

# Contact Improvisation

## Gestural Interactions in the Performative Encounter between Dance and Music

---

Ivo I. Berg

**Abstract:** *This article examines how dancers and musicians interact in free improvisation performances. It assumes that the improvisational context uniquely connects the participants, creating a contact surface for mutual perception and reference between the arts. Based on interviews with members of two Berlin performance projects, the study used qualitative social research methods including guideline-based expert interviews with video stimulated recall. Findings indicate that reciprocal references stem from performative negotiation processes and individual positioning in different fields of tension. Themes include the role and quality of the performative setting, the overarching category of space, differences in aesthetic perception between sound's omnipresence and vision's distancing perspectivity, and the tension between aesthetic presuppositions and unconscious influences. The interviews confirm theoretical concepts of musical gesture and gestural interaction, offering valuable explanatory approaches and highlighting the diversity of artistic practice.*

The combination of dance and music is a common format in performances of the free improvisation scene. The question of the levels on which dancers and musicians interact with each other, that is, in which ways the two artistic practices are related to each other, is usually open. While at least general musical parameters can establish a common basis for the interaction of musicians alone and ensemble playing suggests a corresponding interaction, these presuppositions are much less self-evident when different arts meet: What relationships arise between dance movements in space and musical sound events? Is one medium transformed into the other? How do dancers and musicians make their performative decisions in this context? Are any references consciously controlled or do the artistic expressions confront each other without intention? To what extent can we speak of a reciprocal influence?

In this paper, I assume that the performative framework of improvisation creates a specific environment that raises these questions and addresses the connection between music and movement in a special way: musicians themselves become agents in the space; their physical presence allows them to become points of gravity of the movement events, even if they sometimes play without visual contact with the dancers; the dancers in turn also find themselves on the level of sonic events via the sounds of movement and breathing, thus staging musical parameters of their movements. The openness and temporality of improvisation, as well as its emergence in the moment, refer both sides to each other, thus questioning the quality of mutual perception and challenging the exploration of possible parameters of interaction.

### Concept of the Interview Study

In the following, I will compare the work of two performance projects from the Berlin scene with regard to these questions: the duo Andrew Wass (dance) and Simon Rose (saxophone) as well as the trio BIT with Britta Pudelko and Ingo Reulecke (dance) and Thomas Gerwin (percussion). My aim is not only to develop a theory-based view “from the outside,” but also to include the perspective of the artists and to explore their experiences and strategies in practice. To this end, I conducted an interview study in September 2020 with the two musicians (hereafter SR and TG) and one of the dancers from each of the projects (hereafter AW and IR). My approach was based on methods of qualitative social research—in this case in the form of an expert interview with video-stimulated recall—without, however, attempting to completely meet the standards of empirical research.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, this methodological relativization was based on an explicit theoretical self-interest with which I approached the interviews. On the other hand, as a musician I have improvised with the members of Ensemble BIT in the past, which meant that I was personally involved from an artistic point of view. My approach is therefore determined by a hermeneutic research attitude—especially considering the analysis of the interviews presented here.<sup>2</sup>

---

1 For a brief overview of common forms of interviews in qualitative social research, see Günter Mey and Katja Mruck, “Qualitative Interviews,” in *Qualitative Marktforschung in Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Gabriele Naderer and Eva Balzer (Wiesbaden: Gabler, 2007), 249–78.

2 The interviews were recorded, then transcribed and form the basis of this article as a text source. The sources in brackets refer to the transcripts of the interviews.

The interviews were based on two videos of live performances by the two ensembles in Berlin in 2012 and 2014.<sup>3</sup> The interviews were conducted according to a guideline that I had designed beforehand, which remained unchanged and was only reformulated with regard to the perspective of the interviewee.<sup>4</sup> They began with retrospective questions about the common working method and the basic setting of the performances. This was followed by a review of the performance video with a request to highlight and describe particularly striking and intense moments of interaction. Starting from this stimulus, the focus then turned to aspects of perception action in order to build on this and open up a general level of possible references between dance and music. The final step was for each ensemble to watch the other's performance video, which provided the opportunity to spontaneously comment on artistic impressions on the basis of the thoughts developed.

## Theoretical Framework

The basis of this conception is my perspective as a musician and representative of instrumental pedagogy—a subject that in recent years has increasingly come to be understood and researched in a comprehensive sense as “Musizierpädagogik.”<sup>5</sup> The connection between music and movement already plays a central role here in terms of learning theory: learning music, understanding music in the sense of procedurally coded knowledge and ability, is linked in many ways to physical processes and physically initiated developmental processes. This includes both the development of cognitive-syntactic structures and the ability to process musical auditory phenomena in an action-oriented way, as well as the level of musical expression and musical understanding of expression.<sup>6</sup> With

