

Mutual Composing

Practice-led Research: Improvisation in Dance and Music

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What is the relation between improvisation in dance and music? This question prompted the collaborative practice-led research project described in this article. The project followed on from the findings of *Improvisation, music and learning: An interpretive phenomenological analysis* (Rose 2013) that described improvisation, in addition to being found within individual disciplines, as a human capability that is apparent across different spheres of activity, in arts and beyond. The use of the term *practice* here denotes ongoing professional activity in two different fields: Andrew Wass in dance and Simon Rose in music. Practice and research have been designed and carried out with the aim to not artificially separate the two – research assists the ongoing development of practice. This article offers an initial reflective perspective of this ongoing research. Although constraints of time have led to my solely authoring the article, in keeping with the project's aim, research activity is equally shared between Andrew Wass and myself. The shared practice leads to a form of *mutual composition* – a term coined by saxophonist John Butcher (Rose 2013).

Both music and dance have respective histories of improvisation but how do these relate to one another, if at all? Our shared research interest is in more fully understanding and thereby acknowledging the potential of improvisation within our respective disciplines – creating at the point of performance. The project explores the relation of practices by means of non-hierarchical performance. Real-time composition, or improvisation also effectively becomes an interdisciplinary research tool (that is *fit-for-purpose*) with the capability to embrace practices, offering adaptability, mutability, privileging not-pre-determined events as they occur and develop. Research is led by practice (Smith/Dean 2009) that seeks emergence.

Improvisation is a social, collaborative process (Sawyer 2007; Rose 2016) and in order to explore the phenomenon of improvisation and how respective practices may be shared collaboration is requisite. Experience of both watching and participating in group improvisation in simultaneous dance and music with

five or more participants, indicated how the complexity arising from the infinite possibilities can easily *muddy the waters* (and this multi-dimensional, interdisciplinary complexity is one of the reasons improvisation in simultaneous music and dance practice remains, beyond the tacit, not well understood and little researched). For these reasons the idea of exploring improvisation in music and dance in the form of a *duo* held appeal – simplifying while retaining the important relational aspect of such practice allows it to become more coherently understood. An aim in practice is to be open to temporal possibilities that will continuously change and the parameters of the duo means that, for research purposes, the flow of shared information may become better understood.

But how is understanding of this shared practice achieved? In studio sessions and public performances the precept of phenomenology, to »return to the things themselves« (Husserl 2001: 168), informs the performance-research practice, allowing for the *not-pre-determined* rather than the pre-planned. There is a synergetic relation between the study of experience, phenomenology, and open improvisation that explores the not-pre-determined (Rose 2016).¹ Improvisation is enacted and regular studio sessions began in January 2013 – not prefaced by discussion of content or a way of approaching. From the outset a video camera would be set to record in vision and sound. Having improvised together for an approximate set time we would subsequently describe to the other what we had been doing, our intentions, decisions, references, what has been suggested, particular feelings associated with the piece, what we liked, where things *worked*, reflections on the relational aspect, ideas that could be further explored and so on. Subsequently video files were shared, viewed and notes made independently. In this way an iterative practice led *research cycle* (Reason/Bradbury 2007) was established that has proved to have longevity, sustaining the shared phenomenological practice-led research approach. The professional partnership is, for me, directly analogous to a *working band* in music, for example, leading to public performances including: *Formations* (Berlin 2013); *Formations Extended* (Berlin 2014); *Libet's Lag* (Berlin 2014); *Lateralized Readiness Project* (Berlin 2014); *The Fourth Wall* (Berlin 2015). In this way, the research is situated within the lived-experience of ongoing professional practice.

Our research interest and outcomes are only made available by means of knowledge gained through experience of what is there in dance and sound. Research and performance has been guided by the notion of *body first*, of how the »body is faster than the mind« (Pauline Oliveros, quoted in: Rose 2013: 191). The practice-led research collaboration presents an order of things, that is: *doing, discussing and writing*. With an emphasis on the first of these, *doing*

1 | Rose (2016) offers an extensive account of improvisation and phenomenology.

– discussion and writing are supportive of action. In general, the academic desire for written outcomes may easily lead to an anxiety that reprioritises more cerebral activity and our shared practice has worked with awareness of this.

