which the racist colonial project across the Euro-Anglo-American context has adhered itself to and surrounds the performing-dancing body, the recognising that improvising practice always sits in relation to, and emerges from, powerful systemic inequalities therefore conditions the degree to which one can claim it as a wholly transgressive or wholly emancipatory practice.

whose influence movement improvisation and these associated concepts became established, whose ideas have influenced me, and have shaped the discourse and global trajectory of the practice. As was the case in Chapters 1 and 2, and in line with Arabella Stanger's position that theatre dance is "a nexus of corporeal, discursive, and institutional practices" (2021, p. 4), I will bring these concepts into explicit relation with the social-political, considering in particular the impact of structural whiteness within the WTD tradition, its conditioning of the body, and its relationship to the turn towards 'ordinariness' in early postmodernism. I will also draw attention to the processes of occlusion and normalisation to which divergent bodies are subject within the culture of Balletic dance (as the dominant form of theatre-dance in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century), and how this has conditioned the impression of the dancing body more generally in the Western context.

### 3.2 CONCEPTUAL SHIFTS (A TALE OF TWO COASTS)

The great blossoming of improvised movement in the WTD context, which has since engendered a global rhizome of associated practitioners, pedagogues, and publics, is commonly attributed to a number of paradigmatic dance-artists and communities who were collaborating and developing work on the dual contexts of the United States of America's coasts from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. While there is undoubtedly a wealth of insight to be gained from a focus on any one of these artists, I choose here to focus on two practitioner-contexts as lenses through which to highlight concepts which are foundational to the strand of movement improvisation with which I most closely associate (emerging out of postmodern theatre dance), and which are important conceptual precedents to my own practice.

In 1950s California, Anna Halprin became known as an artist and teacher whose work engaged deeply with dance's capacity for and as ritual, with inter- and infra-community discourse, with art as healing, with the de-objectification of the female body, with the dissolution of conceptual binaries, and critically, with the engagement of intuitive movement and improvisatory methods in and as performance. In New York City, the formation of the *Judson Dance Theater* (hereafter 'Judson'), often afforded the moniker 'the birthplace of postmodern dance', and subsequently of *The Grand Union*, catalysed an explosion of



interest and practice in movement improvisation; the influence of these New York communities is palpable even today, owing to the prominent roles that the artists of these groups have maintained as practitioners and performers, as pedagogues, as authors, and academics.<sup>5</sup>

The work of artists on these two coasts encapsulated a politically and socially driven reassessment of the hierarchies and organizational structures of modernist dance, the prevailing aesthetic sensibility and artistic philosophy of the era, whose cultural prominence was subtended by the relative hegemony of Ballet within the world of theatre-dance. This reassessment was undertaken across a variety of fundamental parameters, notably: in economy and authorship attribution, through the destabilisation of the choreographer-dancer paradigm and in a shift towards distributed creative agency; and in formalism and aesthetics, which involved the “dissolution of the constitutive binaries [...] of modernist aesthetic ideology”, in part through the strategic “insertion of the ‘non-aesthetic’ in the form of ordinary movement and untrained performers” (Dempster, 2008, p. 23). A critical vehicle for these strategies, by which concept became reified, was the *theorising and practising* of spontaneous improvised movement. Reciprocally, through the articulation and exploration of these strategies in performance, movement improvisation as a practice became adhered to them; their concepts permeated its creative processes and the language of its practitioners, imbuing a developing practice-culture with emancipatory rhetoric and aspirations. This conceptual infusion has underpinned the development of improvised movement, shaping its discourse, affecting its presentation through the ensuing decades to the present, and has directly influenced my own performance practice.

### **3.2.1 West Coast: Anna Halprin**

Aesthetically, that ‘everyday’, ‘non-affected’, ‘pedestrian’, or ‘ordinary’ movement might be of value in theatre-dance performance was an idea reflective of a broad conceptual shift across the Euro-American arts throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wherein the ‘quotidian’ was inserted, or irrupted, into aestheticized

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<sup>5</sup> The Judson dance artists included, at one time or another: Deborah Hay, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Lucinda Childs, Judith Dunn, David Gordon, Twyla Tharp, and Barbara Dilley (among others), alongside an astonishingly broad array of collaborators from across the performing and visual art disciplines, including Cecil Taylor, James Tenney, George Brecht, Bill Dixon, Takehisa Kosugi, Robert Rauschenberg, Jennifer Tipton, Geoffrey Hendricks, Thelonius Monk, Charlotte Moorman, Robert Morris, Carollee Schneemann, and Joan Baker.

spaces in which it had been previously de- or un-valued. Often this was employed in oppositional stance to the acerbic formalism of a prevailing modernist aesthetic.<sup>6</sup> Considering: Duchamp's *Ready-Mades* through to Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1961-62); the development of *Musique Concrète* (see Holmes, 2008) through the early experiments of Stanislavski; the 50's and 60's era cinematic oeuvre of Jean-Luc Godard (see Süner, 2015); right through to the sculptural work of Doris Salcedo or even Tracy Emin's *My Bed* (1998), one can identify the 20<sup>th</sup> century as one in which the nominally 'ordinary' – the everyday, the mundane, the incidental – became ordinary material for presentation, manipulation, and subversion within a great variety of western artistic contexts,<sup>7</sup> and from a great variety of motivations. From the advent of anti-modernist sensibilities in the early century (the dates of which vary dependent on disciplinary and cultural contexts),<sup>8</sup> the received ontological boundaries set between art and life became the subject of extensive examination and attempts at dissolution through the presentation of the ordinary as aesthetically viable.

Elizabeth Dempster asserts that, within the context of theatre dance, the "narrative of a progressive modernism exhausts itself or runs aground in the early 1960s" (2008, p. 34), the period around which Anna Halprin's improvising practice was developing on the west coast. The emergence of 'ordinary' movement in the postmodern theatre-dance context which is often discussed in relation to Judson, but also formed a central aspect of Halprin's work, "involved a strategic embrace of the residuum", summarised as "all that is cut away and excluded in the formation of theatre dance"; this was then

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<sup>6</sup> For a self-proclaimedly Francocentric but nevertheless insightful account of the move against spectacle and modernist tendency across the visual arts, cinema, and theatre through the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present, see (Gumpert et al., 1997).

<sup>7</sup> As Alfred Huyssen (1988) asserts, quoted by Burt: "modernist art has a mission to salvage the purity of high art from the encroachments of urbanization, the impact of technology and industrialization, and from mass culture in general. The avant-garde of the early decades of the twentieth-century, however, 'attempted to subvert art's autonomy, its artificial separation from life, its institutionalization as "high art" that was perceived to feed right into the legitimization needs of the 19th-century forms of bourgeois society' (ibid.: 163)" (Burt, 2007, p. 30).

<sup>8</sup> Burt comments, for example, that the renewed interest in Dada (or Neo-Dadaism) in New York in the 40's and 50's did not explore fundamentally 'new' ideas (the precedents having been set historically by Duchamp, Satie et al. in Continental Europe) (Burt, 2007, p. 30). Due to the apparent marginality of the early-20<sup>th</sup> Century avant-garde in New York, however, in comparison to continental Europe, which met lesser "public success [...] Pop, happenings, Concept, experimental music, surfiction, and [the] performance art of the 1960's and 1970's look more novel than they really were" (Huyssen, 1988, quoted in Burt, 2007, p. 30)

“taken up as the revalued ground of dancing” (2008, p. 34). Dempster highlights, following Deborah Jowett, that the *pedestrian*:<sup>9</sup>

functions to confuse or disable entrenched oppositions upon which dance modernism is founded, in particular, the oppositions between dancers and non-dancers, dance movement and everyday movement and choreographic schema and the performance. [...] the presence of the pedestrian in the form of undancerly dancers and everyday actions provoked a profound, if regrettably short-lived, questioning of the forms and categories of received practice. (2008, p. 24)

Underpinning all of Halprin’s work, to which she was wholly devoted until her death in 2020,<sup>10</sup> was a tangible and profound commitment to break the entrenched sense of boundary between WTD’s traditional conceptual and practical binaries: between its focus on removed art-performance and daily life, between the body-individual and the body-social, between practitioner and public (see Hirsch, 2016). This inclination towards what I would name non-dualistic perspective, or anti-dualism (see *Non-Dualistic Perspective*, in Part II), also involved Halprin’s intimate exploration with ‘ordinary’ movement – with the dissolution of the binary between the ‘affected’ and the ‘pedestrian’ – manifest in her own choreography, and in her engagement with ‘untrained’ dancers and communities. Across the spectrum, *all* movement was, to paraphrase Dempster, taken up by Halprin as valued ground for dancing. Despite her disciplinary pedigree, her advocacy of this binary-dissolving, non-dualistic practice and thinking was not always welcomed by the dance establishment. In interview with Richard Schechner in 1989, she comments:

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<sup>9</sup> The term *pedestrian* carries with it associations of the street, the public sphere, as well as the bodily activity of walking. These three imaginaries contrasted markedly with the conventional spaces, economy, and aesthetic vocabulary of theatre-dance as it developed through classical ballet to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and into the modern era. The front-facing proscenium stage and its fictive affordances, the dance-literate theatre-going public, the highly stylised, technically strenuous, formalised kinetic language of the European theatre-dance tradition were set absolutely in opposition to an exterior world of bodies-at-labour, urbanised public spaces, and industrial consumption. As such, the term as utilised within dance functions not only as a descriptor of kinesis, but as an indicator of counter-culture (in either a positive or negative light).

<sup>10</sup> As is the case with many first-generation free improvising musicians, it is worth reflecting that a great number of the founding figures of postmodern dance are still practising and teaching as of the date of this thesis. In addition to the death of Halprin in 2020, Nancy Stark Smith, early developer of Contact Improvisation and founder of *Contact Quarterly*, whose impact certainly rivals Halprin’s in terms of global influence, passed away in 2020.

In the dance world the reaction I often get is that “this is therapy, not dance.” I’ve never found this prejudice in the theatre world. I search for real-life-as-art. I want the personalized self-body to become the metaphor for the big collective body. I don’t like the way ballet, modern, or even postmodern dance armors [sic] the body personality by abstracting feelings, content, and physical movement. It becomes formalized art, feels distant from life, and doesn’t involve me. I can be momentarily entertained, excited, even elevated like anyone else that goes to dance performances, but it doesn’t last. (Schechner and Halprin, 1989, p. 67)

Driven by her agenda in search of “real-life-as-art”, Halprin developed a methodology which cultivated individual, person-specific ‘kinaesthetic awareness’, as well as incorporating a politics of community and collectivity in performed movement, extensively exploring what might today be named *socially engaged practice*.<sup>11</sup> Many of Halprin’s titled works, such as *Ceremony of Us* (1969), *Circle the Earth* (1986), and *Planetary Dance* (1987) were concerned with hierarchical relations, with performed and real-world power structures, and with inter-community healing as ritual (Schechner, 1989; Halprin and Kaplan, 2015). The latter two of these, in stark contrast to the dominant axiological position of mid-century modern dance, were framed as accessible to and in fact predicated upon the participation of non-trained dancers (something for which Judson, and the later development of Contact Improvisation, would also become well known). Halprin’s dedication to this way of practising saw her navigate and facilitate the irruption of the everyday into the context of the nominally aesthetic, as well the inverse – the articulation of the social-political within the performative frame. Although the methodology and execution in some of her works can be critiqued from today’s critical social-political perspective,<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This practice is referred to in Jackson et al. (2022) as “Civic Artistry”. Through the latter decades of Halprin’s career, of particular note is her extensive work with both cancer-patients and survivors, with the elderly and those less able-bodied, and also with the LGBTQ(+) community across the course of the global AIDS Pandemic (Halprin and Kaplan, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> In particular, *Ceremony of Us* has been critiqued for its racial insensitivity in both creative process and execution (see Herbst, 2014). Irrespective of its aspirations towards healing racial division in the wake of the 1965 Watts Riots in Los Angeles, the methodology of the project, which saw Halprin author a specifically ‘black kinesiology’ for a troupe of all African American dancers, was markedly inappropriate. While the Halprin archive describes the work as “both a challenge to the status quo of racial stereotypes and an unwitting reinforcement of the sexual and class myths embedded in them.” (“Ceremony of Us · San Francisco Dancers Workshop and Tamalpa Institute Anna Halprin Digital Archive,” n.d.), and Halprin herself reflects: ““there were *real* issues [...] black women feeling abandoned as the men were attracted to white women. White men feeling emasculated. The issues of understanding their differences, finding their commonalities, were exactly what the dance was about.” (Gerber, 2009), neither perspective directly and sufficiently acknowledges the project’s exhibition of racial stereotypes concerning exoticized, sexualised, black *others*.

Halprin was an artist who embraced movement improvisation explicitly as a means to actualise an agenda of anti-hierarchy across both the aesthetic and social arenas.

The foregrounding of ‘ordinary movement’ and the explicit engagement with the ‘pedestrian’ by artists such as Halprin is generally alluded to in terms of its aesthetic radicality, however the degree to which the concept of *ordinariness* (which the pedestrian encapsulates within the theatre-dance context) might be troublingly compounded by hegemonic perspectives, in particular with regards to race, is an aspect of the discourse which has been critically under-discussed and has significant implications for dancing bodies. Rebecca Chaleff has undertaken a powerful critique of the turn towards “radical ordinariness” in the early period of postmodern theatre-dance,<sup>13</sup> highlighting that the foundational aesthetics of the movement were heavily influenced by systemic racism and institutional whiteness, and that its founding artists, albeit unconsciously, “preserved and perpetuated the whiteness of high modernism by twisting the trope of racial exclusion from a focus on trained bodies to a focus on ordinary bodies” (2018, p. 72). In line with my own exposition of the pervasive racist stereotyping of moving black bodies which dominated 20<sup>th</sup> Century Western media as being characterised by *hyper*-mobility, *hyper*-flexibility and corporeal excesses (see 2.2.1), Chaleff has highlighted that such qualities of *excess*, while they might be considered “admirable” qualities for dancers, when they are “culturally adhered to blackness [are] as implicitly restrictive as they are explicitly laudatory” (2018, p. 72). She holds that the exaltation of ordinariness within early postmodern dance unwittingly reinforced the exclusion of bodies which, through culturally embedded processes of racialised differentiation, were automatically ascribed the condition of *extraordinariness*, exceptionality, and otherness as held against a norm of whiteness. She summarises:

Feminist theorists of intersectionality have taught us that normativity is scripted by complex assemblages of power structures that shape the subject’s orientation to the idea of ordinary life. Furthermore, postcolonial theorists have interrogated the conceptual category of the ordinary as a function of colonial enterprise that

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<sup>13</sup> Chaleff focuses her critique on two paradigmatic works of postmodern choreography: Yvonne Rainer’s *Trio A* (1966) and Trisha Brown’s *Locus* (1975).

privileges white, Euro-American bodies, histories, and ideologies by enabling *claims to universality* (2018, p. 74, emphasis mine)

Chaleff identifies that the ordinary, as conceived by the white majority founding artists of the American postmodern dance movement,<sup>14</sup> was necessarily informed by a disciplinary space and lived experience oriented by whiteness as an invisible and normalising force; “as an unseen characteristic, [which] remained unquestioned, and therefore [was] protected by”, and I would also suggest, protected *from* “choreographic explorations” (2018, p. 72). Richard Dyer opens his influential critique of whiteness by remarking that “as long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people” (Dyer, 2013, p. 1). One can extend that within the context of dance to which Chaleff refers, *othered bodies are raced, white bodies are just bodies*. The aesthetic choices of the early postmodern artists, including Halprin, therefore “remained inflected with the power dynamics that had privileged white artists for centuries” (Foster, 2002, quoted in Chaleff, 2018). A perspective on the ordinary was present, but it was constructed from the experience of whiteness only. That the early postmodernists’ experiments with the pedestrian represented any kind of universal ordinariness, ‘true’ ordinariness, or even the idea that such a thing exists, is therefore an impossible claim.

[the] presumed universality of the white subject enables white bodies to circulate unremarkably yet influentially within the context of performance, moving from a position of privilege in which their race does not precede or define their presence onstage. (Chaleff, 2018, p. 76)

To extol ordinariness and to admonish the spectacular (as is the case in Rainer’s famous *No Manifesto*) where both of these concepts are predicated on normative whiteness, reinforces the disenfranchising of bodies which are automatically “raced” as other. Therefore, notwithstanding the evident impact the emergence of the *pedestrian* had as a destabilising force against the specific aesthetic of modern dance, and its commonly attributed radicality, it is essential to engage with the racialised component of the

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<sup>14</sup> De Spain has also identified that the majority of movement artists representing the “face” of improvisation, forming the interviewee pool for his *Landscape of Now*, are white (2014, p. 7).

ordinary turn in scholarly discourse around early postmodernism, as I have here, for two reasons. Firstly, in order to avoid the negligent implication that the aesthetics of the movement might be disconnected from concerns of bodily difference and differentiation which had significant cultural impact (and bear relevance today). And secondly, more optimistically, because recognising this complexity as entangled with practice suggests, in and of itself, a capacity for practice to be a genuine mediator for social interests – for the negotiation of subjectivities, and by extension, one hopes, for the articulation of social change.

Despite her inclination towards ordinariness, in performing “natural actions of everyday life” (Carter, 2000, p. 185), Halprin did not outright dissuade affect (as the ‘non-pedestrian’) or admonish more formalistic gesture. Rather, she attuned her practice and pedagogy towards integrating the bodies of ‘undancerly dancers’ and their own ways of moving. She encouraged a personally “intuitive” understanding of the symbolic potential of simple movements, in order to invoke personal and collective memory, imagery, and meaning (see Mishlove, 2000), driving her creation of so-called ‘ritual’ pieces (see Schechner, 1989; Halprin and Kaplan, 2015; Mishlove, 2000). Carter comments that in doing so, Halprin’s aim was also “to use improvisation to break the traditional division between performers and spectators and to make the dance experience more accessible to dance audiences and the public.” (2000, p. 185). Her aspiration was the bridging of separated groups, for which she strived to find practical language and a methodology of movement which was available to all.

Although, following Chaleff’s argument, any claim to universality of movement (something Halprin variously espoused) must be interrogated on the basis of its intersection with structural racism, I would also suggest that the racial experience of Halprin herself intimately informed her motivation towards describing her practice in such terms. From a family of Eastern-European Jewish immigrants (Barthes, 2007), and growing up in a Yiddish-speaking household (Jackson et al., 2022, p. 435), Halprin has commented variously on the impact of her Jewishness upon her approach to making work (Wittmann et al., 2015, p. 16), particularly regarding community, a desire to heal division, and the power of ritual

(Barthes, 2007, p. 5). Douglas Rosenberg has commented that Halprin's Jewishness "is written on her body" manifest "in her commitment to community and to repairing that which is weakened or broken" (Rosenberg, 2005, p. 6); this he links to the Jewish concept of Tikkun Olam, often translated as *repairing the world*.

The intersection of Jewishness and whiteness is complex and highly geo-culturally specific,<sup>15</sup> and this complexity does not negate the capacity for the problematic idea of the 'universal ordinary' as predicated on normative whiteness to exist within Halprin's work. However, in light of David Schraub's assertion that "the concept of the Jew as being even potentially White is of relatively recent vintage." (2019, p. 379),<sup>16</sup> and considering Halprin's generational proximity to the upheaval of migration as a result of antisemitic persecution and the challenges of integration (even within the Jewish diaspora; see Barthes, 2007, p. 3) as well as her personal experience of antisemitism (see Ross, 2021), I believe that one can also acknowledge Halprin's inclination towards "universal" movements as a commitment to dance's affordances in enriching and empowering across the boundaries of community, informed explicitly by her lived experience of Jewishness, and not only from an aesthetically motivated, socially-politically disconnected response to prevailing modernism.<sup>17</sup>

In exploring movement performance through ritual pieces, predicated less upon the execution of "dancerly" activity and more upon human connection and collective gestures and activity, which involved the inclusion of 'non-affected movement', Halprin *aspired* to an ethic of social inclusivity

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<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, this intersection is the subject of substantial debate and extensive scholarship which I cannot hope to summarise here. For a variety of critical perspectives, see: Brodtkin, 1998; Jacobson, 1998, Chapters 3, 4, 5; Berkovits, 2018; Bakan, 2014; Schraub, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> He clarifies "As racial discourse began to emerge in Europe in the seventeenth century, the general (though not universal) view was that Jews were at the very least racially Other and perhaps even "Black." This went hand in hand with Jewish subordination – Jewishness and Blackness reciprocated and reinforced one another, as both served as markers of disease, ugliness, and inferiority of all sorts" (2019, 379).

<sup>17</sup> Notwithstanding the issues I have outlined with regards to the impact of whiteness on early postmodern dance, it must not be presumed that turns towards "universalism" always spring from such contexts. Rakesh Sukesh, for example, is an artist who has developed a method which aims to "enhanc[e] humanness in its most raw form" which is a holistic synthesis of yogic and psychophysical practices, such as "Kalarippayattu and contemporary movement techniques, yoga Asana, pranayama, energy work and phycology" (intact\_method, 2022).



through improvisation in which everyone could partake, in the pursuit of expressing collective and personal authenticity. Curtis L. Carter comments that:

Halprin's methods extend the notion of subjectivity, which had conventionally focused on the choreographer's explorations in modern dance, to include the individual dancers whose free and spontaneous movements also contribute to the dance process. Natural actions of everyday life, including the movements drawn from the sensuous behaviors [sic] of both animals and humans, were brought into play in performance through improvisation in Halprin's work. (Carter, 2000, p. 185)

It was in essence a practice in which *all movement might carry potential*, therefore, which Halprin transmitted through her 'Workshop' in San Francisco, to a generation of younger, eager dance-artists. Halprin's anti-dualistic inclinations, her engagement of improvisation with the social-political, and her openness to the *potentiality* of diverse forms of movement expression, I hold to be of immediate relevance to my own practice. I extend the idea of the potentiality of 'all movement' through both the sonic and kinetic domains, recognising not only all movement, but all sound (and ultimately all activity) as carrying potential. Furthermore, the dissolution of conceptual binaries associated with a non-dualistic approach to thinking, doing, and describing practice is a critically important aspect of my own improvising, which informs and underpins the content of Part II of this thesis.

### **3.2.2 East Coast: The Judson Dance Theater**

The extension of subjectivity which, Carter writes, infused Anna Halprin's encouragement of "free and spontaneous movements" (Carter, 2000, p. 185) also encapsulated a decisive conceptual and practical shift towards the democratization of dance-generation processes which fuelled the politics of early improvised movement across the United States. The question of how to generate a practice-culture in which individual dancers might be afforded immediate creative agency in performance, rather than participating solely in the exhibition of dance *made by another* in transmitted, largely immutable and

singularly attributed choreography, became definitive of the investigations of the artists' collectives in the East.<sup>18</sup>

In the 1960's, in Greenwich Village, within a climate of counter-culture movements, artistic and social protests against political oppressions, disciplinary conservatism, and elitism,<sup>19</sup> individuals who would form the core of The Judson Dance Theater and later The Grand Union coalesced around the already prominent power-couple of John Cage and Merce Cunningham. Cage, a lecturer in experimental music at The New School, espoused what is now recognisable as a hugely influential experimental compositional philosophy (which I will only summarise here): his flattening of hierarchical distinction between salient disciplinary concepts such as 'noise', 'sound', and 'music'; his juxtaposition of and indistinction between the nominally pedestrian and the artistically heightened or inflected; his orientation towards chance and indeterminacy; his Buddhistic de-emphasising of compositional ego; and his involvement with supradisciplinary performance practices, resonate overtly in the work of both Judson and the Grand Union, prompting Jewett's teasing comment that Cage was the "midwife of postmodern dance" (Jewett, 2005, p. 90). These groups, challenging their experience of the formalism and stricture of the lineage of modern dance within which their members had trained,<sup>20</sup> undertook an aesthetic and philosophical reassessment of what shapes WTD could take, who it could incorporate, and by what innovative mechanisms of composition and collaboration performance in this particular cultural context could come to be. This they enacted through privileging the use of everyday and found objects,<sup>21</sup> the group performance of (often quite literally) pedestrian movement,<sup>22</sup> the subversion of

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<sup>18</sup> As Elliott writes: "the aims of accessibility and egalitarianism infus[ed] the artistic experiments of the American 1960s' avant-garde dance and theatre improvisers" (Elliott, 2014, p. 38).

<sup>19</sup> A climate which equally gave rise to the intermedia happenings of the *Fluxus* artists, as well as to the formation of the seminal groups in improvised music such as AACM, SME and AMM (all founded in 1965)

<sup>20</sup> Banes comments that "Improvisation, spontaneous determination, the use of chance techniques were not simply formal devices, but carried political meaning. [Judson] was a group that wholeheartedly rejected the hierarchical organization of the modern dance world it had become part of, and, by extension, the authoritarian elements of American society its generation had begun to defy" (Banes, 1981, p. 104).

<sup>21</sup> Lucinda Childs' *Carnation* (1964), for example, involved the dancer placing various domestic items including a salad-strainer and kitchen sponges into sculptural formations on her head.

<sup>22</sup> As Carolee Schneeman can be heard commenting in the promotional video for the MoMA retrospective on Judson, *The Work is Never Done* – "we looked out the window for possible movement ideas, people walking in

WTD's choreographic roles and codes, and the development of improvisation as a bespoke performance practice.<sup>23</sup>

Sally Banes holds that it was “through Cage [that] a younger generation of American artists found a heritage in the history of European avant-garde art and performance” (Banes, 1981, p. 102). While Cage was evidently a titanic figure of the avant-garde, it is perhaps more pertinent to the dance origins of Judson to emphasize the influential roles of Robert Ellis Dunn, and of Cage's partner Merce Cunningham, through whose pedagogical efforts the Judson artists were given privileged access to Cage's ideas.<sup>24</sup> Carter names Dunn, along with Anna Halprin, as being a “catalytic” individual who was “especially instrumental in advancing improvisational approaches to dance movement and choreography”; this was enhanced, he says, in the case of both Dunn and Halprin, by their bringing to dance of “a vision grounded in multidisciplinary interests” (Carter, 2000, p. 184). While, beyond the kinetic, Halprin had a close appreciation for the spatial and architectural not only through her relationship with her landscape-architect husband Larry Halprin, but also through attending classes during Larry's studies in Architecture at Harvard (Hirsch, 2016),<sup>25</sup> Dunn, as an individual straddling the formal domains of both music and dance, offered a synthesis of Cage's philosophy of sonic composition within the frame of choreography (Burt, 2007, p. 33). This no doubt laid influential conceptual precedents for sonic-kinetic dialogue within Judson and its successor-groups. Considering the legacy of Dunn's class as the crucible in which the Judson artists first began to work together, one can assess that the interdisciplinarian syncretism Dunn espoused was a foundational element of the group's

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the street” (“Judson Dance Theater,” n.d.). Steve Paxton's work in particular is known for investigating the act of walking at great length in performance (Rainer, 2012; Paxton, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> While during the early 1950s there existed already a burgeoning avant-garde interdisciplinary scene in Greenwich Village, Satin comments that within dance, performance by overtly iconoclastic experimental groups such as the *Dance Associates Cooperative* gained little acclaim or notoriety. Judson therefore functioned as a point of concentration, with the group's explorations representing “a focus for a number of things that had already been happening” (Herbert McDowell, quoted in Satin, 2003, p. 68).

<sup>24</sup> The mentor-figure James Waring was also a satellite of the Judson group, whose choreographic and pedagogical practices intersected with some (but not all) of Judson's principal aesthetic and organisational concerns (Satin, 2003). See also (Vaughan, 1980).

<sup>25</sup> For more on the synergistic artistic relationship between the Halprin's, see Wasserman (2012).

initiation. Coupled with the experience of numerous Judson artists of working closely with Halprin, the presence of inter- and multi-disciplinarity in the group's origins is tangible.

The transmission of Cageian ideas via the figure of Cunningham was also important, because, as Banes asserts, "the [...] dancers respected Cunningham's achievements as a choreographer, rebelling against what was sometimes felt as a hierarchy of authority in modern dance and cleansing the dance of its often psychological overtones." (Banes, 1981, p. 102). While he occupied a position of respect and influence within the Judson community, Cunningham maintained a degree of aesthetic distance from the group's improvisational explorations; Ramsay Burt quotes from Jill Johnston's memoir-like recollection of her writings for *the Village Voice* (1998) on the duality of Cunningham's relationship to the Judson artists:

While Cunningham has been unwilling to sacrifice an aesthetic he had become deeply committed to he's been more than sympathetic to a new aesthetic for which he was partly responsible. I think he makes occasional forays into a territory which he completely understands but which remains alien to the sweep of his classical purity. (Johnston, quoted in Burt, 2007, p. 27)

Despite this distance, and, I would add, acknowledging what Johnson describes as "classical purity" as euphemism for an alignment with the Eurocentric aesthetic outlook, Steve Paxton recalls it was Cunningham's "mutational edge", in opposition to what reads (in the pejorative) as a celebrity and 'maturity' that *stagnated* the practice of the modern dance exemplars, which rendered him "innovative" in the eyes of the Judson artists (Paxton, 2012). Cunningham was an individual within whom experimentalism and artistic radicality were usefully tempered by industry acknowledgement and peer-recognition, who could therefore effectively straddle the precarity of the establishment/avant-garde divide.

It was ultimately *beyond* Cunningham and Dunn's classes and studio, however, within the "Judson cauldron" itself (Rainer, 2012) that Cage's "credo of "any sound can be music" (Perron, 2020) was

translated into the kinetic in its rawest form.<sup>26</sup> Echoing Halprin's incorporation of the 'ordinary', the Judson artists sought to embrace "the residuum" (Dempster, 2008, p. 34) through the incorporation of 'undancerly' action and its *interpolation* – beyond only the juxtaposition of material as exhibited in the collaborations of Cage, Cunningham, and Tudor (etc.) – with affected kinetic forms. Hilary Elliott notes that "taking its place alongside [...] experiments in choreographic form and Cunningham-inspired Chance techniques, improvisation in and as performance became one of Judson Dance Theater's defining characteristics" (2021, p. 27). While it is of note that Judson presented ostensibly *single-authored works* as its primary output (titled and attributed to individual 'choreographers'), the questioning of hierarchies, form, and aesthetic values which the practice of improvisation engendered, and a push towards collective artistic generation and equitably distributed creative agency (hence the idea of democratization), represented an essential influence on Judson's immediate community and forms a substantial aspect of its legacy. Just as in the case of the early improvising musicians, whose advocacy of improvisational practice was subtended by what David Toop coins poetically as "dreams of freedom" (Toop, 2016), Judson's exploration of improvisation was infused by a climate of politicised practice which sought the performative articulation of aspirational social structures and value-systems, towards emancipation from the rigidity of the status-quo. Banes highlights that

during [the 1960's/ 70] American culture generally expressed themes of concern with cooperation, collective living and working situations, and attention to process over finished product. In politics and social situations as well as in the fine arts, people began to look to spontaneity and improvisatory methods to provide a life better than that which a rigidly constructed, individual-oriented, hierarchical society had created (Banes, 1981, pp. 208-9).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Perron asserts that "John Cage's credo that "any sound can be music" theoretically extended to "any movement can be dance." But Cunningham pretty much stuck to a highly technical style—long spine, extended legs, pointed toes. It was the Judson group that applied Cage's idea to movement. Under the tutelage of Cage's protégé Robert Dunn, they came in with task dances, gestural dances, talking dances, screaming dances. There were dances with tires, chairs, hangers, mattresses, balloons, radios, homemade films, roller skates, and a parachute. No one was aiming to produce a masterpiece, or even to please the audience—which was made up mostly of other young artists." (Perron, 2020)

<sup>27</sup> Carter also comments more generally that "improvisation incorporates [...] the overthrow of hierarchical practices and the endorsement of open form, and has thus become a central concept in the dance" (Carter, 2000, p. 181).

Through their improvisational experiments, the Judson group sought to apply a counter-hegemonic politics of cooperative egalitarianism to the domain of artistic practice.