- 
- 3 For the duo Wass/Rose see *Libet's Lag*, December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014 at Uferstudios Berlin, filmed by Didi Meier, accessed 27 July 2022, [https://vimeo.com/115512490?embedded=true&source=vimeo\\_logo&owner=2667046](https://vimeo.com/115512490?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=2667046); for the trio Pudelko/Reulecke/Gerwin see BIT at “OSM 2012,” 2012 at Radialsystem Berlin, filmed by Carlos Bustamante, accessed 27 July 2022, <http://www.thomasgerwin.de/listen-and-watch.html>.
  - 4 The interviews with TG and IR of BIT took place as individual interviews; with AW and SR I conducted a joint interview.
  - 5 On the concept of Musizierpädagogik, see Martina Krause-Benz, “Musizierpädagogik—A Term with Potential and Perspective,” in *üben & musizieren research* (December 2021), accessed 27 July 2022, [https://uebenundmusizieren.de/artikel/research\\_2021\\_krause-benz/](https://uebenundmusizieren.de/artikel/research_2021_krause-benz/).
  - 6 A central historical starting point for these findings is the development of the subject of rhythmicity. Cf. the contribution by Dorothea Weise in this

the concept of embodiment, this basic position has gained renewed urgency in recent years: after all, the corresponding theories of the philosophy of mind put forward the thesis that mental processes are not only based on bodily learning processes, but are tied to a far greater extent to the existence and current role of the body than generally recognized.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in relation to music-making, all the movements of a playing person come into focus as potentially meaning-bearing, meaning-giving, or meaning-understanding “musical gestures.” I would like to outline a few theoretical points of reference in order to sketch out the concept of “gestural interaction” raised in the title of this article:<sup>8</sup>

- General concept of gesture: The philosopher Vilém Flusser starts phenomenologically from an open concept of gesture, which includes any bodily movement whose mode of appearance goes beyond a purely causal justification. For him, however, the “gesture of listening to music” is not just a movement, but a whole-body attitude that allows the body to be experienced as permeable, in that the body allows itself to be penetrated by music and begins to resonate.<sup>9</sup>
- Musical gestures: Based on the paradigm of embodiment, this research direction explores the gestural potential of all movements in music-making. It is based on a nomenclature of “sound-producing gestures, communicative gestures, sound-facilitating gestures, and sound-accompanying gestures.”<sup>10</sup>
- Musical energetics: In the first half of the twentieth century, the music psychologist Ernst Kurth founded a phenomenological theory of how music appears in consciousness. According to this theory, music is inwardly

---

book. For a current overview of learning theory research, see Wilfried Gruhn, “Was der Körper nicht lernt, lernt der Kopf nimmermehr ... Lerntheoretische Überlegungen zur Bedeutung der Leiblichkeit des Lernens,” in *Musik und Körper. Interdisziplinäre Dialoge zum körperlichen Erleben und Verstehen von Musik*, ed. Lars Oberhaus and Christoph Stange (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), 105–20.

- 7 Cf. Ivo Berg, “Von der ‘Verkörperung’ zum ‘Embodiment’? Ein neues Paradigma aus der Philosophie des Geistes und seine Anwendung in der Musikpädagogik,” in *Diskussion Musikpädagogik* (January 2017): 12–9.
- 8 The following theoretical approaches are presented in more detail and summarised under a theory of gestural learning in Ivo Berg, “Gestisches Lernen,” in *Musiklernen. Bedingungen–Handlungsfelder–Positionen*, ed. Wilfried Gruhn and Peter Röbbke (Innsbruck: Helbling, 2018), 155–76.
- 9 Vilém Flusser, *Gesten. Versuch einer Phänomenologie* (Bensheim: Bollmann, 1991), 193 (trans. Ivo Berg): “Die Geste des Musikhörens.”
- 10 Rolf I. Godøy and Marc Leman, *Musical Gestures: Sound, Movement, and Meaning* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 23.

felt and imagined in physical categories of movement, space, matter, and energy.<sup>11</sup> The metaphor theory of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in turn, assumes that linguistic concepts are based on basic bodily experiences.<sup>12</sup> The metaphorical nature of musical energetics could therefore be traced back to bodily processes.

- Gestural model of communication: Michael Tomasello assumes from an evolutionary-anthropological perspective that pointing gestures and iconic gestures form the starting point of human communication both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. However, their function is not exhausted in pointing to or depicting reality. Rather, their communicative success is linked to a cognitive structure that reveals itself in a mutual knowledge of a shared background.<sup>13</sup>

Some possible interfaces between dance and music can be derived from these theories: from the dancers' point of view, it could be asked whether the perception of music takes place in the bodily resonance that Flusser postulates and whether the conceptualization of music in bodily categories can form starting points for reference in dance. From the point of view of the musicians, it could be asked whether the awareness of the gestural potential of their own musical movements suggests links to dance movements or whether, conversely, such awareness is motivated by contact with dance. Finally, a "gestural interaction" between the two sides could be assumed if a "shared background" could be postulated in the performative events, which becomes the basis of a mutual understanding and improvisational shaping in the ensemble.