With the overarching research question – *What is the relation of improvisation between music and improvisation in dance?* – after doing and its reflection, a rich way of gaining knowledge of each other's field has been through sharing: histories, philosophies, pedagogies, important developments, key players, different schools and sub-genres, the nuance carried by variations in local and international forms, as well as the tacit understandings within these variations of practice. In this way practical sessions have been supported by extensive subsequent discussion. Awareness of our use of embodied metaphors (Lakoff/Johnson 1980) describing practice has aided the processes – for example, the spatial terms/metaphors used to describe both dance and music.

In this article I have limited the focus of discussion to the *sharing* of our practices. I haven't discussed the *substrata* of research that is our reflection, thought and activity that furthers our separate music and dance activity and indeed other research. We both also work independently in a variety of performing contexts and this shared research has, in different ways, influenced day-to-day practices elsewhere. For myself, for example, the dance/music collaboration holds similarities and significant differences to performing solo – musical choices are informed by the dance collaboration in compositional ways. Developing awareness of spatiality and the extra-musical has, to some extent, extended my thinking in other performance contexts. Individual concerns include Andrew Wass' current doctoral study *Exploration and experimentation: the fractal and rhizomatic nature of improvised dance* at the University of Chichester, United Kingdom. Reflections upon our separate practices as they relate to this collaboration form an important dimension for future documentation.

Exploring this complex relational question of how our shared work is developed together, two notable points of reference arose from ideas found in the work of composer, musician and theorist John Cage (Cage/Cunningham 1981) and artist, philosopher Marcel Duchamp (1957). These aligned with an intuition that improvisation in music and dance need not begin from the premise that there is a simplistic one-to-one relation between the two – the infinite creative possibilities suggest the sharing of practices can go far beyond that. There can be presumptions in discussions of improvisation leading largely from associations with styles of improvising found, for example, in Jazz and Contact Improvisation and their strong links to *given* ideas such as *spontaneity* and *call and response*. However, the phenomenon of improvisation is not *defined* by any style – to presume that a style of improvisation in any sphere is defining can foreshorten potential.

John Cage and Merce Cunningham (1981) explain how they discovered, as a way of working together, that their respective practices could simultaneously co-exist with awareness of the other and not seeking to impose a new structural relationship. This thinking reflects Cage's (1995) ideas elsewhere, of all sound being available to the musician, as potentially musical, allowing sound and action within the world rather than seeking to control or »glue« practices together as he puts it (Cage/Cunningham 1981). This inter-disciplinary perspective may also further reflect Cage's experience at Black Mountain College (Asheville, North Carolina, USA) visiting on a number of occasions between 1948 and 1953 as composer, performer and teacher during which time multi-disciplinary performances took place in a highly improvisatory manner – the ethos of the college being to seek to embrace thinking regardless of the discipline (Goldberg 1998). Rather than seeking to externally guide or choreograph, our duo performance practice takes place by seeking the emergent – in a manner that is not dependent upon a one-to-one relation (although this, of course, does not preclude a one-to-one relation should it arise).

A second reference, for me, that supported the intuition of simultaneous yet *not co-dependant* action in practice comes from Marcel Duchamp's (1957) idea of the *coefficient*. Although very different, in this context it in many ways supports the previous idea of *allowing* relations to develop. Put simply, Duchamp proposed that art's meaning occurs in the space between the object (in this case dance, music) and the spectator – the coefficient of art and its reception. As well as allowing our practice to emerge simultaneously, for each other, we work with awareness of how the spectator is also part of the developing process – this is directly reflected by the consideration of spatiality that includes the audience. Through the sharing of experience, creating a coefficient axis of potential meaning, the understanding of the piece is shared between audience and performer or, put in another way, is developed by performers and audience. This particular connection to the coefficient arises via the *not-pre-determined* character of our shared improvisation through which dance and music develop at the point of performance. Taken together the ideas of not-pre-determined improvisation and the shared construction of meaning support Jacques Rancière's (2011) socio-political descriptions of the more active, *Emancipated Spectator*, or audience.

There can be a tension between the need for research that is rigorous and the contingencies of artistic practice – they don't necessarily complement one another, why should they? While research demands findings and results, creativity is not necessarily amenable to quantifiable measurability and the agile, multi-faceted nature of improvisation may compound such tension. How do you research such a thing and remain true to the spirit of improvisation – allowing for creative development as it occurs? The practice-led approach described here has suggested some approaches and strategies that speak to

such questions, principally by aiming to allow for action that guides the desire for research.

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