Reframing and expanding the claims made by Banes in *Democracy's Body* (1981) within contemporary theory, Joy Harris has reflected that both the practice and the organizational structure of the Judson group can be usefully assessed through the lens of Hélène Landemore's recent propositions in *Open Democracy* (2020).<sup>28</sup> Harris identifies a strong correlation with what Landemore terms an ethic of fundamental "participation rights" within the work of Judson, claiming, after both Banes and Judith Dunn (Banes, 1981), that the group's generally "antihierarchical structure", manifest for example in their concerted commitment to consensus decision-making, avoided "dominance of one member over the other, [kept] artistic cults of personality from infecting the creative realm" and "level[led] public space so a diversity of voices [could] be heard" (2021). She adds that the incorporation of 'non-trained' dancers into working practice and performance "nurtured an artistic space poised to embrace various artists, disciplines and practices", which by necessity garnered a tendency towards pluralism and cooperation. While I agree with this perspective, recognising Arabella Stanger's argument that theatre-dance "can model harmonic or freeing experiences for dancers and audiences while masking and legitimizing imperial, colonial, and white supremacist practices of space" (Stanger, 2021, p. 4), I would qualify that it is important to temper claims to Judson's diversity and inclusivity by acknowledging its white majority community, as well as its proximity to the Eurological framework of modern dance from which its dancers emerged (Stanger discusses this, via the lens of Cunningham's work, in relation to the constructing and choreographing of "white ideality"; 2021, pp. 125-158).

Although I have asserted that despite the group's commitment to interdisciplinarity and the foregrounding of the movement of non-dancers within performance, an unusefully deterministic

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<sup>28</sup> Landemore's basic provocation is that systems held to be fundamental to or synonymous with contemporary ideas of democracy need essential reassessment; she advocates, for example, a shift away from electoral systems of government (commonplace within so-called liberal democracies) towards "assembly representation either through lottocratic method, or self-selection processes" (Harris, 2021). She also extols a fundamental transparency of political processes as a means to ensure accountability for *both* politicians and citizens, as well as an emphasis on majoritarianism (Landemore, 2020).

delineation between trained and non-trained dancers is problematically reinforced by repeatedly naming them as such (see McPherson, 2020b, p. 25), the willingness of the Judson corps to incorporate untrained movers explicitly within the frame of dance performance stood in stark contrast to the prevailing modernist tendency towards the ‘dancerly’ exhibition of virtuosity.<sup>29</sup> In marked contrast to the highly stratified, top-down company structure of modern dance companies, which constituted the dominant disciplinary structure of the era, Judson’s experiments in collective organization both on and off-stage emerged through and infused their deepening focus on improvisation in a synthesis of aspirational politics and performance practice.

While for Halprin and the Judson artists, within this shift towards democratisation, the historic identification of *choreographer* was far from abandoned, the function and definition of the role was expanded to include an openness to emergent movement as generated in the liveness of performance by numerous agential (human) bodies. A. A. Leath, who along with John Graham was a formative collaborator of Halprin’s until the late-60’s, comments on their developmental work together that “no one person was the choreographer, each person was using his own innate materials” (Gerber, 2009). Following the dissolution of Judson in the mid-60’s, the development of The Grand Union emerged out of Yvonne Rainer’s project *Continuous Project – Altered Daily (CP-AD)*, as a maturation of the reassessment of choreographic role and the opening to collective authorship initiated in the Judson experiments. This was a project in which Rainer’s role was, at least at its inception, explicitly and singularly authorial; however, Sally Banes identifies that as *CP-AD* was performed reiteratively, “Rainer struggled with her ambivalence about hierarchy and democracy, freedom and limits, her role as “boss-lady” (as she put it), and her desire for cooperative work” (1987, p. 206), and resultantly, the process to evolve until it “deeply involved nine choreographers instead of one” (p. 207).

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<sup>29</sup> This virtuosity is something which I would consider, per Threadgold’s writing on the mythologising of Discipline, as the “performance of [the discipline’s] genres”, the on-stage articulation of its “favourite discourses, myths, and narratives” (Threadgold, 1996, p. 194).

The move towards a distributed attribution of creativity – the naming of multiple individuals as being co-generators of the work – broke markedly from both the power-dynamic and the authorship paradigm of the established choreographer-dancer relationship which had hitherto dominated the modernist tradition – choreographer as one *making dance upon the body of another*,<sup>30</sup> and dancer as one whose body *articulates another's dance* – and is perhaps the most striking aspect of Judson's legacy. Paralleling organizational and structural developments in free improvised music, subtended by similar aspirations against rigid hierarchy and top-down power-structures, the distribution of creative agency across members of improvising groups underpinned the development of improvisation in the kinetic realm. In my own practice, this approach carries forward not only in the way in which I work closely with collaborators, who I consider equitably agential co-generators of *improvisational worlds* (See Part II, Practice), but also in my utilising of multiple convergent expressive modalities within the course of single performances in a relationally de-hierarchised manner. The ethic of hierarchical destabilisation, seeded in the Judson era, imbues my contemporary practice.

### 3.3 BODIES BEING SEEN: INDIVIDUALITY, VISUALITY, AND THE COMPANY-DANCER FROM THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY TO THE PRESENT

The modernist choreographic paradigm of the Judson era was epitomised, and to an extent still persists, in the culture of dance-companies named after individual artists, and by extension, framed as their singular choreographic vision. De Spain offers that the climate of mid-century modernist dance was in essence an “era of the Choreographer, writ large”, with individuals such as Martha Graham “seen as creative geniuses responsible not just for making movement but also for a grand philosophy (one might, with tongue lightly in cheek, say a religion) of dance as an art form” (2019, p. 691). As such, approaches that question the hierarchy of this choreographic paradigm cut to the very heart of the dance discipline, its economy, and its image, undermining the cults of personality which surrounded the matriarchs of

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<sup>30</sup> Prepositional phrases still common within dance parlance reinforce the subject-object relationship between choreographer and dancer: to choreograph a work *on* a body, to set a dance *upon* someone, for example.



modern dance, from whose ideas, Halprin notes, she and her collaborators consciously diverged (Halprin and Kaplan, 2015).

Halprin indicates her objection, upon seeing work by Martha Graham's company in 1955, that such was the influence of these totemic choreographers that the dancers of the company came close to mimicking them even in their appearance:

I was very offended that all the dancers in the company were lookalikes to Martha or whoever was the choreographer. I could never move like that. First of all, I didn't have the kind of hair she had. She has this long slick shiny hair. Every time she would move her head one way or another the hair would go flopping back and forth. My hair is just [...] it's always been kind of kinky. I move my head and my hair wouldn't move at all. There was no way I could copy her. That just kind of rubbed me the wrong way. Not lending itself to creativity, which was my greatest concern. (Gerber, 2009)

Beyond indicating the evident iconifying of the choreographer symptomatic of the era, Halprin's comments on the dancers' appearance also poke at the disciplinarily entrenched culture of control by which the company-dancer's body has been historically subject to depersonalisation, de-agentialisation, and subservience to choreographic will and processes of disciplinary normativity. These processes, as exposed below, are also intimately entangled with a culture of racial exclusion within the discipline of dance, whereby the presence of the ordinary body of whiteness has constructed substantial barriers to participation.

Through uniform visibility, and through corporeal conformity in both style and technique, the company-dancer's body has conventionally been rendered an efficient and purportedly 'neutral' instrument for the execution of externally imputed shapes, gestures, lines, forms, and ideas, as authored by the choreographer figure. Repurposing Craenen's assertion on composed virtuosity within music, I would propose that these processes represent compositional strategies by which a disciplinarily sanctioned authorial body can "*force[]* access to the performing body" (2014, p. 130); by their very nature as the explicit exercising of control by one party over the body of another, these strategies have distinct ethical as well as aesthetic implications. Paralleling the sartorial conventions of the concert-hall (see 1.2.1), the

occlusion of the company-dancer's individuality by visual means has been actualised through the commonplace stipulation of uniform costuming and hairstyling for performance and in the rehearsal studio,<sup>31</sup> which is often reinforced by specific differentiation for soloists, and consequently plays into axiological norms whereby the visual identification of individuality is adhered to, and permitted insofar as it reinforces or indicates, paradigms of soloistic virtuosity.<sup>32</sup>

From the early modernist era onwards, concert works as wide ranging as Martha Graham's *Chronicle* (1936) to Pina Bausch's *Rite of Spring* (1975), José Limon's *The Unsung* (1970/71) to Ohad Naharin's *Echad Mi Yodea* (1990) or *Virus* (2002), all represent choreographed pieces which conventionally employ explicit uniformity in costuming as a foregrounded visual aspect (although it must be acknowledged that the compositional motivation for this choice undoubtedly varies between these choreographers and their cultural contexts). While this sartorial uniformity can be harnessed performatively as a method of critique and commentary, as is particularly evident in above works by Naharin (whose use of costume addresses issues such as Jewish and Israeli identity, and the holocaust; (see Dekel, 2009; Kussell, 2016), and might well be extolled for its affordance in foregrounding the formal or aesthetic qualities of the body above individual difference, Tynan and Godson have outlined following Antonio Gramsci's writings on prison-systems (1971/2007) that "the overt formality and restrictive qualities of the typical uniform suggest that it manages both appearance and human behaviour; its *image* persuades and its *materiality* forces" (2019, p. 10 emphasis by author). They summarise Michel Foucault's position regarding the relationship between uniform and control, highlighting that the visibility of the body represents a site for disciplinary institutions to exercise unilateral power.

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<sup>31</sup> These aspects bear evident relevance to normativity in racial presentation.

<sup>32</sup> Consider, for example, within the Ballet tradition, the valorised role of the principal dancer and prima ballerina, as well the canonising and iconifying of virtuosic dancers such as Rudolf Nureyev, Margot Fonteyn, Natalia Makarova, Anthony Dowell, or Sergei Polunin, for example, all of whom have been afforded prominence within disciplinary discourse by dint of their performance of traditional virtuosity. In the case of both Polunin and Nureyev, the acknowledgement of their individuality as dancers has undoubtedly been aided by off-stage controversies.

the surface qualities of the body [are made] significant to the workings of a disciplinary society. [...] Uniform clothing was an integral part of [the] technology of normalization to position people within a network of relations [...] the uniform represents the power and control of the institution that sets it to work; it is one part of a whole aesthetic system to regulate environments, be it in the school, workplace or prison. (Tynan and Godson, 2019, p. 11)

The inherent problematics of this dynamic become intensified if one considers the specific forms and targets of oppression by which discipline's aesthetic system of environmental regulation is constructed; in short, *whose appearance and behaviour are being managed, and by what differentials?* Notwithstanding the fact that one of the traditional emblems of WTD, the ballet pointe shoe (which can also be considered an item of gendered clothing) *physically* alters the body of the dancer (often from a young age), conditioning it into one which can efficiently facilitate the shapes and steps requisite to the discipline's traditional aesthetics (see Bickle et al., 2018; Buonaventura, 2003; Costa et al., 2016; Lobo da Costa et al., 2013; Pearson and Whitaker, 2012),<sup>33</sup> one can identify also that the "surface qualities of the body" (Tynan and Godson, 2019) – such as hair, clothing, cleanliness, physique – serve a significant role in the evaluation of the individual in relation to schema of social-political constructs such as gender, race and class.<sup>34</sup> The extent to which uniform dress might therefore be complicit in both defining and reinforcing systemically normative conceptions of body bears comment within the WTD context at large, and particularly in light of the issue of the normative body of whiteness as identified by Chaleff within the context of early postmodernism.

The practice of *pancaking*, whereby dancers of colour spray-paint or use makeup to alter the traditional pink satin fabric of pointe shoes and tights to match their own skin tone, is troublingly commonplace even today. It has prompted recent campaigns within the industry for inclusive dancewear that does

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<sup>33</sup> The discipline of dance, perhaps the most brazenly out of all performing arts, actively alters the physiology of its performers into shapes to reinforce its established visual mythology. The case can also be made that instrumental and vocal performance in music conditions the body irreversibly for disciplinary gain, however the sonocentric underpinning of the music discipline generally renders the visibility of body a lesser point of scrutiny than the production of sonic expressions within the discipline's hierarchy of expressivity.

<sup>34</sup> As Ben Spatz comments on the 'reading' and/or acknowledging of identities present in performance as being facilitated by audiovisual media, "technique cannot be separated from the bodies that are enacting it [...] there [are] always identities in the space [...]" (2021).

not presume a white skin-tone as default (see JESSICADARETODANCE, 2020; Pauly, 2020). A brief statement on uniform-change released by the *Royal Academy of Dance* in response to the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 (“Royal Ballet School Announces Change To Uniform Policy - The Royal Ballet School,” 2020),<sup>35</sup> reveals that a conflation between the colour of traditional dance uniform and the *ordinary* body as conceived within a frame of whiteness, whereby the non-white body is understood as exceptional and the white body asserts neutrality, remains extant. The persistence of the white body as a normalising force, whose purported neutrality damagingly claims greater aesthetic viability than a dark-skinned body as default, has also come to recent public attention through the experience of Chloé Lopes Gomes, a dancer at the Berlin *Staatsballett*. Gomes’ accounts of racist abuse in the rehearsal space, public ridicule from authority figures in the company, and requests on the part of choreographer-directors to use white make-up to lighten her skin-tone (among other aggressions) have been the subject of recent media attention (Ahmed, 2021.; Adela, 2021.; Bearne, 2020); this has highlighted the experience of dancers of colour within the echelons of ‘elite’ dance institutions explicitly in relation to their visibility as ‘raced’. What is apparent in these examples is that it is not only the utilisation of uniform towards functional neutrality, but the reification *via* uniform of a normative conception of body bounded in exclusionary differentiation and the othering of non-white dancers, which underpins the sartorial conventions of the theatre-dance tradition. It is tangible in the above examples of sartorial convention alone that processes of exclusion and the imbalanced dynamics of social differentiation are manifest *within* the confines of the performing arts, and are in fact explicitly entangled with nominally ‘ordinary’ or ‘conventional’ visual aspects of disciplinary aesthetics.

I argue also that the regulation of the dancing body’s visibility through uniformity reinforces the hierarchy of power by which the will, and perhaps even the *body* of the choreographer is privileged above those of ‘non-choreographer’ dancers. Reflecting upon Halprin’s comments on Graham’s

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<sup>35</sup> The key sentence of the statement reads “From September 2020, female students can choose to wear in class either traditional ballet pink tights and shoes, or matching ballet tights and shoes in a colour to match their skin tone if preferred.”

company, it is worth remarking that, although it was presented three years prior, the ordinary costuming of the women-dancers in Bausch's *Rite of Spring*<sup>36</sup> bears an uncanny resemblance to the clothing of the principal soloist in Bausch's 'masterwork' *Café Müller* (1978), a role originally danced by Bausch herself and which has arguably become visually emblematic of her career at large. The hairstyles for the women dancers in the original version of the *Rite* are remarkably reminiscent of Bausch's own iconic profile.<sup>37</sup> The *body* of Bausch seems to inhabit these dances not only in the transmitted mechanics of choreography, or the simple attribution of singular authorship to the work as a whole, but in the subtle replication of her own visuality. Through such processes, the mystique of the Choreographer is emboldened, its authority asserted strongly within the consciousness of the disciplinary public.

### 3.4 IMPROVISING AGAINST CONTROL

My practice seeks explicitly, and insofar as it can while mediated through my own body and its particular identifications, to work against the Imaginary Bodies of hegemony (see 2.3). Overtly, I advocate the affordances of difference and individuality in practice as set against a substantial and powerful history of control as exercised in conformity, in both cultures at the intersection of which I situate my practice. Composer-improviser Anne Bourne, in conversation with Pauline Oliveros, has summarised expressively the affordance which she believes the practice of improvisation itself, being one of spontaneous creation emerging *from the individual body of the performer*, can offer in contrast to paradigms of corporeal control and de-agentialisation:

Improvising differs from performing written music because, when reading, or even after memorizing a long piece, when you try to internalize and personalize the piece to become authentic expression, you are taking on, on a physiological level, a preconceived pattern generated from another's soul and body. [...]

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<sup>36</sup> Muted, off-cream-coloured nightgowns (with the later differentiation of the sacrificial dancer, who dons a red gown).

<sup>37</sup> The 2022 performance of the work – a collaboration between Pina Bausch Foundation (Germany), École des Sables (Senegal) and Sadler's Wells (UK) – performed by an all-African cast, does not subscribe to Bausch's hair profile, instead featuring a range of African 'natural' hairstyles. Despite this, the uniformity of costuming for performers of all genders has been retained.

Without the grid of a preconceived score between you, one can be open to any new impulse that may emerge from one of you. I merge with a fellow performer and follow their soul walk on an instinctual level. Improvising performers are often surprised, when going beyond craft we find ourselves making choices that lead to simultaneous musical arrival. I am often surprised that being true to myself and singing authentically is exactly the thing that co-creates the strongest and most moving musical event.

(Bourne, quoted in Oliveros, 2004, p. 64)

For Bourne, it reads, improvised practice is intimately connected to a sense of performed personal authenticity housed not only in ‘soul’ but also, critically, in *body*; one which is not subject to, or at least pursues emancipation from, patterns of externally exerted psycho-physiological control. Bourne implies that, within the WAM context, this control is perhaps most visible in the performer’s aim to faithfully and accurately interpret the notated score-object as prescribed by the composer (in their conventional role as sole-creator).<sup>38</sup> Within western theatre-dance, in which the notated score-object forms a less essential or definitive aspect of compositional (choreographic) identity, a similarly impactful paradigm of control can be identified in the commonplace exercise of the choreographer’s selecting and cutting material from a passage of movement improvised by the ‘non-choreographer’ dancer in studio, subsequently setting it into ‘what is to be danced’ (what Larry Lavender terms the “danced-choreographic”) in performance. Lavender holds that this practice represents an assertion of the “traditional Western conception of private property” (Lavender, 2019, p. 275), writing that:

in authoring and imposing tasks or scores for improvisers to follow, and in selecting from improvised material certain movements or sequences to remake or ‘set’ into patterns and ‘erasing’ the rest, dance choreographers display ownership over dancers’ labour and its products. (Lavender, 2019, p. 275)

He further relates that this process, which he identifies as “authoritarian”, affords “the capacity to deliver coordinated repeatable sameness in their execution of movement [which] gives dancers viability as commodities” (2019, p. 276). It is by capitalist utility, therefore, that this process of attribution and

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<sup>38</sup> She does also indicate that one of the benefits of score is that “it can distract [...] from self-consciousness” (Bourne, quoted in Oliveros, 2004, p. 64).

commodification is “firmly ensconced as ‘normal’ within theories and practices of training dancers and choreographers, and in the production and consumption of concert and theatrical dances”, albeit often, he notes, “accomplished with a soft voice, in an ostensibly caring manner” (2017, p. 276). Divergence from this normalised mode of making dance within the western economy of art-production can therefore be seen as constituting a fundamentally economic, as much as a philosophical or aesthetic, act of transgression.

The orientation towards personal and collective emancipation from either concrete or conceptual authority which exerts control over the movements of the body – whether this be an individual figure (such as a choreographer), a score-object, a social construct (such as gender, class, or race), or more broadly an overarching framework of aesthetics as canonised by a discipline – has tangibly underpinned the development of improvised movement practice in the Euro-American context from the days of Halprin and Judson onwards. In the turn towards the nominally pedestrian – as something other to the affected and formalistic focus of the modernist aesthetic – and in the undermining of traditional choreographic relationships enacted through democratisation (as well as through the destabilising input of Cageian chance and indeterminate compositional techniques), the early postmodernists seeded a *culture of practice* defined by emancipatory aspirations (if not the wholesale actualisation of freedoms). The early postmodern improvisers’ articulation of fundamentally anti-capitalist and antihierarchical organisation, while manifesting prominently at the functional level of aestheticized dance as performance, represented also an embodiment of experimental sociality by which larger-scale politicised aspirations could be presented within a relatively safe (if undoubtedly privileged) space and community. The hope for a way of moving which actualises, as well as theorises, a dream of freedom, therefore characterises the beginning of this culture of practice. Recognising the failings of the original dream to see all the problematics of power (the inequalities of race, in particular) within its surrounding culture, I hold that today, via critical reflection and a transparency of discourse which acknowledges practice as living within our social and political bodies (both physical and conceptual), we might be better placed to empower ourselves and each other, moving forward (see *Part III: Conclusion 2*).

## 4 MOVING-SOUNDING: BODIES MAKING NOISE

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“You can only do one thing at a time!” Just like that... “You can only do one thing at a time!” Being brought up that way...Why? Why can’t I play at doing seven, eight things at a time? Why not open things up a little bit and play at the possibility of what it is to be human, instead of the limitation of what it is to be human?

Deborah Hay in interview (Bromberg, 2012)

As much as sound has historically dominated the domain of western art music, kinetic expressivity has most evidently reigned in the domain of western theatre-dance to the de-emphasis of other expressive modalities. This stands in marked contrast to the established syncretism of moving and sounding which is more readily identifiable in other cultural dance contexts (see, for example, Nor and Stepputat, 2016; Mason, 2014). While there has been reiterative academic and practical interest in recent decades in interrogating the sonic in relation to, as emergent within, or in dialogue with, dance within the western canon, spawning the field of *choreomusicology* (Mason, 2012),<sup>1</sup> Efva Lilja maintains that dance’s overriding ocular-centricity is evidenced by a disciplinary culture in which dancers have been subject to literal and psycho-developmental, as well as aesthetic, processes of silencing.<sup>2</sup> She cautions:

Dance and choreography are often referred to as silent art forms, since we are expected to work outside of verbal or literary formats. The presumption is that those who do not speak are silent. This is underpinned by how the dancer’s identity is formed, generally dominated by physical skills training based on imitation and repetition. Studios are still equipped with mirrors to certify the physical progress. Dancers are to this day mostly supposed to work from the idea that the body is their only tool. This attitude is devastating, undermining both the dancer’s confidence and understanding of self. The dancer turns silent, since she is not expected to have a voice. (2018, p. 18)

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<sup>1</sup> Studies have been notably focussed on a number of specific arenas: balletic works (for seminal research, see Jordan, 2000); historiographical perspectives (see Okamoto, 2005; 2012); gestural studies (Duerden, 2007; 2008; also Godøy and Leman, 2010); and the intersection of the kinetic and sonic within dance as mediated by new technologies (see Jewett, 2005; Bläsing and Zimmermann, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> For more on challenges to ocularity within the dance field, see Garrett-Brown (2007), and Killeen-Chance (2018).



Such a sentiment has been echoed in my own conversations across the course of this research with peer-artists in dance's existing company-structure, as well as with pedagogues and solo artists.<sup>3</sup> Paralleling the recent corporeal turn in experimental music, the emergence of sounding (using body, objects, or voice) from dancing bodies, and from bodies in dance contexts, represents a recognisable contrarian trend in both "danced-choreographic" (Lavender, 2017) and explicitly improvisational dance practice across the most recent decades. This has gone hand in hand with the explosion of the field of western theatre-dance into multiform and multimedia practices, incorporating diverse modes of live performance alongside videography, scenography, text, sculpture, and digitality.

#### 4.1 VOICING(S): UBIQUITY AND DISTINCTIONS

While sounding using instruments remains comparatively rare for those who might identify primarily as movers or dancers, particularly, and perhaps owing to the ordinary privileging of the human body which has been central to the dance discipline, the use of the human voice has become a commonplace, if not quite predominant, fixture of dance's performance practice, and within movement improvisation represents a commonly employed modality of expressivity. Robert Vesty's recent thesis *Material Words for Voicing Dancers* (2020) represents a rigorous and practical account of improvisation as an "ensounded dancer" and presents a rich perspective on the emergence of voice within the context of theatre-dance with a focus on improvisational practice. Outlining the historical precedent for voicing as 'breaching' the 'silent' stage of dance supported by an array of choreographic examples dating back nearly a century, Vesty has suggested that an apparent "ubiquity" of the vocal turn in theatre-dance has in fact rendered vocalisations "barely breaches at all" (2020, p. 15); the voice's "presence on the dance stage", he writes, has been slowly gathering volume since the "uncoupling" of ballet from opera in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (2020, p. 15), with paradigmatic choreographers from Martha Graham to Akram

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<sup>3</sup> Dancers: John Canfield (personal communication, October 2019) and Kirstie Simson (personal communication, April 2022). Participant Michael Schumacher (personal communication, June 2021, March 2022).

Khan to Jérôme Bel, permitting the emergence of, or *harnessing* the voice within, choreographic contexts (2020, p. 14).

#### 4.1.1 Emergent Sounds in Western-Theatre Dance

Although, within WTD's tradition of choreographed movement, artists such as Pina Bausch largely eschewed musical 'interference' during the generation processes of dance work (Wiegand, 2014),<sup>4</sup> one can identify numerous individuals who have challenged assumptions of dance's 'silence' (per Lilja, 2018) by explicitly engaging the voices and sonic expressions of dancers in their work. Throughout his twenty-year tenure with *Ballet Frankfurt* (1984 – 2004) and subsequently with the *Forsythe Company* (2005 – 2015), William Forsythe encapsulated what Freya Vass-Rhee has articulated as an "auditory turn" in contemporary ballet, presenting works which "transgress ballet's auditory barrier" (2010, p. 388) in which the movement of company members often appears in jarring juxtaposition with collaged sound, and in which movement is itself presented as sonic material (both with and without additional musical accompaniment). In its later works, the Forsythe company experimented with close-mic recordings of 'incidental' vocal utterances, in addition to utilising voice more broadly as a creative medium, "conceiving of the vocal apparatus as exquisitely responsive to movement generated virtually anywhere in the body and refracted across its spaces" (2010, p. 394). This exploration of kinetic sounding and vocal choreography, Vass-Rhee writes, "extended [Forsythe's] research of dance's aural dimensions by investigating the potential of using the dance's own sounds" towards a "profoundly performative aural-visual intermodality" (2010, pp. 387-9). In ballet, Marie Chouinard's *BODY\_rEMIX/gOLDBERG\_variations* (2005) is a notably experimental work which also incorporates vocalisation through dancers' exploring of experimental singing techniques, as well as the foregrounding of incidental vocal sounds made visceral through the strenuous movements of the company and their amplification. Belgian choreographer Thomas Hauert's recent work *How to proceed*

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<sup>4</sup> "Pina didn't want the movements, the dancers, being influenced by any mood from the outside. It was important for her that the form of the dance had an independent life, an independent story to tell. It was always the most exciting moment, when we dared to let the dance meet a piece of music or the other way around. It was always a courageous step – there was always the risk of disturbing or even destroying something through a wrong choice" (Wiegand, 2014).

(2021), uses a huge variety of vocalisations from screaming, to speaking, to whispering, throughout (“ImPulsTanz Archive,” n.d.).

Within improvisational practice and beyond the work of Judson and the Grand Union (both of which incorporated the voicing of dancers),<sup>5</sup> the work of Meredith Monk, an associate of the Judson group, sets a notable historical precedent for the expansion of vocalisation (both sung, and spoken) in dialogue with the choreographic in both improvisational and composed/choreographed works, and indeed between vocalisation and the spatial, visual, and digital. Monk is an artist who has long defied labelling and definitions, traversing the worlds of music, dance, and theatre as a maker in all contexts, and forging a distinct space for kinetic-sonic connections across her sixty-year career. By consequence, her practice has been described as sitting both microscopically and macroscopically “between the cracks” (Mowery, 2013) of disciplines, of media, “between the bar lines and beyond the notes” (2013, p. 80; see also Black, 2010; Kourlas, 1998). Her wide palette of vocal techniques – from the nasal declamations of *Porch* (track one of *Key*, 1971) to the open-vowelled breathiness of sections from *Education of a Girlchild* (1972), to the simple openness of *Hocket* (1991/2) – counterpoints with her equally diverse physical articulations, which range from the explicitly ‘dancerly’ to the muted, and the everyday.

A prominent pedagogue in the world of European improvisation, Julyen Hamilton is a British artist whose practice is well known for its refined synthesis of verbal and kinetic improvised expressions. Hamilton traces his concurrent use of movement and words to a time before his professional career, when asked as a teenager by choreographer Liebe Klug to “move a lot” during a Shakespeare play. He notes he felt “completely at home moving and saying these Shakespearean lines” (Hamilton interviewed by Nancy Stark-Smith; Hamilton, n.d.).<sup>6</sup> Describing his early formal training, he identifies a

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<sup>5</sup> Vesty comments that vocal material, while a “feature of some of the concerts staged by the Judson Dance Theatre” was a “mainstay” of the Grand Union’s work (2020, p. 41). For a short clip of Barbara Dilley vocalising during a *Grand Union* performance event, see <https://youtu.be/5oCjFt5p7hg>, (Bright Invention, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> It seems relevant to note that Klug, wife of the eminent Lithuanian-born chemist Aaron Klug, was herself an interdisciplinarian, having studied music before attending school for modern dance, and subsequently working in theatre (Klug, (A.) interviewed by Macfarlane, 2007) Klug established a modern dance group in Cambridge with Jacqueline Erickson. (Holmes, 2017, p. 171)

climate of experimentation with movement, live music and non-linearity which emerged in British theatre during the 1970's, and he comments that the cohort of peer-students entering dance training at *The Place* in London at that time came from greatly varied backgrounds comprising playwrights and architects, as well as contemporary and classically trained dancers. These multidisciplinary informed beginnings, in an environment where individuals of diverse artistic experiences and disciplinary backgrounds were brought together under the frame of dance, feel tangible in Hamilton's developed, holistic approach to improvisation performance – both solo, and with his company *Allen's Line*. A spirit of the transdisciplinary is tangibly evoked in his desire to allow dance, space, text, and voice to be “orchestrated” together in instant composition. He advocates “letting these areas of expression be made and housed all together, their individual qualities constantly interacting at different levels, weaving a whole, multi layered expression.” (“Allen's Line Company,” n.d.). Hamilton espouses a honed, if perhaps domineering, aesthetic of asceticism within his company, as he describes:

I work with the dancers and poet and light person [of Allen's Line] to remove all excess, all unnecessary in their expression; this allows the forms and orchestration to be rich and immediate (“Allen's Line Company,” n.d.).

In contrast to Hamilton's relative aesthetic stringency, Katie Duck, a contemporary of Hamilton, is an artist whose work is imbued with a maximalist feel of multimodal, total expressivity and politicised radicality.<sup>7</sup> In her improvised performances (which form part of, but not the totality of, her practice), Duck frequently sings, tells stories, and spits out fragments of text while articulating, expanding and counterpointing her verbal imagery within the kinesphere, as well as through costuming, musical sounding, and the extensive use of props and scenography.<sup>8</sup> As with Monk, labels do not fit Duck well, and one can find her identified variously online as a dancer, performance artist, theatre maker, performance maker, choreographer, multimedia artist, performer, and maker, among other things. She has notably, throughout her career, maintained a proximity to aurality and to improvised music,

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<sup>7</sup> A recent and ongoing collaboration, *Abandon Human* with Sharon Smith, is described on Duck's YouTube channel simply as “feminist body text music performance”. (Katie Duck, 2018)

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, *Abandon Human* (Katie Duck, 2018; 2019).

collaborating historically with well-recognised European-based free improvisers such as Tristan Honsinger, Derek Bailey, Ernst Reijseger, and Han Bennink, and maintaining an ongoing artistic relationship with guitarist Alfredo Genovesi, who has performed live and provided soundtrack for a number of recent performances.<sup>9</sup> She has also generated sonic material for use in performance herself, particularly during her early work with *Grupo* in the 1970's (Duck, n.d.). Duck's performances, which differ at degrees from Hamilton's pared-down, quasi-minimal illusionistic narratives, read to me as a smorgasbord of potential expressivities wherein politicised identities and aspects of human living are permitted abrasive, playful entry into the space of performance.<sup>10</sup> While representing very different aesthetics, Duck, Monk, and Hamilton all exemplify the integration of movement-centred improvisation practice with vocalisation in expanded, pluralistic expressivity.