## Ways of Relating between Dance and Music

The following analysis of the interviews is structured according to themes that emerged both from the structure of the guideline and the individual dynamics of the conversation. It becomes apparent that references to the theoretical approaches mentioned can be made again and again. However, the statements of the artists will not be used to establish a meta-theory of the interaction

- 
- 11 Cf. Ivo I. Berg, *Musikalische Spannung. Grundlagen und Methoden für den Instrumentalunterricht* (Essen: Die Blaue Eule, 2014), 106–18.
  - 12 See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live by* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 14–21. For a critical overview of this theory see Lawrence Shapiro, *Embodied Cognition* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 86–9.
  - 13 Cf. Michael Tomasello, *The Origins of Human Communication* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 15.

between music and movement. Rather, the aim is to use the theoretical approaches conversely to expand the diversity and complexity of the approaches in practice. In this sense, overlaps and cross-connections can always be found between the topics chosen here.

## The Impact of the Performative Setting

### *Developing References as a Process of Artistic Research*

Both ensembles establish their artistic collaboration on improvisation. This concerns the concept of the performances as a whole as well as the preparation and rehearsal processes leading up to them. In the background of both ensembles there is also a reflective and partly also scientific examination of the underlying themes.<sup>14</sup>

In both cases, the starting point of the performance is a previously determined setting that provides a framework for open-ended improvisation and at the same time sets a creative impulse from which reciprocal references can develop. This role and quality of the setting is reflected both in the starting point of the collaboration and in the further course of the rehearsal. Rehearsing here, however, means neither automating and refining forms of movement or sound events that have already been found, nor rehearsing a self-contained performance concept. Instead, the improvisational form pervades the further development of the collaboration: instead of rehearsals in the sense mentioned above, there are “sessions” in the sense of improvisations in potential concert mode, which are recorded on video to be discussed later (as in the case of the duo). The subject of this reflection, in turn, seems to be less the concrete references between dance and music in the sense of choreographic questions and more “the quality of communication” (TG) itself. Performances in front of an audience, using the same setting in the same formation as a starting point, are essential for the ensemble’s further development and artistic reflection: “We work on a kind of a continuum. So this is where we got to on this occasion, if

---

14 See Simon Rose, *The Lived Experience of Improvisation in Music, Learning and Live* (Chicago: Intellect Ltd. Publication, 2017); Ingo Reulecke and Heike Gäßler, *Radikale Echtzeit. Tanz, Musik, Sprache als Moment-Komposition* (Berlin: HZT, 2021); Andrew Wass, “Aristotle and Husserl Go Dancing: Solo Improvised Dance-Making and the Noetic Cycle,” in *Choreographic Practices* 11, no. 1 (December 2020): 29–42; as well as the contribution of Simon Rose and Ingo Reulecke to this volume, pp. 361–374.

you like” (SR). In this context, references are negotiated less explicitly on a conceptual level, but rather against the background of their performative success, as the continuation of a dynamic or as the discarding of certain additions: “In that [the performances and sessions] we then developed something like that together, so that rather happened” (IR).

### ***The Setting as an Energetic Space***

Especially in the case of the trio, the setting seems to function as an essential starting point for this success by opening up an energetic space and motivating references on the basis of its elements: the percussive playing and sound material together with a small table, which marks the beginning and end as a spatial center of gravity; the joint beginning sitting in silence, then the agreed sequence of a “kind of expansion into the space, conquest of the space” (TG) by IR with a final return to the starting position. In addition, there is the agreement to maintain a strategy of “reduction” for as long as possible, both in sound and in the range of movement.<sup>15</sup> The theme of reduction is nourished by the percussive sound spectrum of the few everyday objects used by TG (e.g., stone, stirring rod, chain). Just as the beginning of the joint work is described in an exploration of this special set of instruments, listening to the sounds is an essential starting point of the performance:

It was about reduction, but I kept to that the least; because that provoked such a tension, this enduring of the reduction, in the interplay with Britta but above all with the sounds; extremely enervating, that triggered a lot in me; and then at some point the switch was flipped and it went off; I had to make an effort to always find my way back to the reduction (IR).

The immediate success of this initiation of hearing and movement through the “triggering” (IR) of the sounds and sound actions leads to the build-up of tension out of the reduction, which finally energetically expels a form of “arching” (TG) in the space.

The sensation and artistic realization of this tension, in turn, happens in different ways and shows the participants in their artistic individuality. If the initial scene is still characterized by a collective feeling into oneself, by “settling in, tuning in for this thing with the small group” (IR), then “when the switch is flipped” (IR, see quote above), performative roles develop, which in turn enable a general form of reference: one sits “super formally at the table,” while one “freaks out” and the second dancer takes up postures at the table that “turn

---

15 This part of the performance is not part of the edited video used as a basis here.

it into the absurd” (IR). Not only does this offer a variety of possibilities for shaping the three-person situation in changing directions of attention during the performance, but the audience is also offered different “foci or axes of vision” (IR) as it develops. The holding and reduction tension of the beginning expands into a deliberate “discrepancy” (IR) that consistently grows from the playing out of the individual roles and artistic identities.

Although in BIT’s performances there is usually only one person acting in the space, the space plays a central role in the concept of the setting: the theme of “expansion into the space” is referred to by the participants both in the gradual dancing conquest of an ever larger playing surface and in the sound, which can fill the space in different ways according to the acoustic conditions and types of play used. In the enormous contrast between the movement ambitus of the dancer (BP), who is stuck to the table and chair and communicates with the musician (TG) in the smallest of movements, and the space-filling escapades of IR, the tension “in playing with closeness and distance” (TG) is realized as a reference theme. It is precisely in the interplay of the visual axes that the spatial effects of small gestures and minimal sound channeling can be explored (TG).

### ***The Setting as a Place for Negotiating Performative Roles***

In the case of the duo, too, there is an agreed framework of beginning (standing next to each other in the center of the room) and end (kneeling next to each other, looking at the floor). However, this setting does not function in a comparable way as an immediate energetic impulse. Based on the aesthetic intention not to anticipate possible forms of interaction, but rather to “purposefully seek the lack of interaction and juxtaposition and the going against as a direct one-to-one” (SR), the setting literally aims at “standing next to each other”. In this way, the simple question of the common presence in time and space can be established as an overarching theme: “We can do responding to each other but there is something more interesting which is like we’re sharing this space. How are we going to spend that time together in this space?” (SR).

This question initially makes no distinction between the respective aesthetic practices of the participants. Here, too, the category of space is essential: SR, unlike TG, who mostly sits at a table, is mobile with the saxophone, moving along different paths during his playing and thus constantly creating new spatial constellations. AW, on the other hand, considers the musician on the conceptual level of the setting first as a partner and reference point in the space: “I think, I actually tend to relate to him more consciously spatially than aurally, than musically” (AW). But the question of the kind of understanding of space is also included in the concept of both performers: while in the case of the duo,

space is successively “conquered” by expanding sounds and movements “into it” (see quotations above)—the work of the duo is based on a geometric–energetic understanding of the performance space to be played. Reciprocal actions are motivated by shifts in emphasis within this space by seeking complementary positions or intentionally condensing the space by means of its gravitational points:

He came down, so then I curved around towards him, then I left again just to have balance. And he is coming downstage, so then I’m going upstage to like, as I was saying, preserving of having that spatial relationship. And here is the diagonal, you got Doris Humphrey in 1964: The diagonal is the strongest line on stage (AW).

The difference in the understanding of space can be understood in the respective reactions to the beginning of the duo performance: while IR at first perceives a strong tension in the jointly forward perspective, but then cannot understand AW’s abrupt change of perspective (gaze turned to SR all at once, rocking movement in the knees, finally a small hop; 00:20–01:34) as an energetically consistent continuation, the duo mainly observes the correspondence of SR’s going back and AW’s subsequent running backwards (01:38–01:47). However, both performers emphasize that both the impulse to hop as well as the movement to the darker back part of the stage were not based on conscious decisions. Nevertheless, as the reconstructive observation shows, the conceptual setting also acts here as an overriding level of justification for the reference.

Just as in the case of the trio, a corresponding understanding of roles results from the basic spatial constellation in the case of the duo. Here, however, not as a “discrepancy” and polarity of “closeness and distance” (see quotes above), but in the sense of equal presence as the theme of the “Two” (SR)—a role constellation of “two tall men in a space” (SR), which at the same time has an “automatic comedy” (SR) woven into it and for which classic duos such as Dean Martin/Jerry Lewis or Stan Laurel/Oliver Hardy are cited. Thus SR and AW understand their roles as different “archetypes”: AW in the role of an “innate awkwardness” in relation to SR in the role of the “straight man.” However, real relationship moments also play into these performative roles. After all, the openness of improvisation requires mutual knowledge, a knowledge of preferences with regard to modes of action and a fundamental trust in the productive continuation of impulses: “What I see is someone that I’m sharing a performance situation with, right? And that we have to trust in each other” (SR).

## The Role of Aesthetic Preconceptions

### *Avoiding One-to-One Transpositions between Music and Movement*

As has already become clear from the self-reconstructions of the working methods and the creation of the settings, the references are based on a number of aesthetic preconceptions despite the open and free form of improvisation. Both ensembles are united by the basic conviction that direct translations of music into dance or vice versa make little artistic sense and should not be striven for in improvisation. It is not a matter of “simply hearing again what I see, or vice versa” (TG). The principle “Oh, I hear that kind of thing, I’m going to do this kind of movement” (AW) does not work as an immediate improvisation strategy anyway:

Because if what I’m trying to do, meet him when he goes, it’s hard to do that because it’s improvised. I don’t know when it’s going to happen, he doesn’t know what’s going to happen. So trying to create that relationship is impossible (AW).