Reflecting upon my own work in relation to these mover-voicers, and upon my describing it with the term transdisciplinary, I would suggest that Duck's practice treads closer to the space of transdisciplinarity than Hamilton's, and her initiative *Magpie* (also known as *Magpie Music Dance*),<sup>11</sup> based in Amsterdam between 1995-2000, represents to me an innovative and collaborative effort which embodies transdisciplinary aspirations. The initiative was formed in order to "re-look at improvised performance as a fundamental choreographic approach to a live event" (Smith, n.d.). Her website notes that "several of the founding group members were lecturers or former students at the school for new dance development [in the Netherlands]" which had "specific connections to the American Judson Church movement" (Duck, n.d.);<sup>12</sup> however, the work of the group clearly expanded beyond this immediate (dance) genealogy, and into discernibly contemporary inter- and transdisciplinary spaces. Sharon Smith, a member of the group, summarises:

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<sup>9</sup> See for example Duck's CAGE project in Bilbao, 2017 (Katie Duck, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> It's worth noting that despite any differences, Hamilton and Duck frequently collaborate and perform together, often with musicians.

<sup>11</sup> Not to be confused with *Magpie Dance*, a UK-based dance charity for individuals with learning disabilities. ("Home | Magpie Dance," n.d.)

<sup>12</sup> The group would later include Michael Schumacher, my colleague and collaborator, who lends his artistry and voice to this project as a research participant.

Magpie is interdisciplinary. Magpie is not building pieces that employ different media. Magpie performances become an arena where different media are playing with each other, are in dialogue with each other. If the spectator has come to watch “dance” and then focuses on a body dancing, rather than shifting that focus, opening their selves up to the whole room, they are not really experiencing the work of Magpie. Magpie is fluid. Its presence disseminates amongst place. Magpie enters a performance situation as “part-of”. This is a political posture. To understand or more simply, to properly access the work, it is not useful to employ the traditional analytic and values systems usually used to “appreciate” dance works. Magpie identifies the places where traditional value systems and grand narratives are faulty within and plays here. It unsettles. Magpie is not precise, exacting, themed, directed, set, authored or closed. These are aspirations which compliment the values of patriarchy and celebrity status. Magpie is fluid, loose, with fragmented and interwoven narratives. It is undirected, unset, and un-authored. Magpie deconstructs those values and creates another language, or rather a multi or an omni language.

(Smith, n.d.)

While the above represents only one perspective on Magpie, and notwithstanding her use of the term *interdisciplinary*, Smith’s account interests me because a number of her comments speak very directly to aspects I have identified within my own practice as contributing to what I term TFI. The notion of a single performance not as a “piece” but as an arena (a characteristic also identified by Vass-Rhee (2010) in the work of Forsythe), I would parallel with the conceptual frame of what I have called *Improvisational Worlds* (see Part II: *Improvisational Worlds: A Conceptual Vehicle for Practice*). An emphasis on the “shifting” of audience (and indeed performer) focus from fixed discipline-centric ideas of performativity towards engaging with the *totality of improvisational activity and experience* (what Smith describes as “the whole room”), and traversing it, as a *requisite process* of “experiencing the work” is also reflective of my approach to theorising and discussing practice. The corresponding unfixed approach to disciplinary identification and to the excessive marking or naming of individuals in disciplinary terms, and similarly, the advocacy of deemphasising or indeed abandoning “traditional analytic and value systems”, which Smith speaks of in relation to dance only, I would extend through the lens of my own practice into what I claim as improvisation’s capacity to generate context-specific axiologies *in the moment of practice* which invite engagements of value in their immediacy, their liveness, and in their own terms. Her explicit naming of the group as being anti-patriarchal in its

organisation and in its performative articulation indicates also, for me, an essence of antihierarchy which, within the context of the fluidity, play, and shapelessness of the group as an imprecise and open “arena”, I read as constituting a distinctly transdisciplinary ideal. This I claim on the basis that transdisciplinarity, in my usage and understanding, emphasises not only the interactivity between distinct conceptual entities (disciplines, traditions, etc.) inhabiting the same space, but deliberately foregrounds mutability – shifting and transforming, incorporating imprecision, contextuality, openness, porosity, and plurality – which Magpie’s performance work seems to exemplify. While our motivations and aesthetics are not necessarily identical, I feel that aspects of the ethos of Magpie as outlined by Smith represent a parallel-context to my own practical explorations, and one which is notably recent and comparatively local.

#### **4.1.2 Types of Voicing**

Nuancing the role of voicing through the lens of his own practice as an improviser who seeks to ‘re-fuse’ the voice with what he terms ‘dynamic movement’ “towards a seamless web of choreographic material, produced where dancing and voicing happen not as separate activities, but as a tight-knit enterprise” (2020, p. 15), Robert Vesty makes some interesting general distinctions on the differing functionality of vocalisation within movement improvisation practice. He offers, on the one hand, that “vocal material” may be employed “to emphasise the anti-illusionistic properties of [a] piece” (2020, p. 54) through mechanisms such as dancers’ commenting “on their own actions, the actions of others, [and] addres[sing] the audience directly”.<sup>13</sup> Vesty aligns this, following Susan Foster’s analysis (2002), with the oeuvre of Richard Bull, and with work of Judson (2020, p. 54), and I would suggest there is an obvious connection between Judson’s inclination towards the incorporation of the pedestrian and their engagement with non-affected, direct, ‘fourth-wall-breaking’ speech. This mode Vesty presents in contrast to an alternative “turn towards the illusionistic”, in which “the fourth wall is rarely broken [...]

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<sup>13</sup> Vesty’s reiterated use of ‘material’ in relation to the voice is suggestive of his experience of enmeshment between vocalising and moving; insofar as the term evokes associations of physicality and tactility on its own, concomitant with his offering of voice “considered [as] a fleshy protrusion, capable of gesturing like a limb of the body” (2020, p. 16), the voice described as “material” becomes something corporeal – a bodily extension into sonic space.

there is an effort towards character, insofar as the material is not explicitly auto-biographical or self-referential” (2020, p. 54), which he indicates is salient in the work of his case study artists (Julyen Hamilton, Ruth Zaporah, and Billie Hanne).

Within my own practice, and in observing the improvisations of others, I have also at times delineated distinct voicing modalities, and I would recognise Vesty’s examples as providing a useful lens by which to compare voicing across improvising contexts and between practitioners.<sup>14</sup> The former mode he highlights (oriented against illusion) I consider as aligning with more prosaic activities such as *commenting, reporting, observing, describing, naming, reifying* – the affordance of voicing here being the articulation of experience as mediated at a familiar linguistic level, applying a useful semantic layer upon the improvisational world at hand. The latter (the illusionistic), perhaps having more of a sense of *poiesis*, acts as a kind of *fictioning*, even *storytelling*, and affords the generation of a sense of *diegesis*, a *drawing in* of the audience into complicity with an improvisational world that is being generated (for further discussion, see *Part II: Improvisational Worlds*, and *Forming Diegesis, Diegesis Forming*). One could speculate that, within Vesty’s trio of practitioner case-studies, the theatrical background of Hamilton and Zaporah in particular might draw them to this latter use of text as a diegetic generator (the sense of suspended reality and fictioning through speech being historically the preserve of theatrical disciplines). From a particularly sonic-oriented perspective, I would highlight (as indeed does Vesty) a mode of voicing which I would name in relation to own practice as *post-verbal*. This involves either the absence of text or the illusion of textuality, but in the absence of words, with a greater focus on the sonic (rather than linguistic) properties of vocalisation.<sup>15</sup> As I discuss in *Reflections on The Voice* in Part II, while I do not preclude the emergence of the first two, this third mode in many ways characterises my own approach to voicing while moving in improvisation.

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<sup>14</sup> Vesty’s analysis is by no means limited by, or reducible to, to the two modes of voicing I have highlighted here. However, in the way he has distinguished them, they serve as particularly useful benchmarks for comparative consideration of voicing types in improvisational contexts.

<sup>15</sup> As is the case with the majority of concepts within improvisational discourse, I would suggest that the distinction between these two things be understood as relational only, and neither essential nor dualistically opposed.



Furthermore, the fluid navigation between different kinds of voicing and their respective proximity to the linguistic, which I would propose amounts to a collaging of “registers of sense” (Brown and Longley, 2018) which potentialises intertextual hermeneutic interaction, represents an identifiable aspect of my own performance practice; it can also be observed in the work of improvisers such as Maggie Nicols, Deborah Hay, Andrew Morrish, David Zambrano, Saadet Türkoz, the abovementioned Katie Duck, as well as that of research-participants Skye Reynolds, David Yates, Maria Sappho, Michael Schumacher, and interviewee Zoe Katsilerou (to name but a few). Improvisers may seamlessly weave these registers together, at one time naming matter-of-factly an element of their experience in explicit words, at another transforming what is at hand into something symbolic, rhetorical, or potentially even abstracted. A duet between Andrew Morrish and Peter Trotman at the *VARIA2015* improvisation festival, for example, sees both artists employ illusory text alongside aspects of autobiography, commentary, and propositions across the fourth wall, seemingly drifting between the roles of storyteller, comic, educator, troubadour, and news broadcaster. (Scenen Atalante, 2020). A recent performance I observed given by dance-artists Charlie Morrissey, Kirstie Simson, and Andrea Buckley at the Wainsgate Dances (Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire) in late 2021 saw the three improvisers constellating words in a pointillistic way while moving, offering observations upon the room and audience, each other, as well as contributing fragments of narrative and illusory imagery, which generated a sense of ambiguity and quasi-suspended reality.

Zoe Katsilerou’s collective ICEBERG – a collaboration between herself and peer-improvisers Eilon Morris, Penny Chivas, and Nicolette McLeod – is an improvising group which I have observed in both workshop and performance (in 2018 and 2019), and which employs both of Vesty’s voicing examples in essentially equal measure.<sup>16</sup> A distinct sense of narrative or storytelling can be interrupted or dovetailed at any moment with a comment upon something relatively banal or ‘obvious’, such as the temperature of the room, a feeling of hunger, or a remark about the appearance of something relatively

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<sup>16</sup> Incidentally, both Zoe and Eilon Morris have cited Andrew Morrish as being a substantial influence on their practice (personal communications, 2019).

mundane in the space. In my experience of the group's work, the interplay between these registers is an integral part of the playful negotiation of meaning and humour that the performers exhibit in their improvising together (as a quartet), but is also a functional pedagogical tool by which they encourage workshop participants to explore the textual in whatever means they feel most comfortable (whether through spinning out narratives, or simply by naming things around them). Simone Forti's practice of *Logomotion*, to give an example of a practice which has been named, can be considered as a mode which also explores the interplay between the illusionistic and anti-illusionistic types of voicing which Vesty describes. Claire Filmon (a sanctioned *Logomotion* teacher)<sup>17</sup> cites Forti's description of the practice:

Movement influences what I think about, and what I think about influences my movements. The thoughts and images seem to flash through my motor centres and my verbal centres simultaneously, mixing and animating both speech and physical embodiment. Spatial, structural, emotional. (Forti, cited by Filmon, n.d.)

Maggie Nicols also comes explicitly to mind as an improviser who frequently and skilfully switches rapidly between these two delineated modes, but who additionally (and perhaps owing to her background in sonic-centred performance) incorporates post-verbal sounding, involving the fragmentation of vocal utterances (both verbal and nonverbal). This treatment of voicing seems more focused on the timbral, melodic or physical properties of syllables and phonemes in the mouth, than on imaginaries or banalities conjured by words. Maggie is known also to include sounds of breath, cracking, wheezing, squealing, screaming, and other vocalisations which D Ferrett relates contribute to a sense of permitting the "abject" sonic in performance – those sounds admonished societally for their dangerousness, or their association with instability, illness, pain, and madness (Ferrett, 2014). Maggie gives permission for these sounds to emerge, not only in performance, but in pedagogical contexts, as

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<sup>17</sup> Only a number of Forti's students and mentees have been authorised to teach the practice.

a means to promote inclusivity, openness, comfort, authenticity, and non-judgement (personal communication, 2021).<sup>18</sup>

The means by which movement improvisers generally incorporate voicing and vocalisation into their performances are palpably wide-ranging if, I would stress, highly contingent on the specific motivations of the individual practitioner and the contexts in which they perform. Although, as Vesty's examples show, one can pragmatically delineate different types of voicing for the purposes of discussion and analysis, it bears comment that the interpretation of a given textual register is also entangled with whatever kinetic, sonic, and visual expressions the performer and any co-performers might employ; these may alter, contradict, support, and otherwise exist in relation to vocalised text expressions, offering a variety of hermeneutic possibilities.<sup>19</sup> As is the case with nearly all improvisational concepts, therefore, one must be wary of employing codifications which are dualistic or boundary orientated.<sup>20</sup>

## 4.2 SOUNDING OBJECTS AND INSTRUMENTAL INTERACTIONS

While the emergence of voicing can be viewed as an established feature within the post-Judson culture of movement improvisation practice, the individual performer's use of sounding instruments in conjunction with movement,<sup>21</sup> in movement-centric contexts, or by those who might readily identify or be identified primarily as "movers" or "dancers", is discernibly less common. Al Wunder, a prominent figure in theatrical and movement improvisation, maintains an instrumental improvisation practice on the *Humdrum*, a percussive tongued instrument played with mallets, often combining improvised text with instrumental performance. However, rarely does he blend movement practice with sounding on

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<sup>18</sup> Maggie and I have performed together across the Pandemic during the Glasgow Improvisers' Orchestra Tuesday meetings, on the Noisy Women improvising platform, and in November 2021, performed live at GIOFest alongside my trio, the Noisebringers.

<sup>19</sup> Within TFI, I would assess that this entanglement is foregrounded through a concurrent navigation of pluralistic modes of expressivity.

<sup>20</sup> For clarification, I am not at all suggesting that this is what Vesty has done; his thesis is extremely fruitful in its use of language, nuanced and balanced in its discussion. I comment this here because, considering the taxonomical tendencies of academia and its inclinations towards definitising, it bears reiteration.

<sup>21</sup> By this I mean a situation in which expressive movement is legibly offered as a focus of audience attention in conjunction with sonic expressions on the instrument.

the drum itself, maintaining them as distinct modes of expressivity (Al Wunder, 2014a, 2014b). Both Julyen Hamilton and Katie Duck have used sounding-objects in performance and have generated sonic expressions in this way, however their regular use of dedicated musical instruments in performance is less immediately apparent. A short clip of video footage of a workshop with Czech avant-garde violinist Iva Bittová at David Zambrano's *TICTAC Arts* centre in Brussels – a recently established centre known to attract diverse movement practitioners, often with close connection to improvising musicians, to teach and share work – shows mover-students engaging voice extensively while moving; however only two individuals in the footage move also with instruments (tictacartcentre, 2022).

Outside the tradition of western theatre-dance, as previously mentioned, a huge variety of percussive and syncretic dance forms (which are also often improvisatory) exist in which movers create a sonosphere through their movement and are often solely responsible for that sonic creation (though the sonic support of non-moving musicians is also common). Flatfooting, Stepdance, Clogging, Flamenco, Kathak, Lundu, Morris Dancing, and Tap Dance, for example, all can involve the performer's generation of sound as an intrinsic part of the dance in performance and/or in rehearsal. Hula Kahiko, for example, one of the two primary strands of Hula, involves not only chant (*oli*) on the part of dancers and non-dancing musicians, but also often the sounding upon traditional instruments held by the dancers as they move, in addition to bells, shells, nuts, and other sound-producing objects attached to the body as part of traditional dress, which amplify the movements of the dancers (see, for a video example: odezaaaaaa, 2021). In this form of traditional Hula, the 'dancers' are as much responsible for the collective generation of musical and sonic content as the 'musicians' which accompany them (see Tatar, 1981).

In movement improvisation within the post-Judson context, acts of striking, hitting, rubbing, or otherwise sounding percussively on the body, objects, and other aspects of the room may arise as a distinct component of performance and, particularly in contexts where movers come together interdisciplinarily to perform with musicians (even if these musicians do not move), the contribution of

gestures which produce sonic artefacts on the part of the movers may be engaged with by audience as contributing to the overall sonosphere of performance. However, contingent on the extent to which sound is framed as a foregrounded modality in the performance event, this being itself contingent on factors such as the identification of the event in relation to a discipline or the naming of individuals with explicitly disciplinary terminology (see McPherson, 2020b), such percussive actions on the part of 'movers' may or may not be interpreted as arising from motivations of sounding, and therefore run the risk of being engaged with primarily as visually or kinetically gestural events. In order for movers' sonic motivations to be foregrounded, the framing of the event must be conducive to their recognition as sonic contributors.

It is worth considering the fact that the earliest years of postmodern experiments in improvisation, while often involving performers' use of voice, frequently employed pre-recorded or offstage instrumental sounds (see, for example, the variety of documentary footage of performances by the Grand Union featured in *The Alchemy of Grand Union, with Wendy Perron & Douglas Dunn* (NYU Skirball Center for the Performing Arts, 2020)); indeed, a surprising amount of dance improvisation since has not engaged with live instrumental sounding at all, often pairing itself with fairly conventional (and canonical) recorded musics (see, for example, Tom Giebink, 2013). David Zambrano, for example, a prominent figure in European contemporary improvisation pedagogy, while he does work closely with musicians, often pairs his expressive, high-energy, experimental physicality in movement improvisation with what reads to me as contrastingly highly structured, often tonal, traditional, largely non-experimental-sounding music (whether played live by musicians, or pre-recorded; see for example: Magnus Rosén Fd Hammerfall, 2013; Patil, N. 2015; movementresearch, 2019). In collaborative contexts within the post-Judson culture where movers and musicians come together to improvise, there frequently remains a spatial separation between those sounding (on instruments) and those moving, the sounders invariably relegated to the outer edges of the space or 'offstage'. Although groups such as Jer Reid's *Collective Endeavours* (solilalock, 2017, 2014a, 2014b), Edinburgh's *Something Smashing* (Letham, 2020), Katsilerou's ICEBERG, or the *Vonnegut Collective* (Vonnegut Collective, n.d.),

to give some local examples, proactively bring instrumental sounders and movers into spatial and physical dialogue, the primary (if not the only) tactile interfacing relationship with instruments is often retained by the nominal ‘sounder’ or ‘musician’ (see mopomoso, 2021)

From my own experience, and pragmatically, I would suggest that often there is an aspect of hesitancy on the part of movers to engage with instruments for fear of damaging them, particularly in contexts where musician-collaborators have brought instruments that they also use in concerts or other sonocentric musical practices. I recall a moment, during an improvisation with participant Sky Su in December 2019, for example, at which the wood of my viola bow snapped as a result of Sky’s actions. Immediately, during the improvisation, he turned to me to apologise; however perhaps surprisingly to him, owing to the relative inexpensiveness of the instrument, and the fact that I own multiple bows, I was content to continue without further comment. In subsequent sessions, following my indication that I had only brought instruments I was happy to engage with quite viscerally and physically, Sky’s approach to the instruments was far less tentative. However, such an openness to accidental damage would almost certainly not be appropriate or likely in all settings, particularly those in which the role of musician as the sole sounder of the instrument (a role dependent on its capacity to sound as expected) might be more-or-less fixed. The conversation pertaining to my own boundaries as the owner of the instruments was essential to the development of a relationship of trust between myself and Sky, as a performance duo with a burgeoning working history; however I would stress that although it forms a central aspect of my personal practice and working relationships, such an openness cannot be considered a general characteristic of inter or transdisciplinary practices, nor should it necessarily be expected.

Aside from the very real economic aspect to the above, the tentative approach that movers may have to instruments is also undoubtedly impacted by the charged significance of musical instruments as objects of disciplinary and sociocultural ritual (see Part II: *Instrumental Kinesis*). As indicated in chapters 1 and 2, the behavioural and architectural conventions of western concert performance, for example,

render both the performer and their instrument as objects of concentrated aesthetic focus within a heightened performative frame; their presence on the stage is imbued with the anticipation of sounding, as well as with the anticipated evidencing of a preconceived, culturally ingrained idea of successful instrumental musicking. Through their role in such performance events across various (sub)cultures, instruments are afforded symbolic significance, as objects indicative and emblematic of musical discipline (and all to which this pertains).

Relatedly, the materiality of the instrument itself, and its intersection with normative modes of sounding, may at times be considered a barrier to a performer's engaging with potential movement expressions (whether they identify more closely with being a 'mover' or a 'sunder'), or concurrent instrumental sounding while moving. I have found often, in workshops I have led, in conversations during collaborative ventures with peer instrumentalists, in teaching and in conference proceedings, that the idea of moving – or *dancing* – while holding musical instruments precipitates concern (particularly among trained instrumentalists) that the relationship between physicality and resultant sound will become unstable or unpredictable. By altering the physical relationship to instrument in such a way as expected, ordinary or familiar gaits, holds, interfacing, or techniques are no longer accessible or are physically impossible, and the performers' ability to produce reliable or stable sounds can be compromised. The potential for expressive movement to override or seemingly 'detract', therefore, from the 'successful' performance of conventional playing techniques (and by extension the 'successful' performance of sounding) renders it a destabilising influence. Within contexts where, for example, technical instrumental virtuosity is privileged, this instability precipitated by physicality therefore runs the risk of delegitimising the sounding activity of the performer (see 2.1, also Part II: Instrumental Kinesis).

While some pedagogues, including my own former mentors Anto Pett and Jaak Sikk, and indeed myself, advocate degrees of physical alteration as a means of exploring new approaches to sounding, within the context of musical improvisation pedagogy, such approaches often recentre on sounding itself as

the primary expressive act, with the visual-kinetic artefacts of movement being treated largely as incidental or experimental, not in the sense of experimentation with movement as expressive, per se, but rather with experimental physicality as engendering unconventional sounds. Furthermore, although some improviser collaborators of mine, such as Colin Frank, regularly utilise physical instability and sonic precarity creatively as a means of generating interest, presence, and tension in performance (Frank, 2022),<sup>22</sup> on the basis of the established culture of practice in which technical instrumentalism is privileged (see 2.1.), others may well view such outcomes as undesirable.

As is evidenced by my conversations with Sky, negotiation of the specific relationship between moving practitioners and instruments is highly context-contingent and involves the mediation of economic (as much as practical) risk. However, notwithstanding the issues of damage and liability, an aspect I would identify in my own practice generally, and in my collaborations, is a reasonable openness to accident and to the precarity of sounding-moving performance using instruments. As is evidenced in the video component of this thesis, sounding instruments are employed by myself and my close collaborators in a variety of unconventional means, many of which are not without structural risk to the instruments themselves. The navigation of sonic and physical precarity and unpredictability which runs hand-in-hand with moving with instruments has formed an important, if not quite central, aspect of my practice research across the course of the last few years. As will be explored further in Part II, this precarity is intimately connected to the dehierarchising of expressive modalities in relation to each other, and a focus on attending viscerally to the immediate emergences of the situation of performance.

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<sup>22</sup> Colin variously explores performance using complex, sculptural assemblages of instruments or objects whose structural instability and unpredictability he holds as contributing to their agency in performance as non-human actants (Frank, 2022). See also, in Part II, *Instrumental Kinesis: Moving-with Instruments*.



# Part II

## Practice

# Introduction to Part II

The second section of this thesis is a collection of multimedia essays, or miniature chapters. These essays bring together a variety of textual registers and media, including academic prose, reflective writing, quotations from interview-conversations, and audiovisual practice documents – footage from studio improvisations, as a soloist and in collaboration with peer improvisers as research participants. The practice documents are presented both without and with annotation; in the latter case, these are examples of documents which have been “illuminated” (after Spatz, 2021) in a mode of experimental videographic analysis which I have come to refer to as *Cloud Annotation*. Rather than following the convention of presenting practice documents as separate to a substantive textual commentary, here I deliberately position text and audiovisual documents in proximity to each other. In doing so, I draw upon the principles of multimodality, hoping to invoke the knowledge which exists “between different agencies” (Douglas and Gulari, 2015, p. 6) of media, within what Isabel Stengers refers to as interstitial spaces (2018).

Named for its application of textual annotations in a ‘word-cloud’ of varying persistence, spatiality, and density, layered upon and around practice videos, *Cloud Annotation* presupposes the effectiveness of a plurality of semantic, textual, and analytical registers as a means to explore and articulate the multiplicities of improvising practice within the videographic arena. This multimodal videographic approach, I propose, is necessary in order to examine improvisation rigorously within the academic context in a manner which structurally aligns with the emergent qualities of the practice itself, being a performance phenomenon which exhibits “protean polyvalence” (Fell, 2017, p. 65), “without resorting to the imposition of a reductive textual or otherwise purportedly summative analytical frame” (McPherson, 2021a). In line with the propositions of Ben Spatz, who discusses videographic annotation as a “compositional, interpretive question of what happens when we juxtapose this video with this video, and what happens when you juxtapose this text with this video.”, I view *Cloud Annotation* as an exercise in potentializing the hermeneutic as a means of addressing the provocation “*what is going on*

here?” (Spatz, 2021). As I offered during a presentation at *The Improviser's Experience: Knowledge, Methodology, Communication* (2021) when first sharing the annotation model:

Rather than prioritising causality or even correlation of improvising events and agents, the model transfers focus very visibly onto the qualities of multiplicity, multimodality, ambiguity, contradiction, intersubjectivity and non-linearity as the actively foregrounded elements of the analysis in its presentation. (McPherson, 2021a)

In an effort to authentically represent my experience of practice in a ‘language’ form, the model deliberately “draws attention to the great number of potential qualities of expression, felt agencies, interconnections, and possible entity-entity interactions which comprise the performance event” (McPherson, 2021a) by employing a variety of textual registers and highlighting their dynamic quality through variable persistence, spatiality, and proximity. In this visibility, I argue that the model reflects the complexity and dynamism of a practice in which a plurality of “potential input factors”, parameters, and variables of performance, “might be considered more-or-less experientially significant at any given time” (McPherson, 2021a); a practice in which one of the most prominent qualities is “fluidity [...] the changing meanings and [...] multiplicity of what's there as a process – improvisation thought of as a process” (Simon Rose, interviewed by McPherson, November 2020).

Throughout this section I draw structurally on the precedent set by Kent De Spain in *The Landscape of Now: A Topography of Movement Improvisation* (2014), whereby each titled section can be considered a specific lens through which to access and explore a focussed aspect of improvising practice, each being *rooted* in my own lived and embodied experience as a practitioner. The titles and headings of each section derive from my personal reflections in the studio, from my experience as a teacher of improvisation (as terms which I have found particularly useful in allowing students to reflect upon and deepen their practice), and are informed also by conversations with colleagues and peer practitioners, through my dialoguing with research participants in both studio and in interview-conversation. Again, following De Spain’s organizational principle, the voices of multiple research participants are woven throughout this section in fragments and quotation, rather than being presented one practitioner at a

time as a form of ‘profile’.<sup>1</sup> This functions both as a necessary acknowledgement of intersubjectivity – a means of articulating the rich diversity of perspectives, and the variety of textual and conceptual registers within the improvising community –<sup>2</sup> and as a means of highlighting pertinent synchronicities in conceptualising, thinking, and articulating improvisational experiences, underpinning my exposition of TFI.

In line with the thread of non-dualistic thinking identified in Part I, and explicated in my own terms in Part II in the essay *Non-Dualistic Perspective*, the delineation of these aspects should not be taken as implying their separation, disentanglement, or their fixedness at either a fundamentally ontological or experiential level. Each of the aspects which I have chosen to foreground by naming them explicitly must be understood as porous to the others, with at times substantial experiential and conceptual overlay; this is highlighted by the fact that, often, quotations from participants invoke a number of these different aspects all at once, in a continuous conversational stream.<sup>3</sup> Often, therefore, the writing in this section is overtly cross-referential. All of the sections in Part II are interrelated and open to each other, being co-definitive and inter-constitutive in their terminology. While the section can be read sequentially, it is best therefore approached non-linearly as a rhizomatically structured web of essays (though it is recommended to view *Improvisational Worlds* and *Video Portrait: My Body, My Practice* first).

Recognising again what Kim Vincs has described as a “subjectivity [which] is inevitably and intricately woven into rhizomatic structures of knowledge”, and identifying improvisation practice as “a field in which rhizomatic structures of knowledge are produced and integrally laced through with the subjectivity of the artist (Vincs, 2010, p. 100), I acknowledge the specificity of my terms, my thinking, and the way in which I present them as being necessarily informed by my own lived experience,

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<sup>1</sup> That said, some sections do feature the voice of one practitioner more prominently than others, dependent on how much they expressed on a given topic, and the alignment of those topics with the sections I present here.

<sup>2</sup> Intersubjectivity has been identified by MacDonald and Wilson (2017) as being integral to the construction of musical identities and memory within improvisational contexts.

<sup>3</sup> Conversation is, of course, a form of verbal improvisation.

including the privileges and cultural contexts to which it pertains. On this basis, with regards to the inclusion of participant voices in this section, I have not been dogmatic in requiring these improvisers to identify with or explicitly use my terminology to describe their own practice. I choose to name the commonalities in our practices with specific terminology in order to articulate the textually elusive experience of improvising, recognising the linguistic as an important (but not *the* only) method of exegesis.

Finally, throughout Part II, I deliberately adopt a more personal, at times quasi-conversational tone. This is because while Part I functions to contextualise and provide frame for my practice, the emphasis of this section is practice as knowledge, and the articulation of my practice through textual and audiovisual means. While it goes without saying that it is impossible within the scope of this thesis to discuss every aspect of TFI, following my genealogical tracing in Part I, the purpose of this section is to illustrate the core aspects of embodied knowledge which I have gleaned and deepened through a rigorous and dedicated period of improvising as research; in doing so, I hope to open this practice into a space for dialogue and conversation.

## VIDEO PORTRAIT: MY BODY, MY PRACTICE



Embedded Video: "My Body". Alternative link to view at (online) [https://youtu.be/d\\_01jzdl6ww](https://youtu.be/d_01jzdl6ww)

Participants Featured: Colin Frank, Maria Sappho, Sky Su | Footage Recorded: February 2020 – November 2021

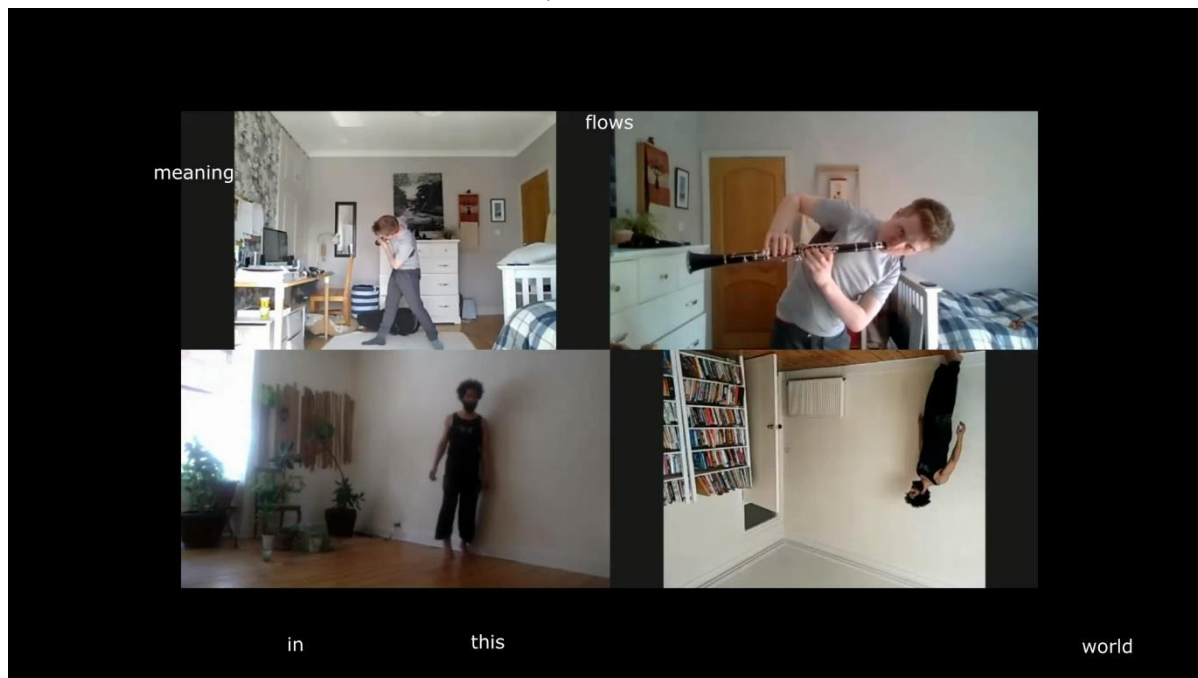


Embedded Video: "My Practice". Alternative link to view at (online) <https://youtu.be/JXr8KHN-ZA0>

Participants Featured: Colin Frank, Maria Sappho, Sky Su, Skye Reynolds, David Yates, Faradena Afifi | Footage Recorded: March 2020 – April 2021

# IMPROVISATIONAL WORLDS: A CONCEPTUAL VEHICLE FOR PRACTICE

PROPOSITION: 'LET'S SAY...IN IMPROVISING, WE MAKE A WORLD TOGETHER'



Embedded Video: "let's say...in improvising, we make a world together".<sup>1</sup> Alternative link to view at (online)  
<https://youtu.be/pV7FuYm2wEI>

Participants featured: Colin Frank, Michael Schumacher, Sky Su, Maria Sappho, Brice Catherin, Laurent Estoppey, David Yates, Skye Reynolds, Catharine Cary | Footage Recorded: December 2019 – November 2021

## AFFORDANCES OF WORLD

Improvisation is more than an arcane artistic practice. It is a way of being in the world. And whether that world exists within the cultural frame of the proscenium stage, between the intricately entangled bodies of a Contact jam, or in the way you eat your breakfast, improvisation can take you as deep as you are willing and able to go. (Kent De Spain, 2014, p. 13)

'Let's say, in improvising, we make a world together'. This is the basic principle which underlies my practice and is threaded through this thesis as the frame within which I illuminate and analyse

<sup>1</sup> This video-essay was presented as part of a talk titled "Spinning out world after world": considering transdisciplinary free improvisation as a practice of performative worlding" at the ReCePP/CMCI Research Colloquium (University of Huddersfield, 2021). It was also included as an example of illuminated video essay at Progression Point 2 (summer 2021).

documents of studio improvisation in solo and collaborative contexts. Following Donna Haraway's well-quoted assessment that "it matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with [...] what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories." (Haraway, 2016, p. 12), and repurposing Kent De Spain's observation that improvisers need to "translate somatic experiences into language that can be understood and analyzed by others" (2003, p. 28), I have been thinking my practice through the imagery and associations of *world* as a suitably evocative conceptual vehicle, one which can "conjure imaginaries that bring with them a particular rhetorical gravity as well as a sense of agency [...] worthy of further critical consideration" (Hawkins, 2017, p. vii). In thinking my practice through *world*, I am able to interrogate, illustrate, and articulate aspects of improvising through metaphor and imagery which constitutes "common conceptual ground" (Hawkins, 2014, p. 2). I consider this thinking-through to be a way of potentializing the hermeneutic through language which, in both its relative ubiquity, and its rich imaginaries,<sup>2</sup> is strategic and suggestive.<sup>3</sup>

## WHAT DOES IT SUGGEST TO THINK IMPROVISATION THROUGH WORLD?

World as evocative of:

topographical and ecological diversity – plural states, Beings, and environments in relation.

complex, dynamic, interconnected and co-creative systems.

scalar shifting on spectra between the massive and the miniscule.

fictive, alternative, and possible realities – imagined places, people, cultures and behaviours, stories and physics.

<sup>2</sup> We are familiar with worlds, as beings of a world – the world, "the only world whose geographic scope coincides exactly with that of earth" (Hayot, 2016, p. 32) – who often engage individually or as communities with other worlds imagined or described; be they literary, magical, historical, geographical, cultural, or somehow perceived as delineated from our own. An understanding of world represents a tacit but usefully ubiquitous undercurrent of collective lived experience.

<sup>3</sup> In using the term 'thinking-through', I invite reference to Melody Jue's *Wild Blue Media: Thinking through seawater* (Jue, 2020), in which she engages in a "reframing our understanding of mediation, objectivity, and metaphor" and "destabilizes terrestrial-based ways of knowing and reorients our perception of the world by considering the ocean itself as a media environment—" (front matter).



notions of diegetic containment as within an atmosphere, a border, a barrier, in space.

the particular phenomenological sphere of other entities – being brought “into the world” of [x] (a crab, an artist, a community).

something not entirely knowable, of which one sees only ever parts, which is nevertheless understood and felt to be real.

*World* and its imaginaries afford, for me, a way to approach improvisation understood as the performing of a complex dynamic system (Cobussen, 2017, pp. 13-14) involving a plurality of factors – a system which is reflexive, self-generative, and self-substantive, which is conceivable as a totality indistinguishable from the processes which generate it. As is articulated throughout Part II (see *Non-Dualistic Perspective*, and *Need*), there exists a conflation between the activity I do while improvising and the entity which is named as ‘the improvisation’; the two are inseparable, dynamically related, and co-constituent. As a spontaneous performative activity, my improvising is entirely contingent on the activity I employ in generating it. At the same time, as the improvisation unfolds, it reflexively conditions my activity through its emergent form, qualities, and trajectory.

Thinking through world also suggests improvising as a form of performative fictioning (Burrows and O’Sullivan, 2019), with the capacity to imagine and articulate possible ways of being. Harmony Bench comments that improvisation is “not about realising an idealised community in the future, but of rehearsing and enacting models of communities, *worlds upon worlds*, in the present” (2016, p. 89, italics mine) – a practice which “as a form of self-fashioning, [...] [might be] also a worlding” (2014, p. 87). Improviser Jer Reid, in conversation with me, has commented in a similar vein: “I do feel like we’re building an idea of the society that we want to live in in the studio. (Jer Reid, interviewed by McPherson, February 2021)”. *World* also reflects the diversity of interrelating behaviours, forms, and expressivities emergent within TFI, which, under the remit of the transdisciplinary, unbounds itself as far as it can from disciplinary restrictions and codified modes of expression (see Introduction: 2. *Perspectives on*

*Transdisciplinarity*) towards multireferentiality and an emphasis on emergences.<sup>4</sup> Finally, *world* suggests ecological entanglements, and encourages non-dualistic thinking via language which troubles binarity and invites the idea of multiple scales and scalar motility; *world* foregrounds the need to shift focus between micro and macro, local and global, understood as linked and interdependent perspectives (Hawkins, 2017, p. viii; see below, and *Non-Dualistic Perspective*).

Through *world*, I “find the language that is representative and reflective of the work we [as improvisers] do” (Zoe Katsilerou, interviewed by McPherson, October 2020). Furthermore, following Elizabeth Dempster’s cautions, I acknowledge the context of the academy as one in which “textual paradigms” can damagingly subsume non-textual ways of knowing (Dempster, 2018).<sup>5</sup> As remedy, thereby, I hold that the rich imagery and metaphor of *world* can usefully and “gently trample some academic conventions or boundaries” by inviting “registers of sense” which are more “affective” than “explanatory” (Roche and Longley, 2018), which do not “name as much as create new webs of connection and new potential meanings” (Profeta, 2015, p. 26). My practice of improvising is a practice of world-ing – of being part of and making worlds together with peers, and together with my environment (as a solo practitioner).

## THEORETICAL BASIS: AESTHETIC WORLDS, SYMPOIESIS, WORLDS AS POROUS TOTALITIES

My use of *world* is influenced by Eric Hayot’s concept of the *aesthetic world*, an analytical frame which has its home in literary studies, but which I contend provides a viable reference for performance studies.<sup>6</sup> Hayot describes an aesthetic world as “the diegetic totality constituted by the sum of all aspects of a single work [of art] or work-part, constellated into a structure or system that amounts to a

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of practice explicitly framed in relation to the concept of ‘Emergence’, see *Sounding-Moving Emergence in Transdisciplinary Free Improvisation* (McPherson, 2021c), presented at the Orpheus Doctoral Conference 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Dempster articulates that Dance, particularly, in the academy has suffered a “subjection” to the textual, by dint of “an implicit “somatophobia” which subtends many if not all of the major disciplines” (Dempster, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Hayot himself presents his concepts as applicable across a variety of cultural and artistic contexts “[...] this kind of cosmographical analysis, especially [...] permits us to move across the less-frequently crossed boundaries of high and low culture, and of aesthetic medium, in addition to the more conventional ones of nation, language, and time.” (Hayot, 2016, p. 84)

whole” (Hayot, 2016, p. 44).<sup>7</sup> To phrase this another way, the aesthetic world is the whole and wholeness of the content, processes, references, structures and forms, relations, narratives, features, objects etc., comprising the work of art (the book, the painting, the performance), which are generated by it and which also constitute its means of existing. Applying this idea to my own practice, an improvisational world can simply be considered the whole *and* wholeness of a given improvisation: its processes, expressions, forms, modalities, interactions, shape, the way it works, the way it looks (etc.), understood as constituting a *diegetic totality*.

Hayot’s aesthetic world indicates something that is self-containing and self-generating, wherein its state of containing (its being *as* a world) is indistinguishable from its processes of generating (its worlding). He articulates this, after Jean-Luc Nancy (2007, pp. 42-43), in the following:

A world encloses and worlds itself as the container that is identical with its contents and its containing, as a ground for itself that does not exceed or reach outside of itself (2016, 23-24) [...] the world name[s] a self-enclosing, self-organizing, self-grounding process. This process is neither act nor event, subject nor object; it is the ground of activity, eventfulness, subject- and object-hood, and of procession. (p. 24)

I translate this directly to TFI, recognising it as a practice in which the process of improvising and the improvisation itself are wholly co-constitutive; there is no separation or functional distinction between one and the other. Whereas a notated composition, a play, or a piece of choreography, for example, ordinarily exists in some form externally to the liveness of my performing – as a score-document, a structure, a text, a thought, etc. – the improvisation exists *only* in my improvising. The theoretical indistinction between the world’s enclosing and the world’s worlding (the being and happening of itself) – the improvising and the improvisation – emphasises the quality of continuous becoming, the means by which improvisation unfolds in real-time, and suggests both generativity and immediacy; these are

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<sup>7</sup> Hayot does not use the word “diegetic” in a strictly conventional sense “as a function solely or partially of narrative development or progress” (2016, p. 44). Rather, his use of the term reads more broadly as referring to anything in the aesthetic world, and of the aesthetic world; a diegetic object is a ‘world-object’, the diegetic space is the ‘world-space’ etc. I follow this expanded usage.

qualities which, though by no means exclusive to improvisational worlds, nonetheless represent salient aspects of this performance practice.

Nuancing the above basis for thinking-through *world*, and aligning with Donna Haraway's critique on total self-enclosure – that “nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing” (2016, p. 58) – I take a necessarily pragmatic perspective that notwithstanding its self-generative reflexivity, if it is to be an effective conceptual vehicle for a performance practice which is acknowledged as situated within social and disciplinary discourses, an improvisational world must be understood as a totality which is also porous. Improvisation does not emerge *ex-nihilo* but from the conditions in which it occurs,<sup>8</sup> therefore an improvisational world must be considered entangled with the cultural, social, and geopolitical context from which it springs. While it can be functionally described as a totality to reflect its qualities of self-generativity and reflexivity, it must also be understood as permeable to its broader situation (see also *Identities in Practice*)

Following Haraway's expansion in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) of Maturana and Varela's original concept of Autopoiesis (1980), I conceive of improvisational worlds as representing “sympoietic”, rather than “autopoietic” systems. Sympoietic systems can be distinguished from their autopoietic counterparts by their approach to boundaries. Anything conceived as a sympoietic system maintains an organisational openness and permeability, permitting for orientation towards change and evolution with “the potential to create changes and to adapt to changes coming from the environment” while *also* “maintain[ing] identity and the status quo” (Žukauskaitė, 2020, p. 150). In this maintaining of identity, such a system can be describable and identifiable from a given perspective in terms of *relative wholeness* (I can describe an improvisational world as a world) while at the same time it can be recognised as enmeshed with its broader situation (I recognise the world as influenced by things outwith it and entangled with it, to which it is permeable).<sup>9</sup> This nuance also represents a form of non-

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<sup>8</sup> Canonne and Garnier describe the idea of improvisation *ex-nihilo* as “illusory” (2011, p. 1).

<sup>9</sup> Such a notion parallels Stacy Alaimo's concept of Transcorporeality, in which the body is rendered porous to the geo-bio-political, while, from various perspectives, retaining its identification as a body (Alaimo, 2018).

dualistic thinking which I identify is an emergent experiential and discursive component of my practice (see *Non-Dualistic Perspective*).

I hold that the sympoietic perspective can support Hayot's comment that "[aesthetic worlds] are among other things always a relation to and theory of the lived world, whether as a largely preconscious normative construct, a rearticulation, or even an active refusal of the world-norms of their age" and therefore "are also always social and conceptual constructs, as well as formal and affective ones" (2016, pp. 44-45), by explicitly accounting for the entanglement with the social, political (etc.), context in which they are made. This it can achieve while also gently troubling the claim that a world might not in any way "exceed or reach outside itself" (Hayot, 2016, p. 24).

### SCALAR MOTILITY: FROM GLOBAL, TO LOCAL, AND BACK AGAIN

Geohumanities professor Harriet Hawkins remarks that discussion of *worlds* and *worlding* invites the consideration of *scale*, *space*, and *scape* as three important conceptual aspects (Hawkins, 2017).<sup>10</sup>

Salient among these three terms, she identifies that *scale* implies thinking at both "local" and "global" level, and I would read also, from her observations, the recognition of both levels as dynamically related. She indicates that these aspects can be approached as relationally de-hierarchised, in the sense that neither one might be considered more valuable, or yielding more or less insight, than the other.

As she writes:

Taking lessons from the debates within geography about scale would suggest a need to denaturalise the global as the ultimate goal, and instead to think in more nuanced ways about its relationship to the local [...] the global is not necessarily the apex of aspiration, instead an appreciation of local specificity in the face of the 'global' might be appropriate. To sit with the local is to appreciate difference, to refine and develop specific senses of the production and consumption of art work and its sociabilities. It is to recognise that an appreciation of the local is not to suggest that the global, and an appreciation of global differences is not vital, but

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<sup>10</sup> Hayot touches briefly on scale in discussing the different levels at which totalities (worlds) can themselves be considered to be observed: "Where in the work does worldedness emerge? It is perhaps easiest to imagine worlds at large scales, or ones that genre has already named: the novel, the oeuvre, the poem. But a sentence in a novel, a word in a poem, a look, an exclamation, or a punctuation mark can become worlds if read as formal totalities of their own." (Hayot, 2016, p. 49)

is to ensure that the global is not somehow seen as ultimately better, as more worthwhile, as more important. (Hawkins, 2017, p. viii)

Expanding this sentiment into a methodology of analysis, a de-hierarchised approach to scale which emphasises scalar motility – the capacity to shift, to zoom, to transgress, and to examine interstices relatively, rather than pursuing exclusively ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’ agendas – can usefully undermine value-systems in which reduction and summation are held to be of greater importance than what might be considered *incomplete* or partial perspectives. Following Haraway, again, in her assertion that “like all offspring of colonizing and imperial histories, I— we— have to relearn how to conjugate worlds with partial connections and not universals and particulars.” (Haraway, 2016, p. 13), I propose there is potential therefore within the world-concept’s implicit evocations of scalar motility to “denaturalise the global” and consequently “think in more nuanced ways” about improvisation, as Hawkins suggests.

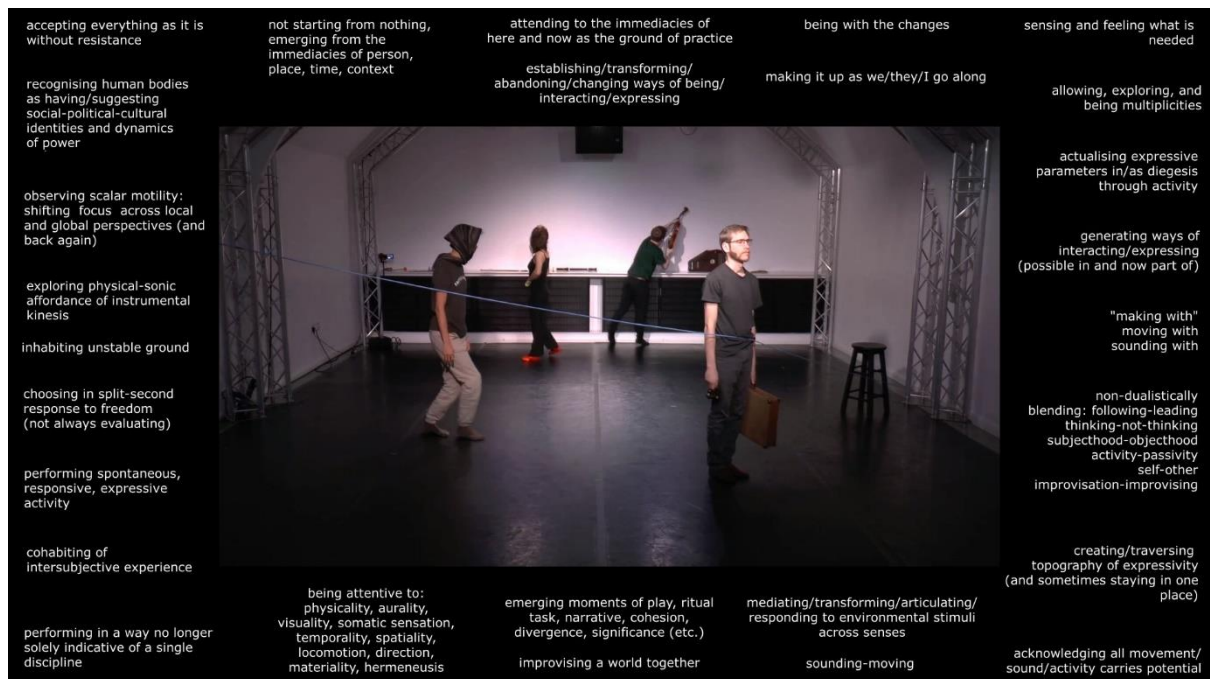
Improvisation has variously been identified, largely by practitioners, as challenging to render in summative or definitive terms (see, for example: Blom and Chaplin, 2000, p. 26). MacDonald and Wilson have asserted that “the aim to create an all-inclusive set of criteria that captures the richness of improvisation while retaining something unique about the process that distinguishes it from other activities, is ambitious” (2020, p. 26). In the introductions of books and collected essays on improvisation, authors frequently skirt around summations and definitions, or resort to qualifying them extensively: Lewis and Piekut’s *Handbook* “makes no explicit attempt to negotiate a single overarching definition of improvisation” (2016, p. 3); Caines and Heble describe improvisation broadly as “a social activity that cannot readily be scripted, predicted, or *compelled into orthodoxy*” (Caines and Heble, 2015, p. 2); and Simon Rose accounts for improvisation as “a pervasive aspect of being human, in every sphere of life, enabling existence” (Rose, 2017, p. 5).

Attempts to codify or impose boundaries upon improvisation regularly engender caveats which frustrate their applicability, and suggest degrees of inefficacy. Although he would later undertake a critique of Derek Bailey’s “dichotomous” idiomatic vs. non-idiomatic distinction in free improvisation (2019), in *A more attractive ‘way of getting things done’* (2017), Simon Fell embarks on a substantial

double-taxonomy in which he categorises improvisers based on their approach to technique, aesthetics, and improvisational philosophy across a number of strata. This undermined almost immediately, however, by his declaration that such categorization is “impossible to apply in a consistent manner” (2017, p. 68).

However, if a ‘universal’ summation or explication is to be considered neither as a goal, nor as *the definitive* marker of successful knowledge-production, but rather is rendered wholly relational (considered geographically as a ‘global’ which, with the ‘partial’ or ‘local’, is understood as a mutually valuable aspect of a dynamic and complex world), then perhaps what might be gained is access to means of discussing and theorising practices considered otherwise in-subsumable or impenetrable by reductionist methods of analysis. If the idea of imposing an agenda of explication or “convergent framework” (Vincs, 2010, p. 101) in analysis of performance – something Kim Vincs asserts is “doomed to failure” (2010, p. 101) – is deprioritised in favour of *inhabiting* shifting scales of focus towards *the visceral engagement with interactions of partial aspects* which are valued as much as the superstructural, I venture that what might be gained is a greater discursive capacity for articulating the dynamism and complexity of improvising, and other related complex systems. This, I propose, can be afforded by considering improvisation in terms of *world* and its associations of dynamic scalar motility.

## AN ILLUMINATED WORLD: QUARTET WITH SKY, COLIN, AND MARIA



Embedded Video: "Quartet Study".

View online: (annotated version) <https://youtu.be/adO9-kM8RI8> | (non-annotated version) <https://youtu.be/U4gAoQ2Tc1A>

Participants Featured: Colin Frank, Maria Sappho, Sky Su | Recorded: February 2020



## INSTRUMENTAL KINESIS: MOVING-WITH-INSTRUMENTS

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Embedded Video: “Sun Duet”. Alternative link to view at (online) <https://youtu.be/CaUgmeMuhTo>

(This video does not have an annotated version)

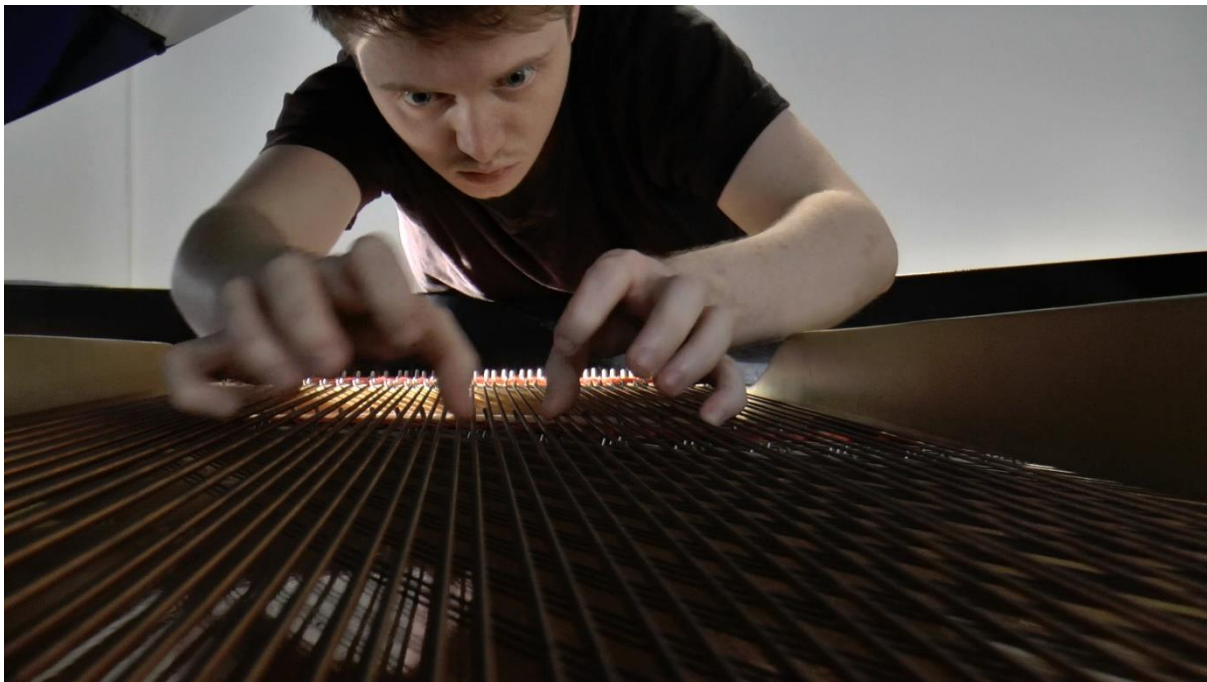
Participants Featured: Sky Su | Recorded: February 2020

Moving expressively with instruments involves the subversion of conventional formal relationships between human and instrumental bodies, destabilising the expectation of sound-oriented function in kinetic interaction, and troubling the neatness of disciplinary identifications which can be inferred from practitioner activity. As I commented in Part I, “through their role in [...] performance events across various (sub)cultures, instruments are afforded symbolic significance, as objects indicative and emblematic of musical discipline (and all to which this pertains)”. Instruments are ritual objects, and by this nature they reach out beyond their material affordances and entangle themselves with ideas, identities, and narratives beyond the studio space. Carrying and moving these ritual objects, being able to grasp or cup them, present in the hands, bring them into proximity with other parts of the body, other objects, and other spaces in the room, is therefore conceptually, as well as gesturally, significant.

As an improviser whose practice intimately involves expressing conjunctly in sound and movement with instruments (as well as without), I have developed a sensitivity to the affordances and challenges of

working with these other bodies in moving and sounding simultaneously. Here I offer a number of considerations within what I term *Instrumental Kinesis*, moving-with-instruments. These considerations are explored through the lens of my relationship with specific instruments/instrument families, each of which I have spent time practising with in the studio across the course of this project.<sup>1</sup>

## THE PIANO IS A BEHEMOTH (PRESENCE AND SIZE)



Embedded Video: "The Piano is a Behemoth". Alternative link to view at (online) [https://youtu.be/SU\\_FYtROG4w](https://youtu.be/SU_FYtROG4w)

Participants Featured: Sky Su, Maria Sappho, Juan-Fran Cabrera | Footage recorded December 2019 – November 2020

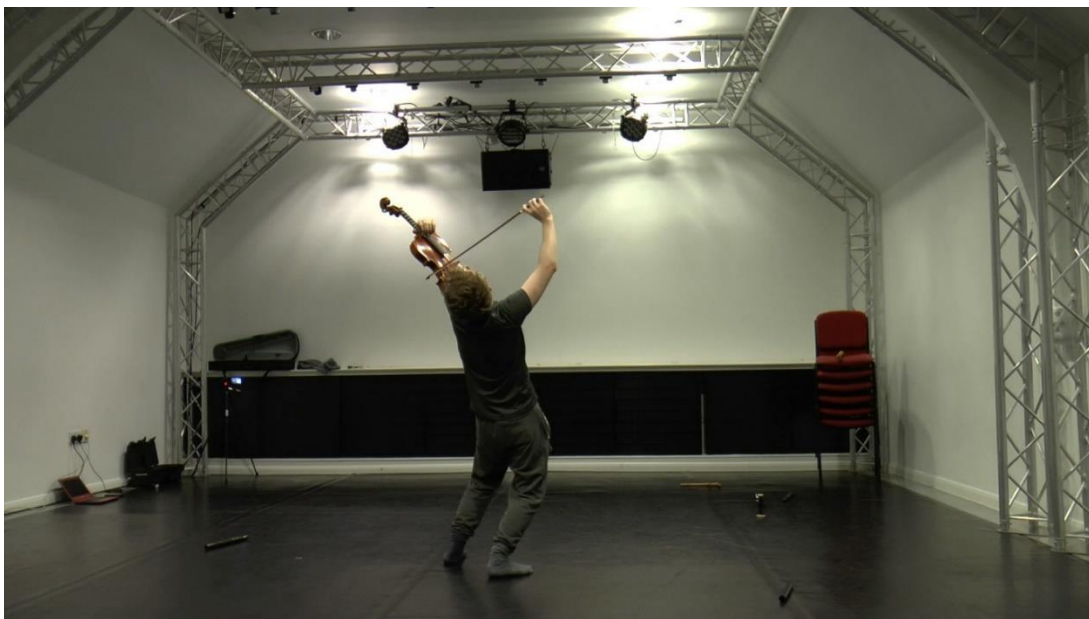
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<sup>1</sup> As is similar elsewhere, while each of these sections foregrounds a single instrument, their commentary carries across the scope of instrumental kinesis.

## THE VIOLA HAS UNLIMITED SURFACES' (VIBRATION AND SHIFTING INTERFACES)

I've also discovered that sound unlocks my body in a different way. The vibration, I think the intention [...] it's like when it comes through you, it's extraordinary. And when you force it [...] then you got to deal with it [sic]. And that can be tricky. (Skye Reynolds, interviewed by McPherson, October 2020)

The vast majority of instruments are conventionally played with at least one hand.<sup>2</sup> The apparatus of one or more palms and corresponding digits is central to the construction of numerous instruments and their ordinary techniques.<sup>3</sup> Shifting the sounding interface from the hands to other body parts not only moves against the established norms of instrumental interaction but decouples my sounding from its foundations in digit-level fine-motor dexterity. At the same time, it foregrounds the tactility and somatic sensations of other parts of the body by bringing them into proximity with vibration, while inviting their capacity to generate sound and to be viewed as sites of sounding.



Embedded Video: "Viola 1"

Alternative link to view online: (annotated version) <https://youtu.be/xxxDyFwgyrE> | (non-annotated version) [https://youtu.be/4\\_DRz\\_GEsRQ](https://youtu.be/4_DRz_GEsRQ) . Recorded: May 2021

<sup>2</sup> Notable exceptions include the harmonica, which can be played on a mount, using only the mouth. The theremin technically doesn't involve a direct tactile interface of any kind, but is still ordinarily played using the hands to manipulate its electromagnetic fields. Other electronic instrumental interfaces, such as the laser harp, are similar in this regard.

<sup>3</sup> Consider the layout of keys on a flute or the holes on a recorder, the rudimentary graspable-ness of a drumstick, or the way that a violin neck curves slightly downward creating a surface against which the hand rests while playing.

The sensation of sound as experienced physically by my body is at the heart of instrumental kinesis. Sound that resonates not only across the proximal space of the studio (perceived by my ears in their attentiveness to aurality), but via contact with the instrument across the chamber of my own body through the surface of my skin, permeates my somatic experience and prompts dialogue with my kinetic expressivity. As I move to sound on an instrument, so my sounding reverberates back into the moving body via points of contact with it (the finger, the torso, the neck, the arm, the head, etc.), in turn conditioning the body's motion in a cycle of vibrational feedback. Attentive to the physicality of sounding as felt across my skin and muscles (as well as accessed by my ears), I allow myself to travel within this cycle; sound vibrates into movement vibrates into sound. Experientially, the two aspects converge so intimately that in the moment of performing, I am hard-pressed to identify definitively and consistently where one impulse begins and the other ends.

By changing the points of my body which contact the instrument I can allow vibrations to be felt in different places and prompt sonic-kinetic dialogue. The fine-tuned neurology of my hands may be more sensitive (in terms of nerve-endings per  $\text{cm}^2$ ) than my elbow or chest, the hands themselves also being more prominent than other body parts in my history of sounding, but these other bodily sites also feel the resonance of the viola, the way the vibration of the string courses via the soundpost and out through the thinner curved wood of the instrumental body. The sensation of the instrument on my thigh is not the same as sensation of the instrument on my neck and shoulder; the groups of muscles which are in proximity to its vibration are different and respond differently, connected to other groups of muscle, joints, and fascia which do not ordinarily touch the instrumental body. Even when maintaining an aspect of a conventional sounding position (i.e., using the bow on the viola's strings), through shifting the overall interface between the instrumental body and my own, I am able to explore how sounding in different sites informs my kinesis, and vice versa. The way I choose to sound also alters how this vibration feels at these different points of contact. *Where* I sound on the instrument, with what technique and pressure, and with what range of motion, changes the way the sound touches me and plays into my somatic sensation. Reciprocally, the changes in my body impact the ways I am able

to sound, the parameters or techniques which are available to me, their degree of flexibility, dynamic, and amplitude.

Increasing my bow-pressure to create a scratch-tone, for example, not only reflects in the tensions of my bow-arm and in the resistance of the string (which come together to create the sound), but carries in the granularity of the sound in transference through the body of the instrument into my own body. The grinding nature of a scratch-tone can provoke a reflective effort, corporeally, to tense my muscles and grind my joints (insofar as they can grind), to judder irregularly, to build pressure internally through contractions, and thereby to close the body into tighter forms. Or, it might provoke a different impulse, the scratch-tone feeling like a pressure that needs release, prompting an expansion across the body as I lengthen and relax my bow-arm to draw tension out from both my body and the string.<sup>4</sup> Both of these sonic-kinetic reflections condition subsequent activity, the changing shape and resistance of my body altering my means of sound production, which in turn suggests new kinesiology, and so on.