This basic conviction raises the question: in what sense can we speak of an interaction between the two practices? If one pursues this question in detail in relation to both ensembles, interesting differentiations become visible. Seen from the outside, the conclusion is that the performances, coming from different directions, nevertheless approach the same experiences, or address the same experiences differently.

### *Constant Reference as a Starting Point for Counterpoint and Independence*

While the duo, as seen, starts from “seeking the lack of interaction,” the trio begins with an intensive mutual reference: the dancers immerse themselves in the sound of the noise actions and “feel what is going on” (IR). The spatial proximity plays an important role here, as does the inhibition of movement in the still small dance gestures. The initial situation created in this way is described as an intensive reference, as “being sworn in” (IR): “It was like a bond between us that kept changing and coming back, so it was constantly such lines of force, or something” (TG).

In the course of this reference, general parameters are described that establish commonalities based on the music: TG’s rubbing sound actions are perceived as “surface and accent” (TG), as “such a contrast of the two-

dimensional with the percussive elements that he intersperses” (IR), which can serve the dancers as “primary orientation within the sound” (IR).

The further forms of reference in the sense of the basic motto of not directly implementing sounds and movements then take place in categories that break up this initially dense interweaving. The aim is “counterpoint: I do so many individual things [with the stirring sticks] and she goes very slowly, against the music” (TG), “going along or going against” or “time-delayed reaction” (IR). In certain situations it is about “not letting yourself drift” (IR), but only reacting subtly, subliminally and at very short notice. It is good “if you can notice a correspondence” (TG), but the “stringency” of one’s own action is in the foreground:

Because I have to, in order for what I do to have a stringency, I have to be for myself in a certain way. I have to be somehow so rounded, but at the same time I have to be so open that I am constantly receiving and transmitting on all kinds of channels as well (TG).

The participants find revealing images for this attitude: IR strives for a “symbiotic state” with the music, from which the freedom of his own action can only arise. The image of symbiosis, which in biology describes organisms which are interwoven with and profit from one another yet remain separate, clarifies here an artistic drive that understands freedom and reference as poles of one and the same thing. IR feels “self-sufficient” and “free” in his actions precisely because he experiences the strong influence of music:

Symbiosis doesn’t have to mean that I then enslave myself in the force field of this particular music, but that I can nevertheless remain self-sufficient; this makes it special and unique, because I then actually make something new out of it (IR).

As seen, TG emphasizes from the musician’s point of view the need to “be for oneself” and to “be rounded” in order to consistently persevere in one’s own ways. He is interested in references that are on a higher level of themes such as “closeness and distance, counterpoint and correspondence or even emotions” (TG). He summarizes the success of artistic communication within improvisation in the “linguistic” (TG) image: “I have the feeling of having been understood” (TG). References within such communication are negotiated performatively in the course of the interaction, but are not made explicit. The feeling of having been understood is obviously expressed subjectively in a confirmation of one’s own course of action. Following Tomasello’s theory, one could speak here of a “gestural interaction” that is based on a mutually negotiated “common conceptual background,” which, however, only reveals itself in the musical or dance-

gestural action and is subjectively grasped as the “theme” and guiding strategy of one’s own improvisation.

### ***Between Conscious Non-Interaction and the Emergence of Relationships***

The concepts of interaction, reference, and correspondence mentioned here several times are first clearly questioned by SR and AW. They understand the concept of interaction as a form of “response.” The nature of a response, however, for them implies that practices are connected and related to each other, which they do not want to accept as a tacit precondition: “So it goes back to [...] that John Cage thing of not seeking to glue practices together” (SR).

SR thus refers to a well-known quotation by Cage, according to which sounds in traditional music are always related to each other and thus there is a kind of “glue” between sounds. Cage’s artistic intention, however, is “to get rid of the glue, so that sounds would be themselves.”<sup>16</sup> Transferring this to the relationship between dance and music, we would have to assume a traditional “glue” in the sense of an existing form of correspondence between sound and movement, which would have to be consciously tackled.

Against this background, several dimensions of the duo’s approach become apparent. As already seen, the question at the beginning is not: “How can I find this connection and interaction?” (SR). Instead, the situation of being together in front of an audience is addressed, “because audiences, no matter what, with just two people, are going to create one [relationship] themselves” (AW). The category of geometric spatial relationships, on the other hand, acts as an external framework and neutral reference point that tries to avoid the described immediate effect on each other. At the same time, the consciously designed spatial relationship—as already indicated above—contains energetic points of contact: for example, in the question of “how long we were playing in certain areas and what we do” (SR), or in the game of balancing the spatial positions, for example, as a “deliberate facing change as he went sideways [...] to sort of echo that momentarily” (AW).

In the background, however, the immediate impact and influence that formed the starting point for the trio’s work can also be discerned in the duo’s case. Looking at a scene of mutual rapprochement (05:44–06:33), both note that there is indeed a kind of response to be observed:

---

16 Quoted from David Nicholls, “Getting Rid of the Glue: The Music of the New York School,” in *Journal of American Studies* 27, no. 3 (December 1993): 335–53, 337.