Embedded Video: “Viola 2”. Alternative link to view online: (annotated version) <https://youtu.be/xxPewkldtrs> | (non-annotated version) <https://youtu.be/ty7QxTG9akU>

Participants Featured: Sky Su | Recorded: December 2019

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<sup>4</sup> Once again, there is no definitive way to say in what way I will respond to stimuli in the moment.



Alternatively, a contortion of my arm may offer only a small circumference of finger mobility on the viola's fingerboard, the tightening of muscles in my shoulder and the twisting of my forearm rendering my hand and wrist less flexible, more tense, with a lesser inter-digit span; at the same time, this concentration of tensions can draw my attention to the subtle sensation of the string against the side of my fingers, the minute changes in resistance across the flesh of the finger pad, and the pressure of the instrument against the tight coil of my arm. Following this haptic-somatic information, I choose to focus on my hand, my finger trembling as it moves over the fingerboard, the varying lightness of the finger-stop drawing out unstable harmonics and high partials; the feeling of stretching the finger, out of the tightness of the arm, leads me to draw it back down into a more comfortable position, the warmth of the wood of the fingerboard leading me to pause occasionally, while the tensile of the string prompts me to draw my finger back and forth, bending it as I slide. The viola and my body both have unlimited surfaces, and by shifting my points of contact, I am able to explore their manifold sonic and kinetic affordances.



Embedded Video: "Viola 3". Alternative link to view online: (annotated version) <https://youtu.be/ospDaizuNmA> | (non-annotated version) <https://youtu.be/FmAVyO8x3XI>

Participants Featured: Colin Frank | Recorded: May 2021

In his thesis *Making With Agential Objects* (2022), Colin Frank describes how, in his post-percussive practice, he finds interest in ‘unstable’ performance situations which highlight sonic precarity as precipitated by the unstable physicality of instruments and objects-as-instruments:

I [often] create conditions of instability and precarity—where a constructed instrument is at the precipice of falling apart or my body is pushed to the edge of being able to maintain an action. By establishing a situation that is unstable, which is also governed by rules that I try not to break, the situation’s instability threatens to destabilise the system of rules, resultantly bringing out unexpected and what I consider to be interesting breakages, irregularities, and split-second glitches. (Frank, 2022, p. 49)

While I differ from Colin in that I don’t conceive of my own relationship to precarity and precarious instruments in terms of the maintaining and breaking of rules,<sup>5</sup> the “irregularities, and split-second glitches” which he references could also be identified in my instrumental kinesis. Rather than considering the altering of bodily interface with instruments as a ‘barrier’ to the exposition of virtuosic technique,<sup>6</sup> and in direct opposition to valorised musical athleticism I have identified as entangled with oppressive structures of heteromascularity (see Part I, Ch. 2), I choose pragmatically to rethink this relation in terms of partnering and “making-with” the instrument.<sup>7</sup> Our shifting interfacing highlights changing material, sonic, and kinetic affordances of our bodies and contact as we move together across space and time. Through my attentive inhabiting of the unstable ground of instrumental kinesis, the notion of control is backgrounded as the negotiation between two bodies (mine, and the instrument’s) comes to the fore.

Re-thinking this changing relationship out of impediment and into affordance engenders the

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<sup>5</sup> Rarely, if ever, do I think of my practice in terms of maintaining an action or task in the face of adversity in the way that Colin describes. Instead, I tend towards moving with the changing situation and adapting very rapidly, which often involves the transformation or total abandonment of previous activity (the opposite of maintaining) as movement unfolds.

<sup>6</sup> By the altering of interface I mean the changing or manipulating the points of contact between the human and instrumental bodies, as well as altering the shapes of these bodies themselves (through changing bodily form, and through instrumental deconstruction or preparation).

<sup>7</sup> Here I reference both Donna Haraway’s concept of “making with” (2016), and Colin Frank’s usage in relation to the agency of instruments and instrument-objects in contemporary musical performance (2022).

acknowledgement, and the acceptance, of sonic and physical precarity as an emergent and aesthetically *validated* aspect of performance. Abject sound, emerging from abject instrumental kinesiology, is afforded space and presence. The instability that arises from continually repositioning an instrument, thereby removing it from its ordinary points of contact with my body and allowing unordinary surfaces to come together (shoulder and string, thigh and bridge, back of neck and wood, etc.), renders both sonic and kinetic outcomes more unpredictable than were I to maintain a conventional playing position. This undermines salient markers by which ordinary (technical) instrumental competency is assessed within the regulatory paradigms of Western musical cultures (see Part I, 2.2.2). In my divergence from conventional (masculine) instrumental stasis, and in actively disturbing the usual interfaces of instrumental sounding while maintaining sound as an expressive parameter, I am able to challenge the hegemony of technical instrumentalism and question its validity in the context of the holistic expressivity which I offer instead as aesthetically viable and personally empowering (see also *Identities in Practice*).

### **THE RECORDER CAN TRAVEL (PORTABILITY AND SPATIALITY)**

One of the primary instruments I have taken to using in the studio for its portable affordances is the recorder, which, when played conventionally, can be blown in effectively any position – whether prone, seated, standing, upside-down, etc. While the cavity of the lungs and diaphragm might be variously compressed, as per my comments in *The Viola has Unlimited Surfaces*, I hold that these changes in the body represent *opportunities* for varied and unpredictable forms of sounding and moving, rather than barriers or restrictions upon specific instrumental technique. More important for me than aiming to produce a sustained tone (with minimal fluctuations) while moving from standing to prone and twisting my arm behind my back (for example) is my capacity to move-*with* the changing airflow across my chest cavity as I explore kinesis with the recorder; I follow the changes precipitated by the contractions of intercostals, giving attention to the sound I hear emerge from the instrument's bore and the way my body twists, in a wholeness of expressive activity that is attuned to the immediate changes of my situation. Stuttering, over- and under-blowing, overemphasised articulations, 'improper' and



alternative fingerings, slippage and spillage of airflow – all might be occasioned by my choice to move while sounding. These emergent sonorities reflect the mutable connection between my physicality and my sounding, the intimate entanglement between my body and the vibrations which emerge through the instrument with which it shifts in interfacing. Rather than avoiding these happenings, I choose instead to follow them and engage with them as an integral part of instrumental kinesis.



Embedded Video: “Recorder 1”.

Alternative link to view online: (annotated version) <https://youtu.be/a2TFJIRhggQ> | (non-annotated version) <https://youtu.be/AQprBjWMMx0>

Recorded: May 2021

Instruments that can be carried allow for a breadth of formal and spatial kinetic interaction in their capacity to be moved in space, manipulated manually, repositioned, passed between performers, and sometimes physically deconstructed.<sup>8</sup> The portability of the recorder allows me to experiment with sound in relation to space and motion, as well as the dimension of time with which sound is ordinarily associated. I can highlight the tactile and embodied quality of nominally sounding gestures and sonic

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<sup>8</sup> In particular, wind instruments offer potential for this latter mode of interaction through the common ‘disconnectability’ between pipes, tubes, bores, and mouthpieces (including reeds and crooks); bowed strings also afford a degree of deconstructive capacity in the decoupling of body and bow (the latter of which can itself be further un-screwed), and percussion instruments frequently can be broken down into smaller pieces.

occurrences within the room by emphasising my kinesis, I can alter my proximity to co-performers (thereby altering their proximity and relationship to my sounding), and I can bring the instrument physically (as well as sonically) into relation with the history of movement across space and time accrued by the improvisational world as it develops. While moving with the instrument, recalling a fragment or a previously iterated quality of sound in a *different position within the space*, for example, imbues this sounding gesture with spatial (as well as sonic) significance; it is brought into relation with the physical, dimensional aspects of the improvisational world— with the memories of movements which have occurred across the space, with things that people have done in this location or that location in the world's prior history. Moving with the recorder and sounding across the breadth of a space, in different locations, can draw attention to the space itself; to its architectural features, its variations in acoustics, and potentially its formal relationship to improvisers' unfolding activity. The moving instrument, in its capacity to sound and be physically present in a variety of locations, can therefore be a vehicle for spatial dialogue.

As mentioned in *The Piano is a Behemoth*, the shape, size, and formal dimensions of instruments also impact the way in which they can be utilised within performance, both sonically and visually. The recorder, as an instrument which is long and thin (essentially, stick-shaped), lends itself visually (and even at times narratively) to becoming an extension of the limbs, a tool, a baton, a pointing stick, a pole, a 'thing that is grasped', as well as possessing, practically, a hole at the base of the bore which funnels airflow, and therefore sound, in a particular direction. Enhanced by this structure, the wooden or plastic bore being long and straight, I can direct my sound into different spaces around the room, changing my posture as I do so. I can work in channelling my expressions into different corners, against walls, across the stage, or even (conceptually) beyond the confines of the performance space through relating my sound and movement to my direction of travel; the speed at which I cross the space, the gait with which I move, the indirectness or markedness of my trajectory, intersect with my embodiment and my sounding gestures and add a layer to my expressivity. Portability also therefore affords a flexibility regarding the direction of expressions. In using portable instruments, I am also able to engage

my vision more dynamically than when playing static instruments, scanning three-dimensional space, turning and shifting levels as I move. The ability to turn fully while engaging the eyes, in particular generates, a feeling of connection to the viscosity of co-performers' activity, as well as reinforcing (through this concentration on the visual) the dimensionality of my own body, its position in space, its formal qualities, and its capacity to move.<sup>9</sup> Engaging sounding while being attentive to viscosity in this way, something afforded by the instrument's portability, draws together the visual and the sonic and invites me to consider their interactivity across my body, between bodies, and across space.



Embedded Video: "Recorder 2". Alternative link to view online: (annotated version) [https://youtu.be/8\\_OAH4FDp28](https://youtu.be/8_OAH4FDp28) | (non-annotated version) <https://youtu.be/8vyXF-jgiRg>

Participants Featured: Sky Su, Skye Reynolds | Recorded: March 2020

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<sup>9</sup> Hilary Elliott comments, on the role of vision in improvising performance, that dance-artist Lisa Nelson "discovered how her 'visual desires reflexively prompted her own movement through space' (Buckwalter, 2010: 121) and this new-found awareness enabled her to explore the emergent 'dialogue' between her 'visual desires' and her physicality (Nelson, 2004: 24)." (Elliott, 2014, p. 69)

## REFLECTIONS ON THE VOICE

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### THE MATTER OF VOICING-MOVING

Breath is at the centre of the relationship between voice and body. It connects the inner and outer chambers of my body and the space (respectively), and is (at least by half) the material of my vocal sounding. It is the air that I manipulate with the larynx, nasal cavity and mouth, which is in physical contact with and moves through my respiratory system. It is also, as I commented in a presentation at the Orpheus Institute, a “biological mechanism that is, for most people, ubiquitous, and forms as much part of the environment of the improvisation of now as the floor, the walls, the tightness in my hip, or the viola in its case. [...] (All of these aspects are present and represent points of possible significance)” (McPherson, 2021c). Breath continues, even when kinesis, instrumental sounding, or other forms of expression do not. This consistency means that, on the one hand, it often goes unnoticed. When not transformed into something nameable – such as speech, or singing – the breath, like the other internal functions of the body, is relatively invisible. On the other hand, its ubiquity means that the breath is always available, always primed to be transformed into a “manifestation or gesticulation obviously demanding attention” (Lehmann, 2006, p. 82).

Transforming the breath expressively in sounding involves shifting my internal musculature to provide resistance, pressure, and vibration. I can draw attention to the sound of breath by changing the shape of the mouth and the position of the larynx, allowing me to shape emergent frequencies. I can also explore a plethora of unvoiced sounds that do not engage the vibration of the skin of the vocal cords – I can gasp, wheeze, blow, heave, puff, pant, all of which might convey different meaning, or suggest aspects of character, narrative, or other significance, in consort with my motion and the particular way I engage kinesis while sounding. The relationship between expressive kinesis and vocal sounding is very close, as both involve the conscious manipulation of my body to transform inward impulse into outward artefact. As Vesty comments:

Using the voice entails complex neuro-physical processes that are, arguably, challenged further by the dancing body's (off-balance and locomotive) dynamic movement. To make vocal sound is to manipulate bodily spaces — cavities and orifices — that are constantly undergoing reconfigurations. (Vesty, 2020, p. 29)

The voice is muscular, fleshy, gristle-y, made of the same stuff as my legs and arms, my gut, my jaw, my glutes. The changing forms of my body (both inside and out) inform and shape the quality and contour of the emergent voice as it proceeds from the diaphragm through the trachea, across the folds of the larynx and passes through the chamber of the mouth. Even more than when expressing in *Instrumental Kinesis*, sounding-moving across voice and body draws my attention to the viscosity of sounding in and from my own flesh. Through vocalising, a similar attentiveness to vibration as I experience when working with the viola is concentrated among a rich gamut of other sensory information which is somatic and tactile — the temperature and speed of airflow, the pressure of air against the lips, the musculature and moistness of interdental spaces of the mouth, the taste of saliva, the dryness of the air, the resonance of my chest cavity (etc.). This wealth of sensory information provides the ground for an expressivity which entwines the sonic and kinetic at the corporeal level, both modalities emerging from inside my body and radiating beyond into proximal space.

Where *Instrumental Kinesis* involves the locomotive and spatial negotiation of a relationship with a physical (and cultural) non-human body, voicing-moving foregrounds considerations rooted in the biopolitics of the vocal-corporeal. As I identified in Part I, the drawing out of voice from flesh evokes the pervasive linkage between femininity, abjection, and the corporeal (see Part I, 1.5.); the fleshy home of the voice is an othered space. Voicing-moving therefore invites scrutiny on my personhood — the assessment of my identities in the meeting of *my* voice and *my* body as a site of fleshy human significance. In my vocalising-moving therefore, as I permit for cracks and squeaks, for breakage and spillage, as I churn and twist my voice within my body, I am able to explore the vulnerability of abject sound as emergent from my body in its raw physicality, its fleshiness, as an expression of my own queerness and queer femininity (see also *Identities in Practice*)

## “WHEN YOU USE WORDS, YOU’RE DEALING WITH A GIANT”

I'm fascinated with words [...] I think because they are the way we communicate with each other, they carry enormous weight. I mean, they're just huge, huge! They're, you know, heavy, heavy, heavy! So I find that in improvisation, it's really interesting to use as little as you can. Until it like becomes like *a thing*. You know, it's a thing that you don't control [...] I find myself – a lot of words will come to me, and I'll just, you know, say “no” – let them inform the what's happening, but I'm not going to say them. Because I think the minute you say a word, like if I said to you, you know, “harbour” or “tree trunk”, you know, you immediately have a reference. Immediately. If not 16 references, which takes you away as a public from co-creating with me, because you're off, you know, thinking about the tree-trunk, you hung out on, or a boat or whatever [laughs]. (Catharine Cary, interviewed by McPherson, November 2020)

As I discussed in Part I, drawing on Vesty’s exposition of types of voicing in improvised performance, I would identify that many improvisers who employ vocal modalities tend towards either prosaic style commentary and stream-of-consciousness articulation of “what is here” in space with them,<sup>1</sup> or towards poetic, “illusionistic” use of language which errs into the narratological. Additionally, they might incorporate or transition between both of these modes, across a single performance, or more generally across the scope of their practice.<sup>2</sup> During my conversation with Catharine Cary, I offered that in my own experience of practice “when you use words, you’re dealing with a giant”; this statement followed her commentary above, in which she offers that words, both spoken and written, are “heavy, heavy, heavy”. The ubiquity of verbal language as the primary mode of communication in the vast majority of human contexts speaks, of course, to its efficacy and brilliance as a cultural and biological innovation, and to its artistic potential; but it also draws attention to the need to acknowledge the dominance of verbal registers – in particular speech – when positioned in relation to the non-verbal (Dempster, 2018).<sup>3</sup> As Catharine comments, words can immediately provide a “reference” – a marker

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<sup>1</sup> Vesty notes that this mode was common to the work of Judson: “The use of voice in Judson Dance Theater appears to have existed at the level of commentary or quotidian conversation attuned in tone and timbre to the preoccupation at this time for playing with the democratising features of the everyday.” (2020, p. 40)

<sup>2</sup> Both of these types of wording are recognisable in footage collected during this project, notably when working with Skye Reynolds, David Yates, and Faradena Afifi, though also present with several others.

<sup>3</sup> During my observation of ICEBERG’s practice and workshop, in 2019, one of the participants commented to me that they felt they “fall back” on words during improvisation when unsure what to do, as a familiar means of expressing. It is also worth acknowledging here that spoken language, while globally prominent, is not the primary

of meaning which reaches beyond the immediate diegesis into collective (extradiegetic) experience and suggests an association, a realm of imagery, even another world. Brazilian-Czech philosopher and theorist Vilém Flüsser speculates that “somewhere, somehow, before pronunciation and behind the mouth, the word has already been formed, however briefly before or after, and not somewhere, somehow in the broad stretches of eternal ideas or in the history of humanity. (2014, p. 27). He continues:

As it breaks through the wall of silence, the word proceeds from the sphere of available words into the sphere of relationships between people, without the question of how these relationships are structured becoming significant. The person who is speaking does direct his word towards a context, he never talks to nothing, and in this sense his speech is always an address, a pronouncement, that is, dialogic. But the words he formulates build chains. They are linked to one another for syntactic and semantic reasons, and in this sense, the gesture of speaking is always a discursive gesture (2014, p. 29)

Flüsser’s exposition of the “gesture of speaking”, as he terms it, is that it is always calling out into a broader web of human concepts and experience, always bringing ideas into relation and into discourse; talking is never talking “to nothing”. As I improvise across a plurality of expressive modes, many of which might be considered more ‘abstract’ than possessing a definite, verbally driven semiology, I am conscious of my desire to check and balance the strength of associative and discursive potential carried by the verbal, mediated in relation to other forms of expression. Perhaps owing to my recent experience working with a number of vocal improvisers aligned more closely with the practice culture of free improvised music than with improvised movement or theatre (including Maggie Nicols, Saadet Turkoz, and Fara Afifi), I find that while I do not preclude the use of words, my practice does demonstrate a tendency towards non-verbal vocalisation (what Vesty refers to as “non-linguistic sound”), which emphasises the timbral, melodic, pitch-based and phrasal qualities of the voice (essentially, its musical parameters), more so than its capacity to articulate in language. Although there are numerous improvisers (both well-known and lesser known, across the span of improvising history) who pursue

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form of communication for everybody, notably those in the D/deaf community who are first-language sign-language users.

some form of word-work as a common if not an integral aspect of their practice,<sup>4</sup> in my own practice, words have rarely been the focus of my improvising, and ordinarily become part of an improvisational world only via a co-improviser's activity – in their introduction of words as an expressive parameter (see *Forming Diegesis, Diegesis Forming*) -- rather than my own.

### **PARALANGUAGE: SOUNDING AT THE EDGE OF SPEECH**

In lieu of actual verbiage, I often find myself expressing in a kind of 'paralanguage', by which I mean a stream of near-syllables and near-words which maintains some degree of speech-like quality in intonation, phrasing and inflection, but which does not directly correlate to any actual language.<sup>5</sup> These speech-like qualities can be extended, manipulated, exaggerated, fragmented (etc.) in essentially *musical* fashion; they can be played with and explored without the directness of semiosis precipitated by language, and therefore can be allowed to hold space in the improvisation as aesthetic artefacts in their own right. I find the isolation of these parameters an interesting means of evoking abstract meaning and nonconcrete associations by paralleling the emotive contours of certain phrasings or rhythmic structures common to speech, without permitting the irruption of 'heavy' words, thereby sidestepping their directness in conjuring specific imagery and generating a definitive semiosphere. I also see this as a means of inhabiting an interstitial, unnamed, queer space 'between' in which unfixity and undefinition come to the fore (see also *Identities in Practice*).

Often this modality of vocalisation, in its speech-adjunct nature, might conduce a sense of character or characterisation, a momentary inference of persona or a sense of deliberate 'affect'; or it might parallel recognisable (extradiegetic) registers of speaking through the mimicking of conversation, diatribe, oration, monologue, reflection (etc.). In its musical and 'para-communicative' affordances, paralinguistic vocalisation takes on an instrumental quality; I engage it in much the same way as I

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<sup>4</sup> Including, for example: Simone Forti, Meredith Monk, Julyen Hamilton, Katie Duck, Andrew Morrish, Al Wunder, Wendy Houston, ICEBERG collective (Zoe Katsilerou, Eilon Morris, Penny Chivas, Nicolette McLeod), Elaine Mitchener, Rylan Gleave, and my own colleagues Skye Reynolds and David Yates, to name but a few.

<sup>5</sup> I am not, for clarification, using this term per its use in linguistics (and related fields) to denote non-lexical aspects of language. Instead I use the prefix para- in its sense as being 'beside', or 'next to'.



approach sounding on the viola or recorder, as another form of sonic expressivity. However, this form of sounding is one which, in its evocative sculpting of the voice at the edges of speech, maintains a distinct allusion of theatricality, something which I find can concentrate the sense of the improvisation as having a distinct diegesis. The in-between-ness of the paralinguistic – neither speech nor not-speech, neither pointedly communicative nor unmeaningful – renders it morphic and unstable; it is precipitous in both its sound and its sensation in my mouth, something neither here nor there, which is capable of turning as easily into song as into sighing, into speech, or into silence.



Embedded Video: “Paralanguage”.

Alternative link to view: (annotated version) <https://youtu.be/etVaObNLqE> | (non-annotated version) <https://youtu.be/xW4IYBC7FfQ>

Recorded: May 2021

## IDENTITIES IN PRACTICE: TOWARDS FREEDOM(S)

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In Part I, I commented that “to move the body against a backdrop of suppressed is to disrupt the status quo, and challenge the normalcy of stasis, bodily subservience, and a-corporeality in direct terms” (Part I, 2.2.). In practising TFI, I strive to subvert the regulatory paradigms by which the axiology of free improvisation’s practice-culture has been shaped. The enmeshment between this axiology and the social, as revealed through my analysis in chapters 1 – 4, means that this is not an abstracted effort. It is also a form of living experimentation with sociality and identity enacted and embodied within the frame of performance. Just as the *Feminist Improvising Group’s* performance of ‘women’s work’ and queer-feminist tactility allowed them to “militate against [male-dominated] musical acceptance” (McKay, 2005, p.291; see Part I, 2.2.2.), so TFI is a space in which my own personal identities are activable entities of practice.

The work we do is about intimacy. So, like, bringing things on different scales together – like the earth turning, your body on the earth – two people – what the essence of each person is in that meeting. (Sky Su, in-studio reflection, December 2020)

As a queer person, I live in daily opposition to the “obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (Butler, 2006, p.186) which regulates social interaction and permeates both public and private life. The conflict between (self-) regulation conditioned by this frame, and (self-) emancipation which resists “the logic of heteronormative hegemony” (Ruberg et al., 2019, p. 109), sits within my body and shapes its kinesis and its sounding expressions both in and outside the studio. The conflict emerges, disarmingly, in the way I deepen my voice as I answer the phone to a stranger, curtailing my register to avoid excesses of dynamic and pitch-movement which might betray effeminacy; in my avoidance of physical contact with my partner in public spaces;<sup>1</sup> in the straightening and widening of my gait as I walk through the city at night; or conversely, towards freedom, in my choice to cross-dress and explicitly

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<sup>1</sup> Even in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for two queer people to express intimacy in public carries the very real potential for oppressive scrutiny, and at worst hate-crime and physical violence.

feminise or androgynise my appearance on the concert stage in response to the regulatory musical culture of WIAM (see McPherson, 2018).

My relationship to sexuality (and to gender)<sup>2</sup> finds a home in the ‘not-quite’ and ‘not-always’ affordances of the queer – an unregulated and expansive field in which I am permitted to possess non-distinctions, to traverse binarity, and to challenge structures of fixity. In its concentrated engagement with these very *same qualities and characteristics* (see Introduction: 2, 3), TFI intersects directly with my lived experience. My queerness is *reified* in performance in the plurality of expressive domains I employ, thus troubling the identification of discipline and its associated patrilineages. It is manifest overtly in my instrumental kinesis, activity which subverts what I have identified as *heteromasculine* bodily stasis concomitant with the valorising of technical instrumental virtuosity (Part I, 2.1. *Hegemonic Aesthetics*). It underpins my exploration of the sounds of abjection, in which I draw on the performance ethics and living legacy of improvising artists such as Maggie Nicols (see Ferrett, 2014) to allow the ugly, the unseemly, the unwanted, and the strange – terms archaically synonymous with the queer – permission and validation in a field of emergent expressivity. TFI is therefore a vehicle by which my queer body articulates its queerness explicitly in the performative domain.

[In videographic documents] you can’t look at the singing without looking at the singer; you can’t hear the singing without hearing that voice. They are not separable, in a very fundamental way (Spatz, 2021)

Working with co-improvisers, a meeting of identities also takes place.<sup>3</sup> My queer kinship and friendship with one participant in particular (who, for the purposes of sensitivity, I will anonymise here)<sup>4</sup> allows

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<sup>2</sup> While a male gender identity might be readily assumed as ‘legible’ in my body, I struggle to identify wholly (and often at all) with the performative provisions of cisgender masculinity. On that basis, I identify somewhere on the spectrum of non-binarity, though my understanding of this is developing. I view practice within the pluralistic affordances of TFI as forming part of my journey of self-actualisation and personal emancipation.

<sup>3</sup> I have not collected Equality and Diversity monitoring data for participants in this project; the ethical basis for doing so within the overall remit of the research (as centred on my own practice) was not justifiable. However, the pool of participants includes individuals from a range of racial, national, gender, sexual, linguistic, ability, and cultural identities. Some chose to comment upon this in relation to practice in interview, others did so privately or informally in the studio, and others chose not to discuss this at all.

<sup>4</sup> Queer identity is a particularly sensitive form of personal data. Individuals may not be “out” as queer with everyone they know, especially family, at work, and in public life. Although, elsewhere in this thesis, participants

our improvising to explore moments of platonic intimacy founded upon this aspect of shared experience; we share this while acknowledging in this pairing that our other experiences, particularly of nationality, racialisation, religion, and able-bodiedness, are markedly divergent.<sup>5</sup> Entering into shifting forms of contact with them, sharing weight, becoming tactile and touching bodies, co-sounding with each other, facilitated by the open agenda of TFI, is a form of emancipatory practice. On two separate occasions when we were unexpectedly interrupted and observed by external viewers while improvising,<sup>6</sup> the physical stiffening and contracting of my body, the dropping of physical contact, the diminution of our sounding, betrayed the presence of familiar processes of self-censoring in the face of queer abjection – our performance of intimacy had been observed. This salient, but not all-encompassing, aspect of who we are fed our experience of practice in those moments; the fact of our being observed without consent (however innocent or oblivious the viewer) reinforced that our activity and our relationship in the improvisational world was entangled in a wider power-structure of social relations.<sup>7</sup>

The intersection of TFI with the social involves not only the lived experience brought by individuals into the studio, but also an acknowledgement that the interpersonal dynamics of performance can signify at the social level. As improvisational worlds shift and develop, social identities form part of the gamut of interactions by which our activity plays with patterns of meaning. Revisiting reflective commentary from participants upon the *Quartet Line* improvisation with Sky, Maria, and Colin (see the final video in *Forming Diegesis, Diegesis Forming*), the relationship between different gender-signifying bodies, for

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have been named directly, on an ethical basis I have chosen to keep this particular information confidential, while still illustrating that the experience of shared queerness is an integral aspect of working with queer co-improvisers.

<sup>5</sup> My whiteness, in particular, affords me distinct privilege; as a result of the hegemony of systemic whiteness in western society by which the white body has asserted itself as a normative force, my body is not ordinarily rendered other by entrenched processes of racialisation. This differs from the lived experience of a number of my research participants.

<sup>6</sup> In the first instance, we were interrupted by a group of building surveyors who walked into the room unannounced. In the second instance, we were watched (unknown to us) through a rehearsal room window by a passer-by, who subsequently entered. In both instances, after the interruption, we debriefed with each other, and reaffirmed consent to continue working across the remainder of the session.

<sup>7</sup> It is on this basis that I have referred to improvisational worlds as representing sympoietic, rather than autopoietic, systems. See *Improvisational Worlds*.

example, raises questions concerning the interplay of agentialisation within the group. Differentiated by the red-ballet shoe – a recognisably gendered item of clothing which carries distinct associations with the gender dynamics of Classical Ballet (see Part 1, 3.3) – as well as feminine/femme gender presentation, Maria’s body is visibly manipulated by Colin, who rearranges her limbs and lifts her up, forcing her *en pointe*. Subsequently, after briefly rearranging his body on the floor and moving away, Maria collapses into limpness, before being picked up and carried by Colin across the room to be deposited on top of me and Sky. Reflecting informally upon the power-dynamics of these interactions with a gender-critical lens, Colin comments that his depositing of Maria as seeming “like a procession [...] like a trade” in which Maria “relinquished [her] control to me in many regards” (Colin Frank, in recorded reflection upon studio footage, April 2020). In response, Maria affirms this interpretation of “man brings woman” – “you were trying to give me [to them] and I was like ‘I don’t want to’”; however, countering this reading of the interaction, she highlights her purportedly ‘passive’ physicality as one which actually manifests her agency in internal resistance:

The weight that my position was in [at the handover], I couldn't do anything but keep my balance to avoid falling. I couldn't just get up because I was in a strange position [...] my agency was actually keeping me up, not letting me fall. If I had relinquished my agency I would've fallen earlier, but the battle was that I didn't want to fall. (Maria Sappho, in recorded reflection upon studio footage, April 2020)

Paralleling Tina Krekel’s assertion that “laziness in front of others” can function as a feminist improvisational tool (as a combat to the masculine musical athleticism which she and I identify as foundational within free improvisation) (Krekels, 2019, p. 2; see Part I, 2.2) , far from resigning herself to being moved as an object, Maria *claims* her activity as a distinct choice “not to have to make ideas”. The playful intersubjectivity of this commentary, from participants jointly employing a socially engaged lens, highlights the multiplicity and complexity of significations which such simple interactions can educe.

Linda Bell refers to gender and race as “identities” which are “visibly marked on the body” (Bell, 2007, p. 196), and certainly, the prominence of these ‘visible marks’ of identity, which Linda Alcoff describes as “epistemically salient and ontologically real entit[ies]” (Alcoff, 2006, p.5), subtends my own choice of focus for my analysis of free improvisation’s practice-culture across Part I of this thesis.<sup>8</sup> However, it is important not to essentialise or oversimplify the visibility of identity, particularly with regards to the hermeneutics of performance. Reflecting on videographic documents in performance studies, Spatz comments that the apparent visibility of racial and gender identities does not negate the complexity inherent in either construct (and constructs they are), the complexity of their intersection with each other, or with other ‘less visible’ identities which are invariably present (2021; see also Spatz, 2022).

Gender and race and all these dimensions [of identity] ... there’s a way that we might think that video presents that very clearly, but actually [...] there are complexities that we need to annotate in order to bring them out. (Spatz, 2021)

The premise of visibility is constructed around processes of *legibility*, by which I mean: the observer’s understanding of presentational, gestural, and behavioural markers on the body *as interpreted*, by which visible identities are assigned to bodies, and from which are determined significance for the observer informed by their own social and cultural context. Legibility is not equitable with legitimacy, and as Warren cautions regarding racial constructs: “by locating race *on* bodies, one risks assuming like qualities based solely on skin color [sic] without acknowledging the different cultural factors that work together to construct identity” (Warren, 2001, p. 91, emphasis added). On the one hand, the position that visible bodily difference does not signify (or has no bearing on axiology) at all only reinforces structures by which the normative (cisgender, male, heterosexual, white, non-disabled) body has maintained its hegemony (see Part I, 1.2.1). However, a delicate discursive balance has to be struck between recognising the “rich differences of life interpretation that are developed via the social

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<sup>8</sup> Fara Afifi humorously sums up her experience of the intersection of race, gender, and the politics of free improvisation in interview with me stating: “The problem with this music is it cannot escape from its societal conditioning. There’s all kinds of prejudices [in it]. You’re quite lucky [in that respect] because you’re not brown, and you haven’t got tits. (Faradena Afifi, interviewed by McPherson, April 2021).

identities based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other such group categories” (2006, p. 286), and the assumption, generalisation, or reduction of individual experiences based upon a narrow focus on ‘visible’ characteristics. In addition to the intersubjectivity inherent in performing with others, the tacit relations between seen and unseen identities complexify group dynamics. This complexity in itself implies a richness of entangled identity interactions which, following Spatz’ and Alcott’s assertions, I propose represents fruitful ground for exposition in a methodology of experimental annotative and ethnographic performance research that recognises sociality as embedded within our living practice (see *Part III: Conclusion 2: Into the Videographic*).

## AT THE HEART OF PRACTICE: FIVE CORE ASPECTS

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### IMMEDIACIES: SITUATING PRACTICE HERE AND NOW

A defining aspect of practice-cultures of improvisation is that they foreground the temporality of (“now”); this, in conjunction with the location of (“here”) and the intersection of these to constitute a singular context (“the here and now”), represent the immediate site of creativity. While a focus on the “now” is indicative of improvisation more generally (and is central to my own practice), a concentrated engagement with “here”, and its intersection with “now” (to form the “here and now”), is particularly significant within TFI. This is because my practice is one in which a great variety of factors, and a broad scope of potential activity (across numerous expressive modalities, forms, disciplinary alignments, etc.), emerge intimately from the specific conditions of the practice-context. My engagement with the immediacies is mediated by my emphasis on openness to emergences and emergent possibilities reflected, per the remit of both the T and F in TFI, across a broad array of expressive parameters and performative qualities. In alignment with the multireferentiality of Nicolescu’s transdisciplinary (see Introduction, 2, 3), and more so than when I have pursued practice in monodisciplinary improvisation contexts, within TFI I engage dynamically with the *plethora* of potential presented by the immediacies by exploring them in dialogue with the *plurality* of domains which my body and its tools can access.

Pragmatically, the location – the “here” of practice – offers visual, sonic, and tactile stimulus for my improvisation. It can provide impetus for activity through the presence of particular shapes or forms, in the curves, lines, and intersections of architectural features; or through certain material properties of walls, floors, of rooms or objects therein, to be explored across a variety of sensory domains across the kinetic, sonic, and visual. The multidimensional affordances of “here” – providing stimulus across the senses – represent an effectively limitless resource restricted only by my own capacity to engage with it (for further discussion, see *Forming Diegesis, Diegesis Forming*).

Mediated necessarily by my lived experience and perception, location also situates my activity within a broader network of cultural and disciplinary associations. The architectural particulars of theatrical



stages, concert platforms or art galleries, as opposed to bars, living rooms, and street corners (all of which are places in which I have performed), carry with them different degrees of formality and suggest differing relationships to hegemonies of cultural capital and the economies of art-production. Different spaces imply a motivation-context for practice through their association with particular social and disciplinary functions. The dance rehearsal studio (complete with mirrors and ballet-barre), for example, is associated with a culture of physical stresses, corporeal manipulation and conformity, repetition, learning, and training, with the implicit goal of performance in a disciplinary economy which privileges accuracy, virtuosity, athleticism, visibility, and preparedness. It is also, historically, a highly gendered and racialised space (Part I, 3.3), one also in which substantial physical contact between people occurs in a context other than sports, intimacy, medical procedure, or violence. In this sense it is a unique environment for corporeality, and tactility. However, it is also a space of relative invisibility, lacking the implicit public scrutiny of a proscenium (or other) stage; in this measure it might suggest a space for experimentation, for development, and for informality (to suggest a few associations).

A converted church, by contrast, is a space constructed for a specific and hegemonically powerful denomination of ritual and worship which has been subsequently repurposed for secular means. A bedroom is a multifunctional domestic space which is likely not only used for improvising. Through their associations, these spaces are imbued with different thresholds for transgressive activity with which my improvisational choices intersect; as but one example, to explore kinetic queerness and queer tactility as I improvise in a home environment or bar, is markedly different to doing so on the concert stage, in a public street, or indeed in a converted church. The relationship between my activity and the social-cultural makeup of the location, of “here”, therefore forms a prominent part of the immediate conditions of my practice.

Co-improvisers likewise represent a prominent aspect of the immediate “here and now” whose presence is asserted not only materially (through their corporeality), and associatively (through any salient personal or disciplinary identities), but through their agency. In *their* engagement with the “here

and now”, co-improvisers activate, shape and transform the environment of performance, providing not only stimulus but *living and changing* context for my actions. In improvising with other performers, the context of my practice shifts overtly into the realm of sociality as the complex dynamics of interpersonal relationships inherent to two or more people co-habiting a space come into play. Evidenced by the structures of oppression derived from bodily difference which are entangled with disciplinary axiology in both music and dance, bodies reach out across history into discourses of lineage, society and culture, behavioural normativity, and the rights of belonging, expression and participation (see Part I, 2.2, 3.3). Within the heightened frame of performance, our interactions and our relationality are therefore magnified. This stimulating aspect of the “unique psychological activity” (MacDonald and Wilson, 2016) of co-improvising, where agency meets agency within a field of immediate possibility, therefore highlights improvisation’s affordance as an arena for social mediation.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to clarify that the foregrounding of “now”, which I have described is integral to improvisational practice, does not indicate the rejection or the negation of other temporalities wholesale; on the basis of the entangled associations of the practice context alone, which reach across time and memory, this is impossible. What it does do, however, is *privilege* immediacy and spontaneity, the concentration of energy and focus (on the part of performers and audience) into an aesthetic moment which is unfolding, which at the instant of its creation, *does not yet* have a form, a trajectory, a context, or a future. The past, therefore, and the wider world, is brought into relation with activity happening *in this moment*, in *this* world; its influence, visibility, and presence is mediated through the lens of the immediate “now” and is explored and shaped by my activity. For this reason, a remembered fragment of melody from a composed song, for example, or a quotation from an existing work of dramatic theatre, might emerge within an improvisational context without being considered wholly othered (by dint of its being pre-written or preconceived). The act of recall itself can be treated as a

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<sup>1</sup> As I noted in Part I, 3.2.1 “recognising this complexity [of the social-political] as entangled with practice suggests, in and of itself, a capacity for practice to be a genuine mediator for social interests – for the negotiation of subjectivities, and by extension, one hopes, for the articulation of social change”.

kind of improvisational material, an invitation for immediate response, development, manipulation, and other forms of my interaction. As an improvisation proceeds in linear time, its content is also rendered temporally relational; the memory of what *has* happened shadows the present *happening* and projects into the future. Whether or not this is strategized performatively through my choices, the “now” in which I create is connected, structurally, to a history of creation and to a future of potential. As participant Giorgio Convertito comments “in improvisation, you *do* have past, present, and future.” (Giorgio Convertito, interviewed by McPherson, October 2020).

## ACCEPTANCE: IMPROVISING WITHOUT RESISTANCE

I will personally never forget spending two hours watching a group of women and girls in Bali dancing the *Rejang*. Even amid a cacophony of children running through the space, motorcycles driving by a few feet away, and vendors loudly hawking their wares, no one could miss the mesmerising presence of the transpersonal. If you accept *this* improvisation in *this* moment and open your awareness, you might be astonished at what happens (Kent de Spain, 2014, p. 101)

Everything your colleagues do is right. (Brice Catherin, interviewed by McPherson, November 2020)

Underpinning my engagement with the immediacies is what I term the principle of *acceptance*. While the English verb *to accept* has a variety of contextual subtleties, its etymological roots are in the Latin prefix *ad* (to, towards) and the verb *capere* (to take). In combination, they indicate simply ‘to take towards (oneself)’, or more succinctly, ‘to receive’. Rather than ‘receiving’ in the sense of receiving an unexpected gift, for example, I view receptivity as an *active* state of availability – that is: to information, to stimuli, to occurrences, to actions, to ideas. Acceptance is the bringing together of the state of receptivity with a conscious acknowledgement of the condition of things directly ‘as they are’;<sup>2</sup> an

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<sup>2</sup> This phrase, as well as ‘Things as it is’ [sic], and indeed the word ‘acceptance’, has particular connotations within Zen Buddhism and other Mahayana Buddhist traditions. While my own identity as a Zen practitioner gives me a particular perspective on and relationship to these phrases, here I use ‘things as it is’ quite directly to mean simply ‘the things that are here in this moment of practice, in the precise way they present themselves’. An articulate western Zen Buddhist perspective on the word acceptance can be found threaded through Fischer’s *When You Greet Me I Bow* (Fischer, 2021).

engagement with the precise contingencies and emergences of improvising in context – in *this* room, in *this* way, at *this* time, with *these* entities, as *this* happens, as I view them *here*, *now*. Within TFI, this is engaging with the whole potentiality of the immediate improvisational world as it unfolds, including the physical environment, human collaborators, objects, or instruments, conceptual or disciplinary framing, motivations, aesthetic forms or sensibilities etc., *without resistance to the presence, fact, or happening of any of these things*. In extension of the perspective encompassing the potential in ‘all movement’ and ‘all sound’ seeded by Halprin, Cage et al. (see Part I, Ch.3), I allow that *everything* carries potential – everything must be brought in.

It's not like the world is preestablished in any way, but it's like... when a decision is made to go in this direction, it's just an accepted fact that everyone says "oh of course that's part of the world – we all knew that". So yeah, it's like I mean it [sic]...but it's more like an expression or a sensibility of the performers, of us, it's like "okay everything that happens is happening now, we know that and now it is part of the world." We're not trying to contradict that. (Colin Frank, in recorded reflection upon studio work, April 2020)

For clarification, this application of acceptance does not imply apathy, disengagement, resignation, or inaction. To engage without resistance to the *presence, fact, or happening* of things is not the same as resigning oneself to a role or space without agency; to make oneself an object in a linguistic sense (per the object of a transitive verb), as some-thing which is only moved and never moves. Participant Brice, who for a time trained in the martial arts discipline of *Saolim*, articulates this nuance of acceptance in the following way:

In martial arts if there's a fist arriving in your in your face, you have to accept that fact. You cannot deny it you know, there's a fist arriving in your in your face. It doesn't mean you're not doing anything about it, you're acting on it. But before you act on it, you have to accept that there's this fist arriving at a very, you know, fast speed. It's not about being passive or even accepting any outcome because you know, I don't know, accepting that the fist will reach your face, that's anticipation, so again, it's wrong. You first have to accept that there is a journey of the fist and then act on that. (Brice Catherin, interviewed by McPherson, November 2020)

In as much as it is not useful nor realistic to deny the fact of the fist – to resign oneself to its trajectory – it is neither useful nor realistic to deny the fact of the uneven floor, the encroaching sound of students down the hallway, the seasonal allergies, the dropping wifi of the Zoom room or the microphone delay (of particular relevance across the Covid-19 Pandemic), the excessive volume of a collaborator, or the grain of the wood panels on the wall. In accepting first and foremost the fact of the floor, the students, etc., I am more immediately engaged, and consequently, primed more attentively to act. Maintaining this attitude of attentive acceptance is critical; it allows me to hold space for both the environment and other improvisers within my own activity, and to understand myself as being always in relation to them. It also typifies an aspect of the transdisciplinary approach; non-resistance invites the “dropping of conceptual stringency surrounding the form and validity” (McPherson, 2021c) of expressions, ideas, contradictions, and expectations, permitting for multiplicities and pluralities to emerge in an open field of potential.

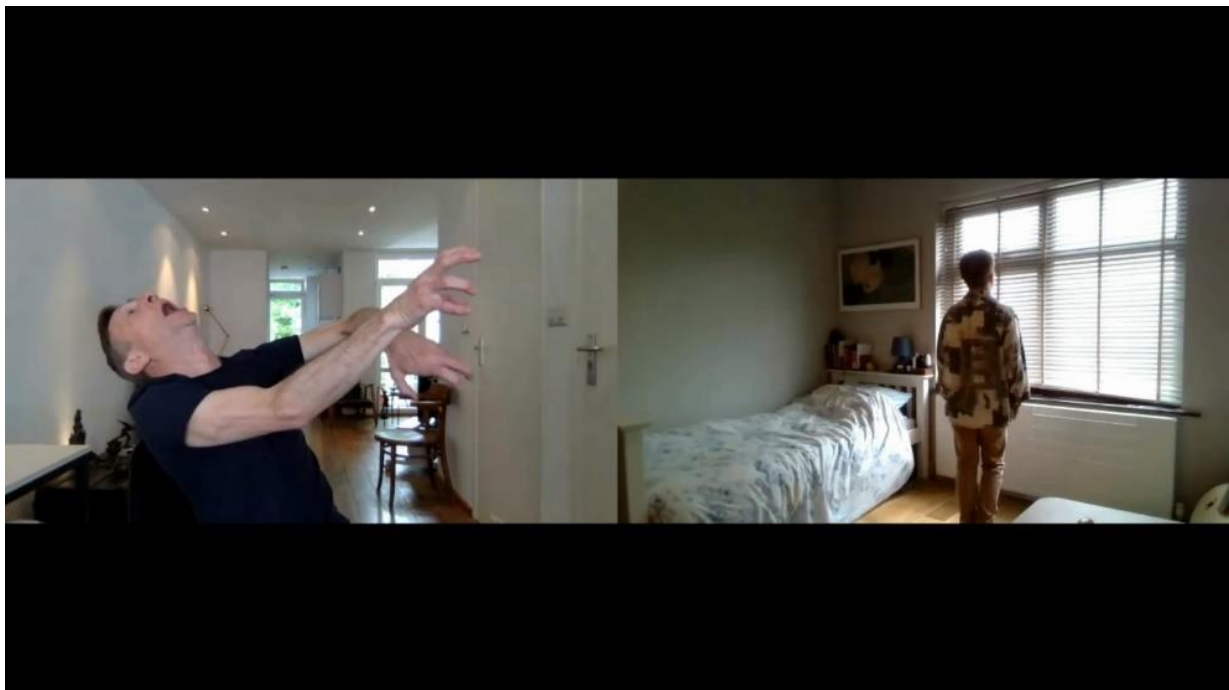
This fundamental openness and non-resistance does not preclude the existence of (aesthetic or otherwise) judgement, ego, or processes of evaluation. Maria Sappho, for example, indicates that personal aesthetic judgement is far from absent, even while she acknowledges the need to accept the activity of co-improvisers (as an articulation of *their* own freedom and agency) and cohabit the performance space with them.

[in an improvisation] maybe someone will be doing something, and I'll be like, 'I am not doing that. That's a bad idea'. And it will make me uncomfortable, because I'm like, 'this is now what I don't like', yeah, you know. But it's fine, because I can't stop them. That's what they're doing. But just maybe I won't join in that... their version of the freedom. (Maria Sappho, interviewed by McPherson, October 2020)

Maria indicates *both* the maintenance of a personal boundary and an attitude which expresses non-resistance at the essential, though not at the aesthetic, level. She recognises a judgement on the activity of the hypothetical co-improviser, while simultaneously accepting it as part of the improvisational world 'as it is', which she summarises simply as “that's what they're doing”. Acceptance in this sense is not

concomitant with the suppression of judgement, but rather with the acknowledgement of and direct engagement with actuality. While the improviser's activity is unavoidably bounded in their personal aesthetic preferences and capacities, as Maria's comments reveal, this does not negate their capacity for acceptance as a *congruent* state of conscious acknowledgement and receptivity.

I'm the most interested in integrating everything into one, making like – creating a situation where all the potential we have is accepted. (Jaak Sikk, interviewed by McPherson, December 2020)



Embedded Video: "Acceptance".

Alternative link to view: (annotated version) <https://youtu.be/2dyZMe0CBP8> | (non-annotated version) [https://youtu.be/L\\_wGy6iiliw](https://youtu.be/L_wGy6iiliw)

Participants Featured: Michael Schumacher | Recorded: May 2021

## CHOICES: ARBITRARINESS, EVALUATION, AND SPLIT-SECOND RESPONSES

It's this constant, constant thing of [...] change and impermanence, and then every now and then stillness. Because then sometimes [...] I'll do like maybe one note, and leave it or, or I'll just go really still. And then make little movements because actually, the movement, it comes from an internal place. (Faradena Afifi, interviewed by McPherson, April 2021)

The question of *how* improvisers make choices has been addressed recently by MacDonald and Wilson within the context of group improvised music-making. On the basis of practitioner interviews and self-reporting, and drawing on the precedent for processual 'mapping' in improvisation research across both music and dance (see Berkowitz, 2010, 2014; Dean and Bailes, 2014; Pakes, 2006; Pressing, 1987, 1984; Warburton, 2011), they have drawn up a model of choice-making in which they claim that co-improvisers engage in "an open-ended iterative cycle [of choices] where all choices lead to a subsequent reconsideration, with each [improviser] constantly "scanning" the emergent sound of the piece" (2016, p. 1035). Different "strategies" of activity are identified in their model presented as a cyclical, flow-chart-style map (see MacDonald and Wilson, 2016, Fig 1), which they present as a usefully narrow taxonomy of possible interactions. These strategies are listed as: "evaluate", "maintain", "change", "initiate", "respond", "contrast", "augment", and "adopt".<sup>3</sup>

The evaluation of 'things that are happening' in an improvisation, prompting a form of choice or 'strategy' of proceeding, is undoubtedly an important aspect of my own practice. Colin Frank describes the re-evaluation of his activity in relation to prior decisions, and the palpably subjective question of whether or not he has 'succeeded' or 'failed' in a plan he may have made:

If you make a plan within improvisation, okay, while you're improvising, and you go about doing your plan, and as I say, succeed or fail is simply: "does it leads to something else that's interesting", or "does it work?". I mean, sometimes you say "I'm going to pick up this object and do this thing with it". And then you do that,

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<sup>3</sup> These strategies, I would highlight, are also intimately influenced by practitioner subjectivity regarding personal aesthetic sensibilities and desires. Chris Parfitt, for example, comments generally: "I want to sound good to what I think is sounding good. (Chris Parfitt, interviewed by McPherson, October 2020). Jer Reid expresses: "You want to be able to go from something very clear and articulated through to something very chaotic, but then if you can snap out of that into something articulated then I think that gives really great shape." (Jer Reid, interviewed by McPherson, February 2021)

and the object breaks [... or] the thing that you're trying to do in the first place goes in a completely different direction. And you work with that. That's fine. But you know, your initial idea was that it can work the way it was expected to work. Now, I'm in a situation I have to reevaluate.

(Colin Frank, interviewed by McPherson, October 2020)

Colin's statement highlights an evaluative process by which he is assessing, based clearly on subjective and unnamed criteria, whether or not something 'works'. It also indicates an alignment with what I named as *acceptance*, here articulated in his comment "you work with that. That's fine", and manifest as his moving with unexpected occurrences without resistance – be it breakage, or things going "in a completely different direction". For Colin, in this anecdote, evaluative choice is an integral aspect of the unfolding improvisation.

However, an alternative aspect of choice which has been evidenced across the course of this research, and which may not be readily apparent to observers of an improvisation, is that while it can be motivated by aesthetic concerns or desires, it is also often strikingly related to occurrences which are essentially arbitrary. Choice need not always be imbued with the compositional gravity of deciding how to proceed in relation to an aesthetic agenda, an artistic desire, a self-imposed task (per Colin), or an overall shape. Particularly within TFI as a practice which involves a shifting between plural expressive modalities and modes of interaction drawing upon stimulus from a variety of sensory inputs, choice may function as response to any number of stimuli that may not always be aesthetically grounded (or indeed nameable). In the following exchange between myself and Maria Sappho, we reflect upon a moment in a quartet improvisation at which Maria removes her sweater and lets down her hair.

Maria: I guess you guys have to deal with this less but [...] if your hair's in your face and you're doing a movement improv and you need to do something about that, you either have to make the decision that that's a part of your character, which obviously makes it add to the – I decided at that point – or it's like when I threw the sweater, I was like "I'm hot, I need to take this off".

Henry: Yeah.

Maria: But the hair definitely gets in the way a lot.



Henry: It's interesting I wonder how much that's communicated because I – When you took your sweater off I didn't even notice

Maria: Yeah yeah yeah

Henry: Watching it back

Maria: But I didn't choose it.

Henry: Yeah exactly – well that's what I mean so like it clearly wasn't "important", but I wonder what about the – well it must have been the way that you did it.

Maria: This one I just decided that it had to be important, so that it did become important. I don't know why I decided. I think it was just the everydayness of the situation, because then it felt like oh it was just an everyday thing that was coming out that needed to then be repeated to absurdify.

(Maria Sappho, in recorded reflection upon studio footage, April 2020)

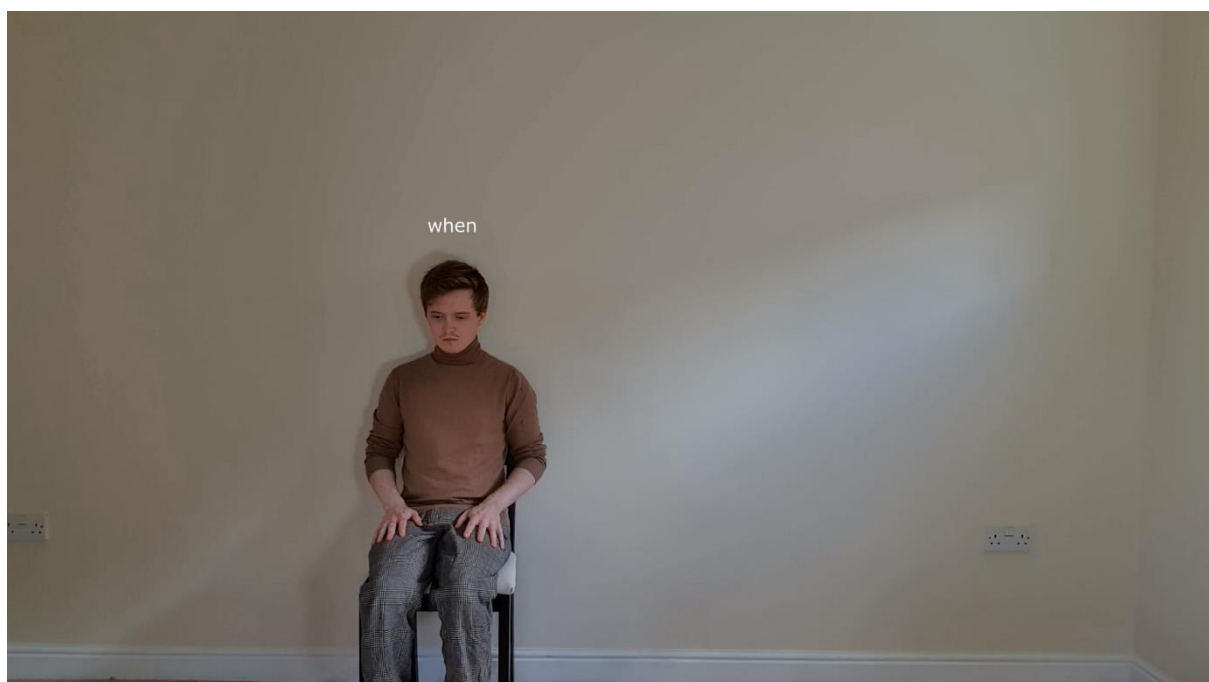
Maria removed her sweater and let down her hair because she was "too hot". However, her comments indicate her awareness of the possibility that, notwithstanding the arbitrariness at its root, her action of letting down her hair might be viewed as a compositionally significant choice by an observer; she might therefore have been prompted to transform this action it into something less "everyday" more affectedly performative. As a Puerto-Rican-American female-identifying artist who, in this improvisation, presented overtly as feminine, for Maria to remove an item of clothing and let down her hair is also inevitably an action entangled with racialised and gendered significations (which she alludes to effacingly in saying " I guess you guys have to deal with this less").<sup>4</sup> In recognising the potential significance of this gesture – compounded by the likelihood of bodily differentiation arising from social inferences – Maria acknowledges her activity as forming, immediately, an aspect of the improvisational world's diegesis; in her actualising an activity within the performance frame, notwithstanding its arbitrary impetus, it can be viewed as part of the improvisational world's working (see *Forming Diegesis*, *Diegesis Forming*). However, tellingly, Maria explicitly states that she did not "choose" to do this. This

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<sup>4</sup> See Maria's discussion of personal hair-activism, fashioning, race, and gender identity, in *What Mushroom? What Free Improvisation* (Sappho Donohue, 2020b).

action was not an aesthetically driven one, even if it is read by an observer as significant; the arbitrary sits side by side with evaluative choice.

The principle that an observer outside the Improvisational world might *not* reliably be able to perceive the precise basis of improvisers' choices, or trace definitive causality in their interactions, unsettles the premise that reductionist models of choice-making are comprehensive as methods of elucidating this practice. While I acknowledge the neatness of MacDonald and Wilson's model (and its precedents), and value its basis in practitioner self-reporting – although it is worth reflecting that, as Kent De Spain comments, “the need to translate somatic experience into linguistic reports invariably change[s] aspects of each improviser's process” (2003, p. 28) – I would suggest that it cannot be considered a summative account of the experience of choice and action in practice. Its language errs towards a way of thinking and talking about practice which artist Ruth Zaporah identifies is not wholly reflective of improvisation's at times obscure and indefinite processes.



Embedded Video: “Choice”.

Alternative link to view: (annotated version) <https://youtu.be/4lawJ98Rjp8> | (non-annotated version) <https://youtu.be/IEzblp2ZEE>

Recorded: November 2021

Zaporah writes instead that: “when we talk about “choices” during an improvisation we don’t mean that before taking any action we must weigh all of our possibilities and then, by educated judgment choose the most enlightened course of expression.” Instead, she says, “choice is a split-second response to freedom” (Zaporah, 1995, p. 22). While these two different angles on “choice” are not necessarily contradictory (and, I would emphasise, *neither is invalid*)<sup>5</sup> I relate more closely to the language of Zaporah’s comment because she emphasises the immediacy of improvisational “choice” framed as *responsiveness in the explicit context of freedom* – that is within an implied open-ended field of possibilities and emergences – rather than in more delimited, processual, and evaluative terms. Zaporah’s phrasing more closely reflects my experience of TFI in which definite patterns of causality, the significance, basis, and in-the-moment functionality of improvisers’ choices, cannot always reliably be named or traced. As I wrote in my *Manifesto*, exploring improvisation transdisciplinarily involves accepting and entering into “unnamed interstitial spaces and relations” (see Introduction, 2, *Manifesto*); Zaporah’s phrasing opens the idea of choice along this path, into less stable, less predictable, terrain. Allowing for the co-presence of evaluative choice, for arbitrariness, as well ‘split-second responses to freedom’, as equal and equally potentially significant emergences in a field of possibilities, is a central characteristic of my practice.

## NEED: A FEELING AND A SENSE

“How do I know what to do?” is one of the commonest questions I have been asked by individuals (often students) who are improvising for the first time. While I have deliberately (if opaquely) countered it in the past with flippant responses such as “just do something”, in an effort to gently deprioritise ingrained patterns of self-criticism and disciplinary biases, the question is in fact a good one. It points to a slippery aspect of practice which I encounter each time I perform, and which has reared its head repeatedly in discussion with experienced peers (as evidenced in comments below). This I name as a *feeling* or a *sense of need*, incorporating, at its strongest, the related term *necessity*. Reframing “how

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<sup>5</sup> I am not trying to suggest for example that MacDonald and Wilson’s “strategies” could not take place in the “split second” to which Zaporah refers.

do I know what to do?” as “what is needed?” gently shifts semantic emphasis to the passive voice. The purpose of this change is pragmatic; it invokes a shift of perspective which positions the improviser, rather than as a lone subject, in relation to something else to which they are responsible – the unspoken *thing* which “needs”. It implies a relationship to something extensive and “more-than” the improviser, which is affected and impacted by their agency and decisions, but which also is imbued, through being the thing that “needs”, with a kind of subjecthood, with a vitality and dynamism of its own. This *thing* might be referred to as ‘the improvisation’, ‘the room’, ‘the moment’, or, to recentre on my own imaginaries, the ‘improvisational world’.

In an audiovisual presentation co-authored with me in 2021, Maria Sappho describes the working process of our improvisation collective *The Noisebringers* from one perspective on this *feeling/sense of need*:

In going about the process to [sic] ‘beginning’ a Noisebringer will possibly ask themselves [sic], ‘what is not here?’. This affects both the possibility of what kind of artistic practice might be used but also is a question [...] about the context of the making. What is not here with us? What would we like there to be? How can something lacking be offered? (Sappho Donohue, in McPherson and Sappho Donohue, 2021)

Maria frames the *feeling/sense of need* here as an absence which prompts creative evaluation from the improviser in the form of questioning. The Noisebringer *asks* themselves what they can “offer” in response to something that is “lacking”. While this is quite evidently bounded in the individual’s personal appraisal of the given context, it is not only internal; it also suggests a turn outwards, a looking to the immediate environment to inform, to guide, to suggest, to dialogue, or to lead. On the one hand, it presupposes the improviser’s creation as a kind of *addition* to what is around them, which is validated at the subjective level. However, it also speaks to a pragmatic *responsiveness* to differing contexts and their contingencies; a mode of engagement which affords the situation of practice itself an assertive

quality and a kind of agency. In order for a *feeling/sense of need* to be experienced, the improviser must be affected by, must dialogue with, the agential thing “more than” them that needs.<sup>6</sup>

This experience is not unique to the Noisebringers’ practice, and has been evidenced in my interview-conversations with practitioners of various nationalities, generations, and backgrounds. Michael Schumacher invokes it in relation to what he refers to as “self-indulgence”. This phrase is not, as he clarifies, pejorative; rather, he uses it to mean the dedicated absorption in the connectedness between the self and the environment through attentive listening in the whole body and all its senses while improvising.

Henry: Can you see if someone is [being self-indulgent]?

Michael: I think you can maybe in ensembles, if you [can] see that they are willing to follow. I think that has a lot to do with it. That’s one example of it anyway – being self-indulgent – *is knowing that the room needs this*. So, I’m going to go with them, because *that’s what the room needs right now*. So, giving way and lending yourself to something that’s already happening in the room – that’s the kind of self-indulgence I’m talking about. Kind of ironic! It’s not the classic, traditional definition of self-indulgence! (Michael Schumacher, interviewed by McPherson, November 2020, emphasis added)

Two phrases in Michael’s response to my question above, “knowing that the room needs this” and “knowing what the room needs right now”, point to salient characteristics of the *feeling/sense of need*; these are its responsiveness to the immediacies of “here” and “now”, and to the externalised and agentialised entity of the “room” (as ‘the thing that needs’),<sup>7</sup> to which Michael describes contributing something (“this”).<sup>8</sup> Michael identifies that, in his example, a contribution (“this”) which might allow him to see someone’s “self-indulgence” takes the form of *following*. This does not necessarily indicate

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<sup>6</sup> MacDonald and Wilson comment that, within their research into choice and decision making in group musical improvisation, some research participants indicated a “more than” directly. They note: “the improvisation was sometimes characterised by interviewees as an external entity or process, within which events arose independently of those creating it” (2016, p. 1035). Kent De Spain, erring on the metaphysical or spiritual, also discusses aspects of this “more than” in *The Landscape of Now* (2014), in the section titled “Transpersonal”.

<sup>7</sup> For Michael, the room comprises the physical, spatial, material environment, as well as any constellation of co-improvisers, and the bodies and presence of audience members, constituting the container of performance (Michael Schumacher, interviewed by McPherson, November 2020).

<sup>8</sup> To clarify, this may not always be contributing new artefacts such as sounds or movements. “What is needed” could just as well be silence, the absence of movement, relative stillness, or an ending.

that the improviser is literally copying or mimicking another body; rather, as he states, it is their “giving way and lending [themselves] to something that’s already happening in the room”. A contribution is framed here as a kind of support. Just as Maria describes the Noisebringers’ response as *offering* to absence, Michael describes a response as *giving to something that is present*. The form that a contribution takes and the way it is articulated by practitioners may vary, but its essence lies in responsiveness to an immediate “more than” that is understood and felt as *needing* the improviser’s activity.