So, for example this one, I changed, Andrew has shifted or developed, so it's no longer the penguin forward, head roll, now it's gone into something completely different. And I'm sensing response (SR)—Oh yeah, I am definitely responding (AW).

The dance movement is influenced by the sound actions, just as the playing of the saxophone seems to translate the physical approach of the dancer into an intensification and compression of the playing elements. For SR and AW, however, these are moments that are not improvisationally processed on a conscious level. Instead of being the conscious subject of the improvisation itself, for them the mutual perception is more on a level of reflective confrontation.

## Influence of Mutual Perception

### *Listening as Embodiment on the Part of the Dancers*

IR's descriptions already reveal an intense perception of the music during the dance. The “enervating” (see quotation above) effect of the sounds is expressed as a physical reaction caused by the music. Listening means feeling at the same time and leads to an inner conceptualization of the music in bodily categories, as can be traced in the language used for this. When music is described as “two-dimensional” (see quotation above), for example, it is imagined as spatial and moving in space (corresponding quotations in AW). At the same time, this movement in space has a specific dynamic that is fed by both the imagined materiality of the sounds and the perceived actions of sound creation, as can be seen in the following scene (01:58-02:20):

I knew about the chain ... that he had it on the table; to play it so noisily, I find it very dominant somehow, almost as if he somehow triggers or almost maltreats us with it, with the noise, but also with the gesture. And then I translated it, if I may say so, into a dynamic, almost whipping movement (IR).

AW, on the other hand, seems to want to distance himself from this direct influence of music. He personally reflects on the bodily and embodied perception of music against the background of a fundamental difference in the phenomenological appearance of both arts. While dance has “only sight,” music addresses “sight and sense of hearing” (AW) at the same time through the presence of the musicians. His strategy of searching for a “non-interaction” corresponds to a no less intensive listening to the music, whose presence he describes as impossible to evade: “If you look away from something, you don't see it anymore. But ears,

you hear it, no matter where you are” (AW). So music fills the space even if the person dancing turns away. Thus his descriptions of SR’s sound actions are no less interspersed with bodily sensations:

And so I don’t try to interact with Simon. The music, the sounds are always coming in and no matter what, I’m going to react on some level, unless I make a huge, really strong choice [...]. And then especially when he gets going with the baritone, it really ... it was a visceral experience. Love it (AW).

Underlying his examination of how the arts reference each other is the reflection on their sensual mode of appearance, which could be theorized as the “involving” effect of hearing in contrast to the “distancing” function of seeing.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Seeing as Sensing Relationships on the Part of the Musicians***

This fundamental aesthetic and perceptual psychological distinction also seems to affect the experiences of the musicians in comparison to the dancers. The descriptions of dance from the musicians’ point of view, however, are much less on a level of immediate sensual experience. Nevertheless, SR also initially adopts a phenomenological perspective in his reflection. The perception of the dance during the performance cannot be understood as the registering seeing of something that simply exists: “Because you don’t ... it’s like, if you kind of open the box and look and say ‘Oh, what do I see? I see ... in the box I see this and I see ...’” (SR). Rather, perception is fundamentally linked to the relationship to the partner within the performative situation:

What I see is colored by the fact that we’re in a performance situation firstly, right? We’re in a special situation together. What I see is someone that I’m sharing a performance situation with, right? And that we have to trust in each other (SR).

---

17 Cf. Ursula Brandstätter, *Musik und bildende Kunst im Dialog. Ästhetische, zeichentheoretische und wahrnehmungspsychologische Überlegungen zu einem kunstspartenübergreifenden Konzept ästhetischer Bildung* (Augsburg: Wißner, 2004), 112 (trans. Ivo Berg): “Das Sehen ist ein *distanzierender* [emphasis in the original] Sinn, der auf einer klaren Trennung zwischen wahrnehmendem Subjekt und wahrgenommenem Objekt beruht. [...] Diese *involvierende* Tendenz des Gehörsinns kann besonders deutlich beim Hören von Musik nachvollzogen werden: Indem Musik direkt auf den Körper einwirkt und damit vielfach eine physisch-psychische Gestimmtheit auslöst, macht sie den Körper des Hörenden selbst zum Ort des musikalischen Geschehens.”

In turn, he attributes seeing and understanding the dance movements to his own learning process. From the experience of the joint work, he sees in himself the ability to increasingly perceive stylistic features of movement and improvisational strategies of dance. Even if from this he draws the impetus for his own explorative attempts as a musician, this hardly seems to have any influence on the way he directly perceives the movements. It almost seems as if they actually have more the character of a given for him in the above sense.

In case of TG, too, there is no exact and perpetual observation or sensation of movements, as would correspond to the omnipresence of sound mentioned above. Perception seems to take place in the background of attention, as it is not uncommon to play without visual contact or with closed eyes. And even if there is visual contact, seeing is more like playing from a score with the support of memory:

Well, I don't watch it all the time, so to speak. It's like ... when you know the piece by heart, but you still have the sheet music in front of you. And maybe you look at it again from time to time or read it in your mind. But you don't read it and really play what you see there. But you already know so and so and so and so, a bit like in your memory. So I don't analyze it or anything. It's just the way it is (TG).