Michael also describes the relationship to *the feeling/sense of need* in terms of “knowing”, implying this phenomenon as something both embodied and valuable (knowledge), and as something which can be shaped and deepened through experience. “*Knowing* what the room needs”, rather than ‘*thinking* what the room needs’, implies a degree of certainty felt on the part of the improviser which allows them to act. This idea presents explicitly in comments by Giorgio Convertito, who describes the *feeling/sense of need* in its strongest terms, as a form of necessity:

[The] urgency [in practice] is that you have to make *that one thing*. It’s *that one thing* that has to be done. It is paramount, it’s imperative. So, there is really no choice. You have to follow that. You have to do that. That’s the only thing you should be doing right now. [...] (Giorgio Convertito, interviewed by McPherson, October 2020)

Giorgio’s use of “urgency” emphasises the immediacy of the activity, while also invoking the certainty that Michael implies (through his use of “knowing”) by claiming that it must be “that one thing that *has to be done*”. Once again, it is implied that whatever contribution the improviser makes, it is in response to something which invokes it and necessitates it right here, and right now. In perhaps the strongest language of all, Giorgio claims this action as imperative, seemingly inevitable – “there is really no choice”.

A hypothetical listener might reasonably ask: *within the context of an improvisation practice which has no hard and fast “rules”, such as TFI, how can there be “no choice”?* This point is answered by

considering *need* in relation to the two words I have chosen to describe it – that it is a *feeling* and/or a *sense*. As a feeling, it is something rooted in the direct and embodied experience of the improviser which is therefore necessarily mediated by their own subjectivity; it is not something which can be considered objective. However, I deliberately refer to it also as a *sense* because of its entangled nature as responsive to *something* that is externalised, agentialised, and understood as “more than” the improviser. To *sense* something implies the reception and processing of information, usually from some form of external stimulus. In describing need as both a *feeling* and a *sense*, I point in the former case towards its inherent subjectivity and practitioner specificity, and in the latter towards the externalised entity in relation to the perceived need of which the improviser’s contribution is offered. For Giorgio to express that there is “no choice” is not a declaration which can be taken as absolute, because it is something that is felt. There is not some underlying or identifiable principle of ‘correct’ and ‘appropriate’ action. Giorgio is instead expressing the felt *need* to respond directly and only to the situatedness of practice as being in an immediate place, at an immediate time, and in relation to the “more than” – the combination of which he refers to in the excerpt below as “the moment”:

Giorgio : Not everything goes. [...] *potentially* everything goes. It’s true. Essentially, anything I do can be the exact perfect thing to do at that moment, but only if it’s in the context. Only! Only if it really belongs to that moment. And we go back to that emergency, you know.

Henry : Yeah

Giorgio : Urgency. It really has to belong to that moment. You have to make it right *there*. Not because it works, like, maybe last week ... in that other improvisation, then you put it here and so it *should* be working because everything goes... It is absolutely contextualised and circumstantial, yeah.

(Giorgio Convertito, interviewed by McPherson, October 2020)

Giorgio’s foregrounding of “the moment” to which action belongs is further highlighted by his dismissal of the idea of offering something which ‘worked’ at a different time, in a different place, and in another improvisation. Chris Parfitt, expresses the same sentiment when describing the potential difficulty of improvising with a collaborator who is bringing something ‘too preconceived’ into the space (thereby

arising from a different time, location, and context):

It's not about being in your own world. [...] if it's flowing in a certain direction, you flow with that, or you create a direction, or you pull it or push it, whatever it might be. So, when somebody's got a kind of a set structure, almost, [that] they're working from, that can sometimes be – can feel limiting, you know. It's a bit like, you know, having a tool that does a particular job very well. Whereas that's great for those jobs that need that [...] sometimes there's something else that's needed. (Chris Parfitt, interviewed by McPherson, October 2020)

Here, Chris too Invokes *need* as expressed in the passive voice, through the metaphor of a job (the “more than” expressed as a task), as well as the idea of following (this time in terms of “flowing”) as articulated also by both Michael and Giorgio. Faradena Afifi mirrors Chris and Giorgio's comments by indicating the importance of sound which is “appropriate” to the immediacy of the moment.

Sometimes I'll move [with] my cello, so I'm always moving around. But then sometimes you're still, because sometimes it's appropriate. It's about- it's situational. So, it's about making the appropriate sound, for that appropriate moment in time. And in order to be able to do that you need to be embodied and you need to be present.

I do a lot of busking, I'm a street musician, I like to play outdoors [...] it's about being appropriate for that point in time and being flexible enough to do the correct movement or sound for that point in time. That's what improvisation is. (Faradena Afifi, interviewed by McPherson, April 2021)

The presence of the *feeling/sense of need* threaded through conversations with different improvisers speaks to its importance and role in shaping improvisational experience, and its need to be acknowledged in spite of its slipperiness. In the comments of these practitioners, its articulation belies a degree of maturity in improvising praxis (by which I mean experience of practice across time, and an ability to reflect upon this practice). However, the absence of a consistent, stable, reliable, or objective framework by which someone external to the improvisation might evaluate *the feeling/sense of need* indicates that it is both intersubjective and highly relativistic. A criticism, therefore, might be that as a result of its relativism, an improviser's action engendered by and predicated on the *feeling/sense of need* risks appearing ‘incoherent’ in some form within the overall shape or structure of an improvisation as observed, or seeming dyssynchronous with the actions of others who may not respond to or perceive



it the same way, or at the same time.

Evidence suggests that this is not the case. MacDonald and Wilson have asserted strongly that the existence of shared understanding between improvisers when performing together (an example of which might be a synchronicity in the *feeling/sense of need*), and the premise that ‘successful’ improvisation is predicated on such an understanding, are in fact *assumptions* contradicted by improvisers’ own reports of practice. Taking a position “consistent with the popular discourse of music as a language within which improvisation takes place”, the authors argue that “conversations do not break down through uncertainty because everyone present makes different sense of what is said” (2020, p. 94). Within their pool of interviewed improvisers, they identify substantial “divergence in how improvisers appraise what they are playing together” both in the moment and after the fact (2020, p. 94). Far from indicating a lack of coherence, within improvisation just as in conversation, they claim on this basis that “as long as each person is able to make sense for themselves within the immediate context of what is said, they can carry on taking part” (2020, p. 96).<sup>9</sup> It is notable that within MacDonald and Wilson’s findings, the immediacies of practice are again foregrounded as critical; is in relation to present place, time, and situation that improvisers’ activity mediates an essentially intersubjective idea of coherence.

We have to be careful because as you know, a discourse about what has happened in an improvisation is [...] very subjective. [...] You can describe that and say, “that’s what it was”. But that doesn’t mean that that’s really true. (Michael Schumacher, interviewed by McPherson, November 2020)

MacDonald and Wilson’s research indicates that divergent subjectivities neither negate nor detract from improvisers’ capacity to improvise effectively together, to create in such a way as all active parties (including audience) are satisfied (based on whatever contextual shared or individual value systems are

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<sup>9</sup> They write also: “Conversations and group improvisations are both creative social processes, continuing as long as they generate novel material that is of value or interest to those involved. The comparison to language [...] suggests that musical improvisation can take place even though each participant’s unique experiences must give them a distinct perspective on any sound that emerges; and even if lack of expertise [,] dysfluency, or unfamiliarity gives each participant a radically different grasp of what is taking place.” (2020, p. 97)

subscribed to), or to *participate* in the same improvisation.<sup>10</sup> It suggests instead that the existence of a *plurality* of understandings and experiences between participants in the same improvisation represents a central aspect of improvising experience.

As a final comment: the slipperiness and intersubjectiveness of the *feeling/sense of need* has palpable transdisciplinary affordances; acknowledging it as a core aspect of practice highlights the commonplace copresence of a plurality of practitioner “agendas” (to borrow a term from Kent De Spain, 2014) – be they ethical, aesthetic, or otherwise – within group improvisations, and indeed in solo work. Opening to and engaging with the multiplicity indicated by the ubiquitous *feeling/sense of need* allows the practitioner, the analyst, the reader, to pursue “the recognition of the existence of different levels of reality governed by different types of logic” (Nicolescu, 2002, Appendix 1), identified by Nicolescu as central to the transdisciplinary approach.

### **NON-DUALISTIC PERSPECTIVE: NOT NEITHER, NOT BOTH (NOT ALWAYS)**

The essentialising of binary concepts – rendering them exclusive as ‘either/or’, involving the hardening of conceptual borders predicated on precision, fixity, knowability, consistency, and boundedness – is rarely reconcilable with the mutability of TFI in its privileging of emergence, pluralities, and interstices. My approach to practice is therefore fundamentally subtended by *non-dualistic perspective*, equal parts owing to an inheritance of the work of conceptual predecessors such as Anna Halprin, John Cage, Judson et al. (as addressed in Part 1, Ch.3), an internalisation and digestion within practice of concepts at the heart of the transdisciplinary, and at the heart of my own lived experience of queerness – plurality, multireferentiality, changeability, and between-ness (see summary in *Introduction*, 2 and 3; also *Identities in Practice*). A non-dualistic perspective on binaries means: *not neither, not both (not always)*. It is a perspective which not only identifies binaries as relational points on spectra, but enmingles them, enfolding them such that at times they are distinguishable, and at times they coalesce.

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<sup>10</sup> For more on this, see MacDonald and Wilson (2020), Chapter 5 – *Distributed Creativity and the Myth of Shared Understanding*.

Salient among the aspects of practice which this perspective evinces is the relationship between my activity and the unfolding of the improvisational world. This relationship, in which I recognise myself as an agent which comprises part of an agential totality (see *Improvisational Worlds*), troubles the assumption that I (as performer) maintain at all times a sense of being active, of inhabiting a generative position of subjecthood within the unfolding improvisation. Yet at the same time, I am also not entirely passive – I am creating and expressing, moving and choosing, making decisions. I inhabit a space in between, which traverses, which transgresses, which travels around both of these points. Below I will illustrate this via comments from peer-practitioners, as a practical exposition of the affordance of thinking this aspect of TFI through *world*.

In the following quotation from *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), poet-philosopher Iris Murdoch expresses how a sense of the dissolved or displaced ‘self’ occurs in a sudden moment of attentiveness.

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious to my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. And of course, this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care. (Murdoch, 1970 p. 84)

Through Murdoch’s noticing the kestrel, in becoming attentive to it, suddenly she describes that there is “nothing but kestrel”. Through absorption in the immediacy of the kestrel – “suddenly I observe”, “in a moment” – her “brooding self” disappears. This shift of attention, Murdoch says, can also (“of course”) be deliberate. She offers it is possible to “give attention to nature” with the remit of “clear[ing] our minds of selfish care”. While Murdoch describes the idea of ‘giving attention’ explicitly in relation to nature, the idea that attentiveness to immediacies can precipitate a sense of selflessness, and thereby can engender the experience that the conventional boundaries of linguistic subject- and objecthood are less rigid, resonates strongly with my experience of practice.

The phenomenon is suggested in Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi's summary of the Flow concept, in the idea that a 'flow' state involves a "merging [of] action and awareness" precipitated by "intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment", contributing to the "loss of reflective self-consciousness" (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2005, p. 90). Although I won't expand greatly into discourse surrounding 'flow' as applied to improvisation here,<sup>11</sup> drawing upon Murdoch's evocative text and Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi's summary, I would highlight that in its attentiveness to the immediacy of its situation, my practice regularly conduces a blurriness concerning the received binary of subject/object, and the associated qualities of activeness and passiveness. Testament to this is the frequency by which improvisers, in conversation, displace their role within the process of improvising into one of either passiveness, or something middle or other – i.e. not graspable in terms of activeness alone.

As one example: participant David Yates, in a succinct but complex anecdote on practice, articulates the relationship between the improviser and the improvisation understood as a system. He describes that while improvising, the perception of differentiation between himself and separate entities in the performance space (which he refers to as "others") stems from what he terms a "limited dimensionality" available to him, rather than representing something that is objective and definitive. Referring to improvisation as an "entity with its own parameters" which is also a "process or system",<sup>12</sup> thereby externalising it as something "more than" himself, he recognises himself and "others" as "projections" of a larger entity (David Yates, interviewed by McPherson, January 2021).<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the "limited dimensionality" to which he says he is afforded access generates a sense of separateness. David's comments indicate that, on the one hand, himself, the "others", and the

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<sup>11</sup> The concept of 'flow' is a familiar feature of improvisation discourse, and there is not scope to summarise its varied applications in this thesis. Some honed discussions of flow within different corners of improvisation studies (across performance and pedagogy) can be found in: Biasutti and Habe, 2021; Douse, 2013; Łuczniak and May, 2021; Solis and Nettle, 2009; Urmston and Hewison, 2014, to name but a few publications.

<sup>12</sup> These are criteria by which I have suggested improvisation can be discussed as a *world* (see *Improvisational Worlds*).

<sup>13</sup> This sentiment is also expressed in comments made by participant improvisers in MacDonald and Wilson's qualitative psychology research (2016, p. 1035).

improvisation are nameable and conceivable as distinct entities (they can be seen as separate); however, they are also co-constituent entities (they are part of each other, and thereby inseparable). He offers a perspective of both separateness and wholeness at once.

Yeah, [in improvising] you're getting those things that you get in meditation when there's the sense of no self. And then you're exploring no self with other people. And it can get quite trippy. [...] (Faradena Afifi, interviewed by McPherson, April 2021)

In very different language, describing an occasion in which she was improvising outside, Faradena ("Fara") Afifi also outlines an experience of the relationality between (her)self and the environment, in which she indicates the degree to which the exclusivity of subjecthood and objecthood, which she describes in terms of activity and passivity, breaks down. She comments:

[While improvising], I'm not imposing. I'm kind of sitting, listening, and then following, and exploring and finding things that are already kind of there, rather than inventing. It looks like I'm inventing, I might be inventing, but it feels like I'm already playing what's there. And I find I haven't got enough bodies, or arms or legs. Yes, there's so many different sounds out there. I once spent about three hours jamming with rain.[...] It's almost like a piano. The notes are already there [...] (Faradena Afifi, interviewed by McPherson, April 2021)

Fara's comments reveal a felt indistinction between the liveness of the environment in which she is performing and the improvising activity which she undertakes. The language which she uses to describe her creative activity deprioritises activeness (something which might well be assumed in the context of her 'performing' and 'creating' live) in favour of something more receptive. She explicitly claims not to be "inventing", describing her improvising instead in terms of "following", "sitting", "listening", and "finding" in orientation to something else. Furthermore, for Fara, in this moment of improvising outdoors, her activity does not *feel* so much self-generated – emerging from a definite position of subjecthood – rather it is experienced as the articulating of something that is "already" present. She is not "making", rather she is playing "what's there". Fara's description is one in which her improvising activity and the immediate happenings of the live environment are experientially blurred. While she

acknowledges (with some flippancy), that she “might be inventing”, this is tempered by the sensation that her activity and “what’s there” are in fact one and the same.

[I was led to] this desire to find a way to balance [...] to be observing and participating at the same time [...] I wanted to grow that relationship of the two that I, you know, I could be in it observing it, but also really in it really completely immersed in it.<sup>14</sup>

I find it more interesting to go through a process of noticing how things change from moment to moment, rather than changing things from moment to moment.

(Michael Schumacher, interviewed by McPherson, November 2020)

Also shifting semantic emphasis away from the active, Michael Schumacher describes his practice as “noticing how things change”. Rather than positioning himself in the role of the linguistic subject of the verb *to change* – being ‘one who changes’ – he occupies an alternative position of the noticer. Michael places emphasis not on his own subjecthood (as being the thing that “changes”) but rather on the subjecthood of something “more-than” (the external things that “change”). He describes a desire to synthesise *participating* in the improvisation – something he has clarified subsequently might be substituted with “the act of composing” (personal communication with McPherson, March 2022) – with *observing* the improvisation as it unfolds, indicating that for him the improvisation is at some level emerging in a *self-generative* manner. At the same time, even while identifying himself in this position of ‘noticing’ the unfolding improvisation, Michael is still describing a practice of improvising in which he creatively and actively generates kinetic expressions in and as performance— he comments, “I’m moving around while doing this” – expressions which constitute the improvisation itself.

Referencing Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991), but preferencing alternative language on the basis of the term’s implications, Giorgio Convertito identifies with a middle position in which he describes “channelling” “things” which “are emerging”. While Fara and Michael identify with what could be

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<sup>14</sup> Michael added, upon reflection on this topic during an informal conversation with me in 2022 “There’s a pendulous swing between the two. Even when you’re on one side - there’s still the tension of the other side. It’s interesting in my practice to keep both the perspectives alive at the same time.” (Personal communication, August 2022)

considered a linguistically passive position, Giorgio evokes something more central, which still ascribes an agency to something beyond himself (it is the “things” which actively “emerge”), while positioning himself in a position that is neither wholly active, nor wholly passive. This echoes what Susan Foster has proposed as the kinship between improvisational practice and the grammatical category of the “middle voice” present in some languages (but not in English):

With this particular kind of verb – and verbs are the closest of all linguistic elements to dancing – events occur neither in the active nor passive voice. The subject does not act nor is the subject acted upon. A close equivalent in the English Language (which does not have a middle voice) to this nonactive/nonpassive voicing is the phrase “shit happens” (Foster, 2003, 7)

The above comments from peer improvisers illustrate three interlocking experiences which are indicative of the non-dualistic perspective on the improviser-improvisation relationship:

An indication that the emerging improvisation (or ‘the environment’, or ‘things’) is conceived as an entity which is agential, while at the same time it is apparent that the improviser has agency

A shifting of semantic emphasis by which the improviser identifies with something other than total active-subjecthood (be this described in terms of passiveness, or something ‘middle-voiced’)

A level of conflation between the activity of the improviser and the “happening” or unfolding of the improvisation at large

Recalling Eric Hayot’s comment that “a world encloses and worlds itself as the container that is identical with its contents and its containing” (2016, p. 23), I propose the relationship between the improviser’s activity and the improvisation conceived of as an agential entity is best expressed as a *world* relation; the improviser’s activity (the improvisational world’s contents) constitutes also the improvisation’s process of self-containing (the improvisation comes into being through improvising activity), and its container (the improvisation exists only in the improvising). Recognising also the affordance of *world* as implying the co-presence and dynamic relation of conceptual scales, one could consider that in describing their role in non-active terms, improvisers also place emphasis upon a perspective which represents the “global”; they suggest the improvisation as a “process or system”, to borrow David’s

terms, within which they are functioning. Simultaneously, this choice of non-active language does not negate their active role in generating the improvisation; while they are part of the “process or system” they are also creating it – they represent a kind of “local” level. The relationship is reflexive, and co-constitutive; their activity generates the thing to which they ascribe agency, in relation to which they describe their role in non-active terms. David, Michael, Fara, and Giorgio indicate what I also hold as critical in my practice: that an improvisational world is at once viewable from and comprises of both perspectives. While we might often choose to express aspects of improvising experience in binary terminology, in order to articulate an accurate reflection of practice, there is a need to enfold this binary within a perspective that enmingles both positions at once.



## FORMING DIEGESIS, DIEGESIS FORMING: ‘WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF *THIS* IMPROVISATIONAL WORLD?’

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Concomitant with the ideals of transdisciplinarity and imbued by the emancipatory aspirations of freeness, the openness of TFI to emergences and to pluralities across a variety of performative variables renders practice palpably non-prescriptive with regards to ‘what activity can or cannot happen’ within a given improvisation— what it might look like, what expressive modalities might be used, what qualities it might take on, or what kinds of behaviours it might contain. What is of particular interest to me, therefore, is how in my practice the openness to and breadth of potential activity (indicated by the letters T and F) intersects with spontaneity of improvisation as an immediate creative act, rendering the parameters of performance highly contingent on the conditions of its situation. The array of aspects that I or my co-improvisers might parametrise within the field of TFI – the different ways we might embody, express on stage, or interact with each other – is both very broad, and highly context dependent.

That said, it would be wrong to suggest that my own practice is infinitely variable, or to imply that it is not shaped intimately by my personal inclinations, motivations, experiences, privileges, and identities. It has a number of characteristics which are more or less generalisable. Rarely, for example, do I use fixed-media or electronic instruments. Instead, I often bring a variety of portable acoustic instruments with me into the studio or to gigs. Often, I do not verbalise (using real language), and when I do vocalise with words, I tend to err away from both explicit narrative and stream-of-consciousness verbalisation in favour of sparse, illusionistic text or meta-language (see *Reflections on the Voice*). In recent studio sessions, in particular following the hiatus from live-work precipitated by the pandemic, I have found that my movement often incorporates the tracing of linear planes within space across the x-y-z axis using the forearms and legs, as well as subtle (largely invisible) shifts in muscular tension which precipitate small rotations of the fingers, hands, knees, hips, ankles and elbows while other parts of the body remain more stationary. All of these things are current tendencies of my practice. However, in

improvisations in which other kinds of activity have been offered into the space by other practitioners, or in simple divergence from habit when working solo, my engagement with or adoption of these other activities is not outright precluded by my tendencies.

Within such a broad scope of potential, paralleling MacDonald and Wilson's quasi-rhetorical question "why [...] are free improvisers' choices not overwhelmed with an infinite array of options?" (2016, p. 1039), I have considered:

In what ways do I, as a practitioner, experience the negotiation of the potential diversity of activity taking place within a given improvisation?

In what ways do I identify and mediate what is (or isn't) being presented as 'material' or viable expressive parameters?

And at a higher scale: how are the specifics of the improvisational world generated? How are its parameters laid?

Thinking my practice through the imaginary of *worlds*, I have found the term "diegesis", in the expanded sense as utilised by Eric Hayot (2016),<sup>1</sup> to be useful in exploring how it is that improvisations within TFI take shape, change shape, generate (and are affected by generated) activity. By considering practice as creating improvisational worlds, I can explore how my and my co-improvisers' performative activity comprises a diegetic wholeness of activity which is also reflexive. This dynamic and complex relationality is something Kent De Spain expresses as "the structure of the perpetual "now" that both determines and is determined by [the improvisers'] actions" (2003, p. 37). Susan Foster, in the same collection of essays, asserts that "each next moment of improvising, full of possible positionings, develops its choreographic significance [...]" which enables "the making of the dance and the dance's making of itself" (2003, p. 8). Foster refers to dance in the same way I (and various of my participants) refer to 'improvisation' as a form of the agentialised and non-dualistically conceived "more than"; something

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<sup>1</sup> To reiterate: Hayot does not use the word "diegetic" in a strictly conventional sense "as a function solely or partially of narrative development or progress" (2016, p. 44). Rather, his use of the term reads more broadly as referring to anything in the given world, and of the given world.

whose agency in self-shaping is not distinct from my/her/our agency in shaping it (see *Non-Dualistic Perspective*)

In the liveness of improvising, once I do something, it cannot be withdrawn. My activity within this frame of live, spontaneous performance, is rendered immediately as a parameter of *diegesis*. Within TFI, through my or my colleagues' 'doing', activity is asserted functionally in two ways – as something that is both *possible in* and *now part of* this improvisation. It is presented as a realm of performativity – an expressive and aesthetic parameter – which is viable, and which also sets up potential (and sometimes precedent) for activity that follows; activity with which, through being co-constituent in the emergent world, it will also be in relation across the formal dimensions of space and time, mediated by the subjective lenses of practitioner and audience memory. In babbling senselessly with nonsense syllables, for example, I can assert that “senseless babbling and use of the voice are *possible in* and *now part of* this improvisation, and anything that follows will also be in relation to senseless babbling”. In playing fragments of pastiche Baroque music on the recorder, I can assert that “references to identifiable aesthetics, conventional instrumental techniques, idiomatic musicking, and instrumental sound-making are *possible in* and *now part of* this improvisation and anything that follows (etc.)”. When my co-improviser begins to verbalise a stream-of-consciousness commentary on their somatic sensations, to groan audibly, to pick up and manipulate household objects, to recall a childhood memory, to place their full weight on my body, to rapidly change their facial expressions, to sit totally still in the centre of the performance space, to read from a book they have to hand, to relax their body into a less ‘affected’ stance, or to visibly deconstruct my instruments (etc.), these too are asserted as things that are “possible in and now part of”.

I hold that these are ways we indicate to each other what we are allowed to *be* and *do* in *this* improvisation; the means by which we give and receive permissions for behaviours and interaction, on the basis of which this practice can be considered highly social (see MacDonald and Wilson, 2020;

MacDonald et al. 2021; Straw et al., 2017; López Ramirez and Reyman, 2018),<sup>2</sup> as well as aesthetic. Axiologically, our performing activity constitutes the method by which the diegetic specifics of *this* improvisational world emerge – how its expressive and aesthetic parameters are generated, how its specific mechanisms of interaction, its rules, its patterns, are apprehended. As Sparti describes, our improvising is “activity which, as it unfolds, invents its own way of proceeding” (2014). Not only this, but in its happening, it generates what Eric Hayot describes as “rules [which] collectively amount to the physics governing the most basic properties of the diegesis” (2016, p. 50) – it creates, certainly at the hermeneutic and formal level,<sup>3</sup> the context for itself. The emergent diegesis, in its reflexive nature, both contextualises and conditions the unfolding activity by which it is formed; it is both the generative mechanism *and* the content of the diegesis. In this way, each improvisation represents what Hayot refers to as an “epistemological engine”, that is “a mechanism for the generation and exhibition of knowledge about itself as a totality” (2016, p. 50). The diegetic specifics of the improvisation (the “knowledge about itself as a totality”) are generated through improvising activity, activity which also is the performance (the “exhibition”) of these specifics. The improvisational world generates, contains, and performs itself.

### **ARTICULATING CHARACTERISTICS IN THREE WORLDS: DUO, TRIO, AND QUARTET**

The following audiovisual documents from sessions with three different groups of improvisers have been illuminated to illustrate how different types and qualities of activity emerged and were asserted as improvisations unfolded – how the diegetic topography of each improvisational world emerged. The first two examples feature pairs of videos, excerpts taken from improvisations of substantial length (of c.50 minutes, and c.1.5 hours respectively); the footage has been edited to begin, for the initial excerpts, at the moment that the overall dynamic of the group shifted from more preparatory to more

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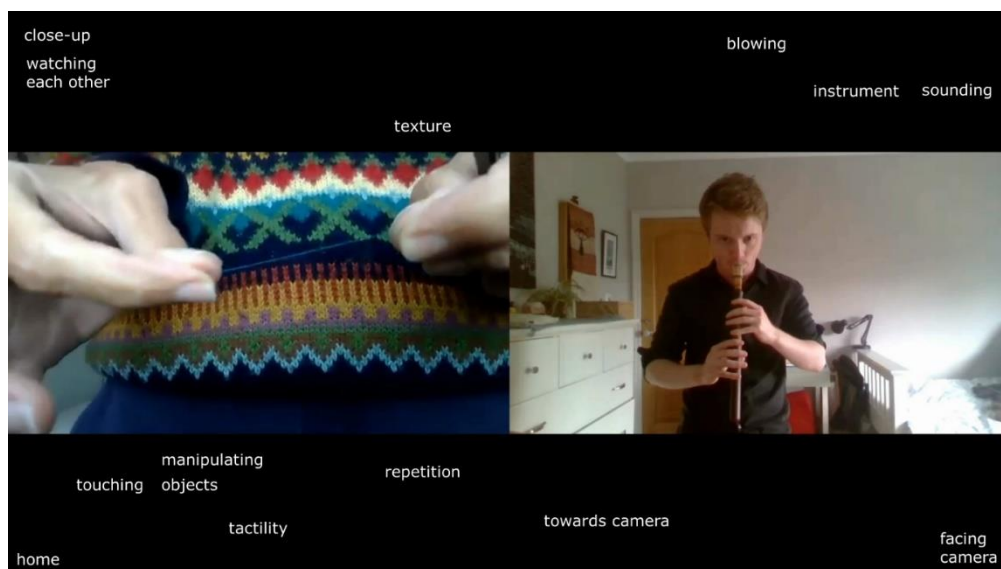
<sup>2</sup> MacDonald et al. describe improvisation as “a universal, real time, social, and collaborative process” (2021).

<sup>3</sup> I qualify this here on the basis that the improvisation is necessarily occurring within a real-world social and cultural context.

performative,<sup>4</sup> and for the second excerpts, after a relatively large amount of time within the improvisation had elapsed. The annotations used in the first excerpts have been reused in the second, to invite comparison and consideration of the development of parameters as the world emerges. The third example features a shorter improvisation (of c.9 minutes) in its totality.

### Duo with Catharine Cary

In May 2021, Catharine Cary and I met online for just over an hour to improvise and talk together. In this meeting, Catharine and I chatted very briefly, before deciding to “go”. I unpacked my duduk and laid it on my desk, and Catharine left the room for a few seconds to fetch something, then we began, improvising together for 50 minutes. In this particular world, features which became apparent early on were: the manipulation and use of objects in the hands as sounding and visual tools; the foregrounding of the fingers and their interface with objects; visually, the drawing of lines between two points; a sense of moving back and forth; clicking, tapping, rustling, dragging, and rubbing (as visual, haptic, and sonic artefacts).



Embedded Video: “Catharine 1”. Alternative link to view: (annotated version) <https://youtu.be/31i-PpS8368> | (non-annotated version) <https://youtu.be/r4WWj697uRQ>

Participants Featured: Catharine Cary | Recorded: May 2021

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<sup>4</sup> This moment can only ever be approximate, and in fact is not necessarily a definitive point. For the purposes of demonstration however, I have selected moments which, from my perspective as an editor and from what I remember of each session, feel indicative of the ‘start’ of each improvisation.

Of course, this permitting and actualising kinds of activity through 'doing' is only one part of the practice. Responsiveness to that activity, and the interrelation of activity within and across the span of the unfolding diegesis, represents the bulk of improvising; we are not only creating at one point in time but proceeding to create responsively in iterative cycles (MacDonald and Wilson, 2016), a process which invariably emphasises certain aspects or qualities of the improvisation and can give its world a distinct shapeliness. As the improvisation progresses, the activity of improvisers foregrounds certain aspects of the world's topography; certain modalities of expressivity and certain qualities of activity can thereby become salient at different points as an improvisation moves forward in linear time.

As I continue to improvise with Catharine, parameters which we introduced at the beginning of our improvisation become echoed, developed, and emphasised – a kind of topography emerges. The subtle rustling of objects and the clicking of nails is echoed in the manipulating of the deconstructed recorder, its hard plastic surfaces juddering in a stream of shaky, repetitive rhythm. Gestures of dragging and rubbing, subtle at the start (Catharine's drawing a thread between fingers), are reflected more maximally with body and objects; I draw a drinking glass across my desk in a sweeping motion, making the drag apparent in the sonosphere where before the action of dragging had been soundless, twisting my whole body where Catharine had moved only her fingers. The act of balancing becomes replicated again and again, with objects in the hand, on the head, set among an unstable soundworld of percussive clicks, scrapes, and granular punctuations. So does the gesture of moving or rocking between two points – left to right, up and down, side to side. Catharine rubs her palms between two points around a tin cup (while also dragging), I swing the foot of the recorder back and forth like a pendulum before transitioning into a tentative, rustling reassembly. These qualities of activity overlap and intersect, one leading into the other; tactility, sonority, and viscosity interbleed as we both follow our impulses, our somatic sensations and desires, while watching the other closely, taking in sound, lines, shapes, and directions.



Embedded Video: "Catharine 2".