TG refers here to perceptual-psychological processes in playing from a score. Due to the abundance of information to be processed simultaneously, reductions through chunking and anticipation of known patterns play an essential role. Transferred to the perception of movement during music-making, the abundance and complexity of movement can be condensed into action patterns that can be processed immediately. Instead of a detailed registration and musical depiction of movement in sound, the overarching relationship and presence in the space as well as the performative dynamics of the actions seem to have a stronger influence. A comparable embodiment of movement in perception on the part of the musicians cannot be determined in the interviews.

## Aesthetic Transformations between Dance and Music

### *Polyphony of Expression Versus "Watering down" of Practices*

Finally, the question arises as to whether the references between dance and music can also lead to a change in their own practice, i.e. whether "aesthetic

transformations<sup>18</sup> are motivated precisely by being referred to one another in improvisation.

The most obvious example of such a transformation can be found in the dance actions of IR, who uses a stool that was actually provided for the audience for his solo interludes in the space. He attributes his choice to use the stool to the sounds of the audience, which for him were a defining factor of the “soundscapes” in the theater. He uses the stool as a moving and shifting dance object and consciously incorporates the resulting sounds of pushing and throwing into his performance. IR sees this direct sonification of the energy of movement as a delightful extension of his expressive possibilities. In becoming aware of and incorporating the sound spectrum of his own movements and body, he sees an additional “polyphony” that can lead to a sharpening of his intentions:

So of course that can also lead to watering down; but I don't have that impression, but rather to sharpen things and to accompany myself and there is a kind of polyphony [...] or such an orchestration, so that is already like that with several body parts. And using the voice in different ways in addition to the noises produced by the body, with the floor and so on, that adds another level of complexity (IR).

AW, on the other hand, is critical of this possibility for dancers to integrate the sounds of their own body movements including breathing, voice, and step sounds. It tends to be a “cliché” and is often a means for beginners who want to establish relationships in this way. However, it is not a “creative tool.” He alludes to the “other side” of “transformation”: the feeling of “watering down” (IR) aesthetic practices, of moving into areas where one does not have professional access.

### ***Gestural Qualities of Music Making Movements***

SR describes the concern of “watering down” as a general problem and a source of inhibition on the part of the musicians. If they were to attempt to integrate dance movements into their playing, a tension would inevitably arise with the physicality of the technical movements on the instrument. These are all too often subject to the requirement of traditional training that any additional movement that does not serve to produce sound must be avoided.

Interestingly, however, this is precisely where IR and AW start in their perception of musicians. For them, musicians are “movers” per se, especially in

---

18 Cf. Ursula Brandstätter, *Erkenntnis durch Kunst. Theorie und Praxis der ästhetischen Transformation* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2013), 120–7.

their technical movements (IR); the exact coordination between movement and sound is fascinating in music-making movements, which often even draws attention away from dance (AW).

Both thus open up a view of music-making movements that—as described at the beginning—was raised in musical gesture research. This directs the view to the variety and different functions of movements on the instrument, each of which can take on a gestural quality. In relation to individual sounds, this includes the body movement in preparation for a sound action, its shaping for the duration of the sound, but also the reverberation, its intended time of effect.<sup>19</sup> Moments of such gestural music-making can be assumed in many places in both videos—also or precisely because both musicians tend to show a non-extroverted technical style of playing on their respective instruments.

### **Primacy of the Body?**

The thesis of this gestural way of music-making can be extended by another facet, especially on the basis of the duo's work. The performance is entitled *Libet's Lag* and alludes to the experiments of physiologist Benjamin Libet, who postulated in the 1970s that in the case of simple physical actions, the neuronal impulse in the motor cortex precedes the actual awareness of the decision to perform this action.<sup>20</sup> Libet thus raises the question of consciousness and the origin of decisions. AW describes a corresponding experience from the perspective of the dancer:

So there are times when we are performing and [...] or in a studio, working together, and I'll do a movement and then I'll hear a sound and I think "Oh, did I respond to that or did I not?" I don't know because I feel like the movement was executed and then I heard the sound but then there is sort of that lag question of "Did I already hear the sound and then I moved and then I became aware of the connection after the fact?" (AW).