Alternative link to view: (annotated version) <https://youtu.be/5wIM1CUqJGE> | (non-annotated version) <https://youtu.be/KL3PR3pBmol>

Participants Featured: Catharine Cary | Recorded: May 2021

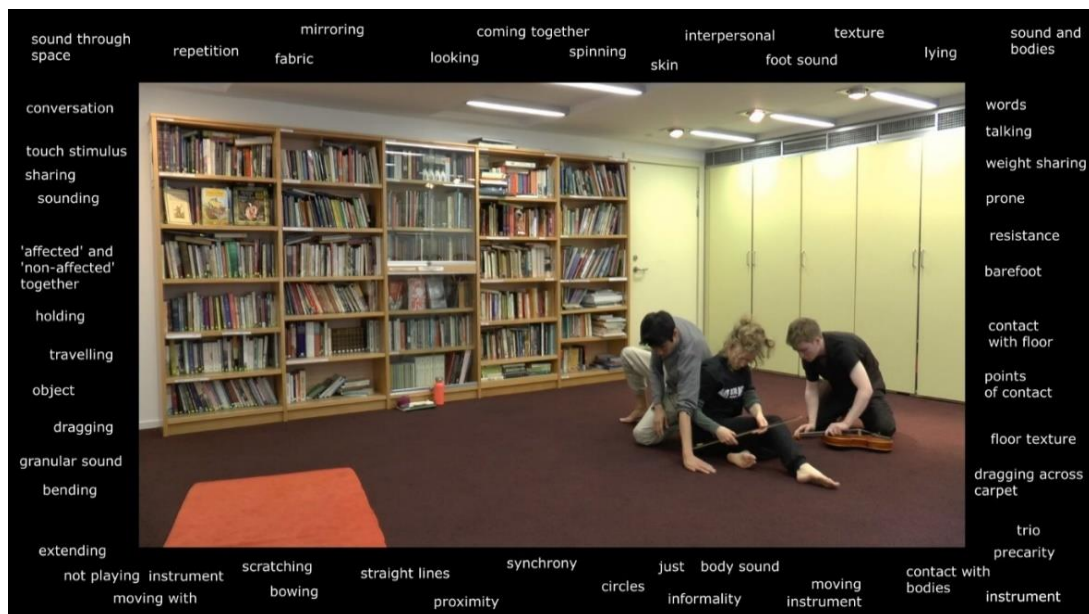
### Trio with Sky Su and Skye Reynolds

In March 2020, mere days before the announcement of the first nationwide lockdown in the UK, Skye Reynolds, Sky Su and I met to improvise and research in Edinburgh's *Storytelling Centre*.<sup>5</sup> Following a brief chat discussion of consent and 'checking in' with each other,<sup>6</sup> we improvised for around 1.5 hours. As in the example with Catharine above, the following two videos have been illuminated to demonstrate how aspects of diegesis were introduced as we participated in this improvisational world, and how they persisted and developed. Particularly salient in this world were a variety of sweeping and dragging kinetic and sonic responses to texture and physical contact – between the bodies of the trio, between body and instrument as well as instrumental parts, between objects and body. Perhaps owing to the time spent chatting before we began, the modality of talking in both an 'informal' and more 'affected' way (as oration and reading) arose as the world was constructed. This improvisation also

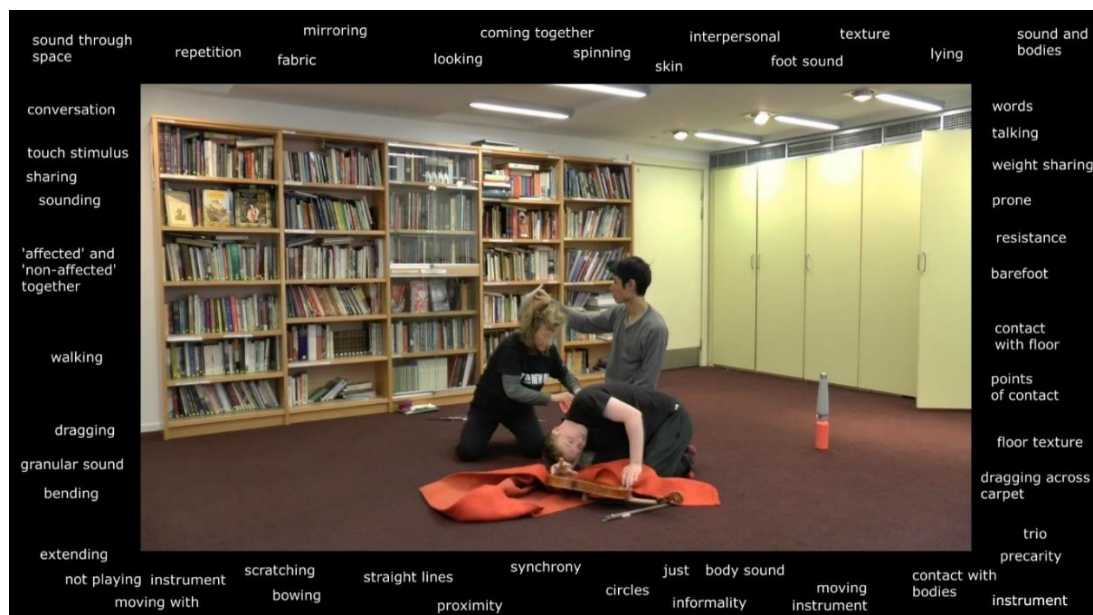
<sup>5</sup> My thanks to Sky Su for arranging space for the session.

<sup>6</sup> This was particularly relevant regarding the early spread of the Coronavirus, about which, at the time, we knew very little. As the facilitator of the session, it was necessary for me to assess that participants were comfortable with physical contact and proximity.

featured a distinct sense of the textural exploration of bodies, contact, and objects, as well as the engagement with the social and environmental context in which we practised – as friends and collaborators, in a private but non-studio environment (the Storytelling Centre).



Embedded Video: “Trio 1”. Alternative link to view: (annotated version) <https://youtu.be/qWQRVumPhnk> | (non-annotated version) <https://youtu.be/f1P46uTcmEw> . Participants Featured: Sky Su, Skye Reynolds | Recorded: March 2020

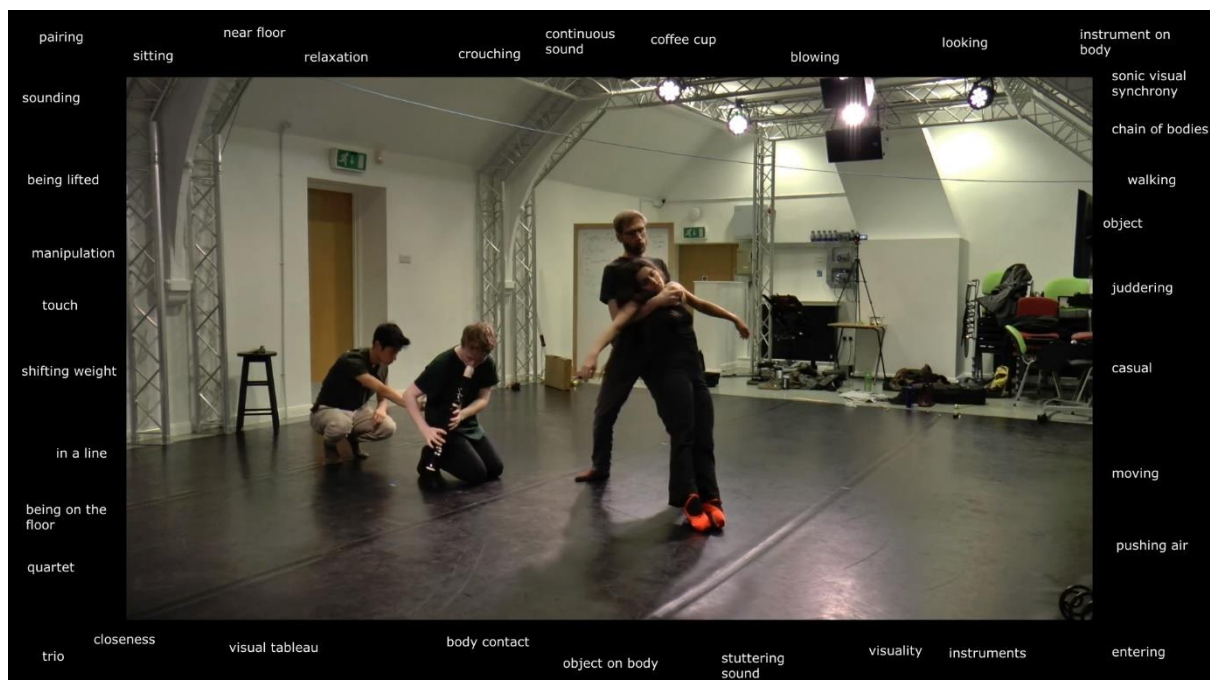


Embedded Video: “Trio 2”. Alternative link to view: (annotated version) <https://youtu.be/6Num0-p2XqU> | (non-annotated version) <https://youtu.be/fdKLEiSeIVc> . Participants Featured: Sky Su, Skye Reynolds | Recorded: March 2020



### Quartet with Maria Sappho, Colin Frank, and Sky Su

In February 2020, I met with Maria, Colin, and Sky (visiting from Scotland) to improvise together in Studio 3 in Huddersfield's Patrick Stewart Building. Across the afternoon, we recorded four improvisations of varying lengths, of which the one presented here is the shortest. This improvisation began after a period of around 20 minutes of collective chatting, unpacking of instruments, and warming up.<sup>7</sup> In this world, there was a juxtaposition of more- and less-affected kinesis, a soundscape derived from blown instruments, an emphasis on formal shape, and a distinct sense of individual role (verging perhaps on character) within the ensemble. Notably, Maria and Sky did not explicitly pursue sounding as a primary modality, whereas Colin and I engaged more readily with sounding on wind instruments to drive the sonosphere. From an initial quartet, there also developed a clear sense of partnering (in duos), before a coming-together once more towards the end of the improvisation.



Embedded Video: "Quartet (Colin, Maria, Henry, Sky)". Alternative link to view: (annotated version) <https://youtu.be/WGIVUecZ5jE> | (non-annotated version) <https://youtu.be/6u5eGY-jGKg> . Participants Featured: Colin Frank, Maria Sappho, Sky Su | Recorded: February 2020

<sup>7</sup> Sky and I had also been in the studio across the morning, working together for several hours as a duo.

## A Caveat

It is important to clarify that, notwithstanding my explicit *naming* of the above parameters actualised by myself and my colleagues for the purpose of illustration in these examples, there is no way to identify, concretely and infallibly, the precise parameters, actions, or indications by which we (consciously or subconsciously) changed and developed material across the course of a performance.<sup>8</sup> Intersubjectivity and the co-presence of a plurality of agendas and divergent understandings between improvisers is a common aspect of group improvising experience (MacDonald and Wilson, 2020; see also *Need*). Attempting to trace causality in improvisers' actions with the motivation of the explication of their activity (a *why*) is, I would argue, an unfruitful exercise which does little except reveal superficial relationships, and my motivation in writing this thesis is not to provide an explicative or summative account of patterns of improvisers' choices.<sup>9</sup> What is more pertinent, to me, and I would assert more reflective of my experience of practice itself, is to explore how the wholeness of improvising activity – a whole world – might be observed, documented, and illuminated as a complex and dynamic aesthetic process and event comprising a plurality of perspectives and potentials. Within this process, undoubtedly, there exist patterns of interaction which are causally related, but I would suggest that in their dynamism and complexity, improvisational worlds might be more faithfully reflected via the *articulation of multiplicities*, across a diversity of registers and perspectives, rather than in codified systems of explication.

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<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the composition and wording annotations employed in these examples, while drawing on conversation with peers and discussion of improvising together, represent my own perspective only, as author and editor. See also *Part III: Conclusion 3*.

<sup>9</sup> To give an example: the precise reason 'why' Colin decided to stand up, lifting Maria, at 01:44 in the quartet video is relatively inconsequential, other than, perhaps, for Colin's own experience of decision-making within the improvisation. What is more impactful from my perspective as a practitioner, I would argue, and what provides a relational aesthetic artefact for my and my co-improvisers' own activity, is the *fact* of his standing and the way that it relates, formally, evocatively, with the sounds and shapes which were being presented at the time of its happening, those that had preceded, and, subsequently, those that followed. The simple fact is that I do not need to understand 'why' Colin stood up in order to participate in improvising with him, nor does it necessarily inform my understanding of the moment of the improvisation in which it occurred.

## DIEGESIS AND DURATION: THE OCEAN AND THE ROCKPOOL

The unfolding of diegesis within these worlds is as much concerned with the duration of performance as by the specific activity that improvisers engage in within it. I approach the relationship between diegesis and duration non-dualistically and via the lens of world, whereby duration can be considered *simultaneously* proportional to and inversely proportional to the world's relative diegetic complexity and comprehensibility (in the literal sense of being able to be 'held together'). On the one hand, a long duration improvisation (the duo and trio examples),<sup>10</sup> affords great opportunity for the *establishing* of observable patterns of behaviour – their laying down within the history of the improvisation through processes such as memory and recall (on the part of audience and performers), reiteration, and self-reference (to name some strategies). Long duration improvisations can elicit a sense of what Hayot refers to as high diegetic "completeness", which is to say they are revealing and exhibiting much about themselves simply by dint of the span of time across which activity can be present and have space to develop, which an audience, and the improvisers, can access. Akin to the diegetic spaciousness afforded by novel, or a feature film, a long improvisation can present a wealth of aesthetic information and hermeneutic potential; the world can be 'fleshed out' with extensive fine detail. On the other hand, however, longer improvisations have notable scope for digressions from their self-established norms, for the shifting of previously identifiable "rules" or "physics" laid down through activity. They have, quite evidently, a lot of time for change, and on that basis can appear highly morphic, mutable, and expansive (one can consider the aesthetic differences between videos 1 and 2 in the first two examples presented here). When approached from the discursive or analytical perspective, longer improvisations may therefore appear *less educible*, less able to be comprehended (again, in the literal sense); in their persistence, these worlds expand their own ground for intricacy and for diversity.

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<sup>10</sup> An understanding of length, like all things, is relative to context and culture, and there are no fixed or objective quantities of what is 'long' or what is 'short'. As guidance, however, in my practice, I would consider an improvisation which lasts longer than 40 minutes to be a 'long' improvisation.

In parallel: from one angle, a shorter improvisation might afford a more concentrated presentation of aesthetic material; a kind of hermeneutic cathexis, directness, or clarity precipitated by brevity. However, conversely, the absence of extensive development across a greater span of time might conduce a lesser sense of being able to ‘grasp’ the improvisation’s workings, to see detail, or to garner a feeling of meaning. These durational considerations are also notably affected by and intersect with the specificities of activity that improvisers undertake, the rate of change of activity (or “rate of innovation” – MacDonald and Wilson, 2017) relative to overall duration, and are influenced, as always, by the situation of the event – its framing within a social, political, disciplinary, and otherwise context.

Once again, I find that recognising improvisations as worlds provides a means to reconcile these seemingly oppositional perspectives, by acknowledging the requirement that worlds both comprise of, and thereby should be considered at a variety of scales. Author Adam Nicolson, describing a self-propelled experiment in which he constructed three artificial rockpools on the Scottish coast in order to observe contained coastal ecosystems, recognises that the demarcation of a smaller container (whether artificial, conceptual, or otherwise) counterintuitively does not correlate to greater relational, simplicity or understanding. Drawing on the mathematical principle of the Fractal, he writes:

The shore is filled with infinite regressions from ocean to channel to bay to pool to bay within the pool, to an inlet in that bay, to a micro-pool, an inlet within it and so on and on into the microscopic. [...] To make a rock pool was in fact to make something no less complex than the ocean itself. [...] Fractal theory suggests that the closer you look at something, the more it remains unknown. Knowledge cannot embrace whatever it seeks to know. It can only sit alongside the world, contingent, touching it, maybe, at one or two points but shrinking beside the unaddressable and limitless actuality of things. [...] The rock pool was not going to be a tiny, graspable fragment of the universe. It was going to be as unknowable as the universe itself. (Nicolson, 2021, p. 69)

Nicolson’s poetic recognition that the rockpool does not represent a subsumable and compartmentalised pocket of the ocean, but instead unfurls fractally into both smaller and more numerous eddies of rich wet complexity, speaks to an understanding that all worlds – whether the artificial rockpool, the ocean, The World, or the improvisational world – are complex webs of activity

which demand a discursive attentiveness to various scales, various arenas of focus, various perspectives, various points of entry.

In particular, the dynamics of scale (whether conceptual or more literally measurable), involving the energetic shifting across micro and macro perspectives, and in between, is integral to worlds' working, and consequently integral to approaching them. Extending via Nicholson, duration could be considered the relative container of performance – something that is larger or smaller (a bigger or smaller rockpool). To comprehend (or analyse, or watch, or to generate) a more substantive improvisation might well be to trace the ocean currents, while to play for three minutes is to make a rockpool. Yet notwithstanding their respective size, both exhibit equally irreducible complexity. Thinking these improvisations as worlds is recognising that micro and macro perspectives are present and vibrant in both; per Hawkins' advocacy of restructuring the hierarchy of global over local (see *Improvisational Worlds*), I would assert that neither need be considered more or less valuable, neither is incorrect, and each can simply enfold the other.

# Part III

## Conclusions

## CONCLUSION 1: EXPANDING THE DREAM

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Tracing the genealogy of my own practice throughout Part I, I have summarised how sound and movement improvisation practitioners in the western transatlantic context have aspired towards personal and collective emancipations. Subtended by original “dreams of freedom” (Toop, 2016), improvisers since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century have sought to reify within their practice the freeing of bodies, minds, expressions, and communities from restrictive norms of discipline, societal convention, aesthetic dogma, and political oppression. However, as my critical analysis in chapters 2 and 3 reveals, there exists a distinct entanglement between wider structures of social-political hegemony and the aesthetical and ethical foundations of these (now mature) improvising cultures. Synthesising perspectives from the flourishing arena of queer-feminist improvisational scholarship (e.g. Reardon-Smith, 2019; Krekels, 2019; Sappho Donohue, 2022), from the application of critical race theory to performance studies (e.g. Lewis, 1996; Piekut, 2010; Chaleff, 2018), and through a focused examination of syncretic sounding-moving practice across mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century music and dance (see chapters 1 & 4), I have argued that the axiologies of improvisational cultures have been markedly shaped by pervasive, normative conceptions of the human body and its corporeality, subtended by the predominance of cis-hetero-masculinity and systemic whiteness within western society. The regulatory force of the normative (white, cisgender, heteromasculine) body in society has conditioned the permissibility of divergent corporeality, even within the relative ‘freedom’ of improvised performance; whether this be in the presence of physical, sonic, and emotional excesses, in transgression from the norm of valorised technical instrumental virtuosity, or in subverting the paradigm of masculine musical athleticism (chapter 2). As a result of this social entanglement, the freedoms or emancipatory developments claimed by practitioners, or recognised as forming part of the canon of improvisational cultures at large – for example, the turn towards ‘democratisation’ and the ‘ordinary’ in postmodern theatre-dance (chapter 3), or the pursuit of freedom from stylistic constraints and the figure of compositional authority in Western Instrumental Art Music (chapter 2) – are understood in this thesis

as conditional; they are always relative to the force of hegemonies deeply embedded within the axiological makeup of culture itself.

In response to the paradigms of corporeal regulation engendered by the above, and in direct opposition to the normative body of hegemony, I have highlighted Transdisciplinary Free Improvisation's affordance as an arena in which divergence, multiplicity, in-between-ness, and transgressions are foregrounded at the conceptual, as well as the practical, level. My own experience of articulating and exploring queer identity within the open field of emergence permitted by TFI (*Part II: Identities in Practice*) represents one example of the capacity of this practice (and related practices) to open space for the socially and politically abject, to permit for the presence of expressivities emergent from othered bodies and experiences. While I acknowledge that my own subjectivity, lived-experience, and privileges have shaped my exposition of TFI and my choice of language, I would highlight its kinship with other recent arenas of performance – such as Walshe's *New Discipline*, Aszodi's *Undisciplined Music* and Ciciliani's *Expanded Field* (to offer some named examples) – which too seek to unbound performing bodies from patterns of aesthetic and social regulation. It is in such opening and undisciplined spaces that the capacity of practice to foster corporeal agency and permit for abjections (see López-Ramírez and Reyman, 2018; also Ferrett, 2018) is being actualised. From efforts in these experimental spaces, I predict that the practices and the discourse of improvisation, in both sound and movement, can evolve to encompass a more inclusive and expansive dream of freedom.

Recognising that the human body is both an essential site of social signification *and* the ordinary interface for improvising practice, it follows that further evaluations of the intersection between practice and salient structures of social identity *as located in and on the body* should continue to form a central component of improvisation research moving forward; as I discussed in *Part II: Identities in Practice*, this must necessarily be tempered by the understanding that the relationship between body and identity is always contingent on the numerous complexities of context, visibility, and legibility. From this integrated perspective: revisiting the ubiquity of the audio-only album format in early free



improvised music, for example – by which I have proposed the living, moving, breathing bodies of performers have been rendered less tangible, and at worst invisible (see Chapter 1.4) – provokes new questions concerning the relationship between socially significant bodily absences and what Currie refers to as the “culture industries” (2014). Developing the arguments I have presented in this thesis, and drawing upon established work on historical negations and absences within free improvisation/free jazz (such as in Myers, 2002), I propose that a sociomusicological investigation of the ways in which the earliest free improvisers’ experiments in sonic emancipation might have been conditioned by the relative a-visibility of bodies in these documents represents a stimulating arena for further research, with obvious scope for novel work in archival contexts.

## CONCLUSION 2: INTO THE VIDEOGRAPHIC

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Looking back on free improvisation’s history of audio documents, while considering new ways to integrate and centre sociality and corporeality within improvisation research, I reflect that my own work has been presented entirely in audiovisual format throughout this thesis. Spatz’ assessment that the “inextricability of technique, identity, and place” (2021) becomes highly visible in the audiovisual domain points to the viability in developing a videographic methodology for improvisation studies – one which can highlight, annotate, and illuminate corporeality and the sociality of bodies and interactions directly.

My experiments with *Cloud Annotation* represent a developing effort towards analysing and presenting improvisation in its various multiplicities. By layering multiple forms of textuality upon visibility, in pointing to the pluralities and indistinctions emergent in my practice, I have proposed a way of illuminating improvisation’s inherently polyvalent characteristics, as an alternative to prevailing reductivist and summative approaches. I have shown the possibilities of *Cloud Annotation* as a viable means of reflecting the complexities of TFI, through the conjunct presentation of text, image, and sound, as well as its efficacy in articulating ideas within my developing conceptual frame of improvisational worlds (itself an exercise in articulating the dynamism and complexity of practice). The

gradual unfolding of improvisational diegesis, for example, the great variety of parametrizable aspects of practice (including expressive modalities, forms, materials, and relationships), the plurality of possible stimuli in the room, the interpersonal navigation of what forms of expressivity become ‘possible and part of’ the improvisation – all of these aspects are rendered very visible within Cloud Annotation’s play with textuality. In writing these aspects directly upon the audiovisual, I propose they are rendered more tangible than in the ordinary and separated presentation of text and audiovisual material. Not only in its superficial application of textuality or overwriting, but also in its combination of semantic registers and its play with temporality, this mode of annotated videographic presentation represents a new avenue by which to explore the reification of improvisation’s more opaque properties, both epistemologically and artistically, within the practice-as-research context and beyond.

Bringing this into relation with Conclusion 1: the capacity of *Cloud Annotation* to illuminate *sociality* in connection with performing bodies is dependent, I would suggest, on the further development of the model from a multi-editor standpoint – something which I recognise is absent in this thesis, owing largely to logistics and the practicality of editing (as well as the overall focus of the research on *my* relationship to practice). My subjectivity affords me a singular perspective as the editor and annotator of these videographic documents. While this does not preclude the idea of my annotating aspects of the social-corporeal connection beyond my own lived-experience, it risks a restriction in perspective. A wider breadth of editorial creativity, choice of language, and interpretation would be afforded by the opening of the model to multiple editors of differing experience (perhaps future collaborators, or indeed current research participants), with the result that multiple versions of annotated videographic documents could offer suitably diverse perspectives upon performance footage.

The affordance of developing improvisational thinking into the videographic also bears immediate relevance to the newest forms of improvising practice – those which have coalesced in the turn to hybrid and digital performance precipitated by the Coronavirus Pandemic. In its inherent generation of videographic documents, and its native audiovisuality, improvisation mediated by teleconference

software or other digital interfaces represents a clear site of interest for further experimentation with annotative models such as *Cloud Annotation*, perhaps even in a live or interactive capacity.

From early 2020, the absence of live venues and practice-groups so critical to the established culture and economy of improvising communities (Chapter 1.2.2) necessitated a pragmatic shift to performing and meeting online. The inability to meet and work in person prompted a new way of practising, a new relationship to body and to technology; the latter not only as a tool, but as a mediator for the sense-media, stimuli, and interactivity ordinarily only accessible in physical spaces, the former as an interface expressing in two places at once – in a physical realm, and in the limited dimensionality of audiovisual media on a screen. While this new environment was unfamiliar and provided no shortage of technical teething problems, it has also enabled core aspects of TFI to come to the fore, as a new, digital space has been opened up.

*Telematic Improvisation* (a term which now carries currency in the aftermath of the pandemic) has demanded a renewed effort to attend to the immediate situation of practice in the form of the new digitality. The previous proprioceptive awareness of other performers – ordinarily a rich resource for my sound and movement – has been distinctly inaccessible. Co-improvisers have been compressed into rectangular screens and windows visible on largely static devices – the desktop computer, the smartphone on the stand, etc. – and the sense of human touch has been absent. However, paralleling the way in which I rethink my changing physicality in instrumental interaction out of impediment and into affordance (Part II: Instrumental Kinesis), my approach to these changing conditions has been one of openness and a focussed acceptance on what arises. While superficially restrictive, these conditions have actually prompted a close attention to visuality as a dominant domain of expressivity and locus of attention, amplifying the corporeality of myself and co-improvisers, and emphasising the role of visuality and kinesis (even in nominally sounding-only improvising contexts). In telematic improvising, the *whole* way an improviser appears on the screen becomes vibrantly active as a pluralistic site of stimulus and expressivity.

As noted in MacDonald et al. (2021) within the context of the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra's (GIO) *Flattening the Curve* online improvisation series, which has been running since early 2020:

The visual democracy and flattened space that Zoom affords, draws to the fore the visual features of what transpires during a session which accords each participant equal space. The individual/social affordance of the boxes within the box let individuals have "equal space" (visually speaking) for furnishing what happens in the "bigger box" (the total of the individual boxes) and that this "affordance," combined with the audio constraints (can't hear all at once, latency) drew the visual features of improvisation to the fore in a new way. (MacDonald et al., 2021, p. 9)

Through the "visual democracy" of Zoom, although physically distant, the players of GIO have been afforded parity of (virtual) space – something less immediately achievable in the contrived environment of the studio. The distinct emergence of visibility within the historically sonically inclined performance practice of GIO ("Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra", n.d.) represents a playful subversion of the conventional modal hierarchy of sonic improvisation practice. The telematic environment of *Flattening the Curve* provided an overt space for disciplinary transgression and experimentation; as a result, a new kind of practice, which I would recognise as palpably transdisciplinary, has emerged.

The move into the digital has afforded a distinct de-hierarchising and blurring of different (and conventionally oppositional) types of sounding and moving, aided, I would suggest, by the physical location of performance as occurring within the domestic environment. The "Theatre of Home" (MacDonald et al., 2021) in which improvisation takes place online has explicitly situated performers within an environment which is unstaged and undisciplined, which carries none of the architectural signifiers of disciplinary culture which frame events of performance and condition the ways in which improvising activity is read and assessed in relation to disciplinary axiologies. Resultantly, moments of 'incidental' sound, of 'pedestrian' movement, of technical glitches, of 'casual' or 'non-affected' speech, emerge side-by-side with heightened physicality and sonority – with gestural, figural, or otherwise recognisably 'aestheticised' modes of expressing native to the performance stage. This telematic environment, bridging domestic spaces, is an arena in which it is apparent that multiplicities of

expressivity can co-exist. While the extent to which this period of digital experimentation will impact subsequent live (non-digital) practice remains to be seen, Telematic Improvisation itself offers a promising arena for the exploration of transdisciplinary thinking within the broader practice-culture of free improvisation. For my own work, it is an ideal environment in which to explore new varieties of pluralistic expressivity precipitated by the undisciplined and unstaged affordances of the digital room.

### CONCLUSION 3: BEING MORE THAN ONE THING

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Finding a home in the transdisciplinary involves deeply questioning received patterns of naming, taxonomizing, reducing, and delineating, which *contain* knowledge in the western context. Following Mel Y. Chen's assessment that words function as "a primary site in which the matter of the world takes shape and is affectively informed [...]" (Chen, in Braidotti and Hlavajova, 2018, p. 33), throughout this thesis I have sought to unwind some academic convention in writing about improvisation, exploring instead the capacity of the transdisciplinary to deprioritise the forms of logocentricity central to Western philosophy and culture, in an effort towards decolonising my own thinking and practice. Thinking practice through the transdisciplinary, as well as through concepts which explicitly evoke the forms and relationships of the other and the more-than-human (such as, for example, the rhizome, or the improvisational world), represents a broadly poststructuralist effort to reconstitute the idea of what knowledge can be, where it can be located, and how it can be articulated.

I have explored the affordances of this articulation of knowledge: by presenting a series of perspectives and Manifesto of TFI in lieu of totalising definition, shifting focus towards the porosity of numerous interinformative concepts; in my structuring of Part II as a non-linear and interpenetrative rhizomatic web of essays, permitting different audiovisual and textual registers to intermingle; in my experimentation with hermeneutic annotations in novel videographic analysis; and in my exposition of the frame of improvisational worlds, a conceptual vehicle grounded in ecological imagery and metaphor, which subverts neat delineations of either/or, foregrounding scalar motility, dynamism, and complexity.

Tempered by a necessarily direct exposure of characteristics which require more honed delineation – for example, the links I have traced between social-corporeal abjections and the axiology of improvisational cultures (Part I: Chapters 2 & 3), or the different ways that cultures of composition and cultures of improvisation have generated their canons and mythologies (Part I: Chapter 1) – I have pointed to the advantages of transdisciplinary thinking in subverting dualistic perspectives, challenging conceptual fixities, and critically, articulating the insubstantialities of my own (and others’) improvising practice; the multiplicity and variety of improvisation, in all its “protean polyvalence” (Fell, 2017, p. 65). A methodology of transdisciplinary exegesis – modelled upon the characteristics of practice itself – has allowed me to identify and articulate central aspects of my improvising:

the way in which my sounding-moving practice synthesises interests of its predecessor cultures (free improvisation and postmodern theatre dance), while transgressing the commonplace aesthetic and formal boundaries of both;

the openness with which I approach the precarity of instrumental kinesis, thinking my shifting relationship with instruments out of impediment and into affordance, and allowing for the presence of abject forms of sound and movement;

the syncretism with which I employ sounding-moving across voice, body, and instrument, in which the kinetic and sonic are recognised as mutually co-generative, and by which monodisciplinary language is rendered insufficient to describe or articulate my activity;

the distinct intersection between my queer identity and my transdisciplinary improvising – indicative of practice’s entanglement with the social – in which the between-ness and otherness of my lived experience emerge through the mutability of my sonic-kinetic expressions;

the degree to which the ordinary immediacies of improvising, as well as choice processes, are mediated clearly by the transdisciplinary lens, whereby *all* aspects of the performance situation constitute a field of potential to be explored across pluralistic expressivity;

the importance of maintaining an attitude of acceptance predicated on openness and non-resistance (to a great diversity of possible stimuli and occurrences) which engenders the emergence of unexpected forms, shapes, and holistic modes of expressing and interacting;

and the essential non-dualistic perspective which colours the way I experience and articulate my own activity, my relationship to co-improvisers, and to the unfolding agency of the dynamic improvisational world of which we also form agential part.

Through this period of rigorous engagement with my practice, along with all its wider social, cultural, and epistemological entanglements, I recognise that through articulating these core elements of my work directly in language which neither essentialises nor contains them, my practice has become richer, freer, and more expansive. Through this concentrated period of research, in permitting myself to traverse a wide geography of improvisational expressivity, identifying how this variety intersects with my own identities, with the cultures of practice from which my work has drawn, and with the communities of practitioners related to it, I see that to be *More Than One Thing* is to claim belonging in a vibrant creative space of interstices and intertwining connections. The aspirations which underpin Basarab Nicolescu's original approach to transdisciplinarity amount to a call for dissolution and recombination of knowledge into new forms as an evolutionary process – something Ljubec describes in her thesis title as a process of “Evolving Transdisciplinarity into an Imaginary Organism of Living Knowledge” (Ljubec, 2015). By continuing to evolve my own practice through the shifting field of the transdisciplinary, I hope to find new ways – both practical and imaginary – to share and develop the living, moving, dynamic knowledge of improvising practice, that it might move into the next moment uncontained.

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