Transferred associatively to the improvisational context of the performances, one might ask whether gestural expressive qualities of music-making in the sense described above might not also follow a primacy of the body.<sup>21</sup> In other

---

19 Godøy and Leman, *Musical Gestures*, 22.

20 Cf. <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libet-Experiment> (accessed 27 July 2022).

21 Pavlos Antoniadis has described such a primacy of the body in relation to the interpretation of complex piano music with the term "bodily navigation." Cf. Pavlos Antoniadis, "Körperliche Navigation. Verkörperte und erweiterte Kognition als Hintergrund der Interpretation komplexer Klaviermusik nach

words, the question is whether it is precisely the thematization of the physicality of music-making and the physical mimesis in the performative situation that motivates the resulting sound actions. An example of such a passage in the trio could be the sound action of TG's stirring sticks (04:06-05:06). Here we can observe how the music-playing is preceded by a subtle bodily settling in, which takes up the gestural quality of the dance and thus seems to gesturally anticipate the sound action. In terms of the nomenclature of musical gestures, these movements would therefore have to be classified even before the gestures that actually trigger the sound. There is no direct confirmation of this thesis in the interviews. TG at least sees the possibility of his own playing "becoming more performative" through the interplay with dance, without, however, feeling like a dancer himself.

SR confirms the artistic engagement with Libet's theme, but does not mention any corresponding experiences on his part. His strategy of moving in space, however, can be interpreted as a transformational bridge to dance. Admittedly, he does not attempt to present his own movements as dance. But by including spatial positions as parameters of his playing, he not only stages acoustic changes of the sound source—as TG does occasionally—but also offers himself in his physicality as a musician as a reference to dance

## Gestural Interaction?

The interviews bring up a variety of aesthetic experiences and artistic procedures. In view of the abundance and inner interconnectedness of the statements, it hardly seems appropriate to search for a single theory or a singular aesthetic principle of mediation between music and movement. Rather, the topics of the interviews open up a broad field of possible references that can nevertheless be structured internally. Viewed as a whole, the references within this field are in a state of tension between conscious preliminary decisions and unconscious influences. They show themselves as momentary processes of negotiation that range from allowing an immediate influence and direct translation to the seemingly intentionless emergence of relationships. Accordingly, in the interviews, in addition to concurring basic attitudes and experiences, there are also different images and modes of individual implementation and positioning. This confirms the thesis put forward at the

---

1945," in *Verkörperungen der Musik. Interdisziplinäre Betrachtungen*, ed. Jörn P. Hiekel and Wolfgang Lessing (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014), 203–8.

beginning that it is precisely the improvisational situation that challenges the exploration of mutual perception and reference.

A central role is played by the performative setting, which is the result of a constantly evolving process of artistic–research interplay and forms the impulse and starting point for these explorations. Between the two ensembles, the category of space can be identified as a basic reference point: space as a performance space that is played in and energetically interpreted together; space as a common projection space for sounds and movements; space as a place of presence and of mutual referral, which gives rise to performative roles and relationships; space, finally, as a space of possibility for aesthetic transformations in which music becomes physical and bodily movements are charged with musical parameters.

The theoretical framework of “gestural interaction” outlined in advance of the evaluation is echoed again and again in the interview statements. The “gesture of listening to music” as affecting a permeable, opening, and resonating body seems to be a central experience, especially for the dancers. Within this attitude of listening, music appears—according to the thesis of musical energetics—in an embodied world of imagination and sensation and unlocks common categories between sounds and movement. At the same time, in the sense of “musical gestures,” the real gestures of musical movements come into focus, whether as an unconscious quality of expression of one’s own movements on the instrument or as a possible starting point for dance movement design.

However, these theoretically derived aspects—according to a possible thesis that could be derived from the participants’ reflections—do not form a necessary or sufficient basis for concrete references. Rather, they seem to point to a space of possibility which, in the sense of the “gestural communication model,” can open up negotiation processes of a shared background of a concrete artistic interaction. These negotiation processes can come to consciousness as themes of improvisation in general terms such as reduction, enduring tension, counterpoint, development of material, going against or letting oneself drift. These, however, cannot be reduced to a specific aesthetic principle, but remain in need of interpretation themselves.

This relativization of theory is also suggested by the thematization of the concept of interaction within the performances. What interaction is or can be, in which forms it expresses itself and to what extent it becomes an artistic concern at all is put up for discussion by the actions and strategies of the participants themselves. Possible forms of interaction can be considered from several perspectives: as a temporally coordinated sequence of actions on top of each other; as an immediate influence in the quality of an action; as a deliberately directed response or consciously set counterpoint; as a decision not

to interact and to maintain personal stringency. Part of this questioning of a one-dimensional concept of interaction is the reflection of the respective sensory perceptions: the imbalance between an involving omnipresence of sound and the distancing perspectivity of vision. It could be assumed that behind the expressed reluctance of musicians to transform music directly into dance, for example, there is not only a discourse of professionalism, but that a border of sensory mediality must be renegotiated here.

Finally, in the artists' self-experiences, the perspectives elaborated here appear in polar opposites and seem to form the breeding ground for artistic decisions precisely from this. This polarity is reflected in the images of one's own playing position: in the image of symbiosis, which at the same time means enabling freedom; in the image of being for oneself, out of which openness and responsiveness emerge; in the image of practices not sticking to each other, into which the awareness of subcutaneous influences and emergent relationships is woven. Decisions in the event stream of improvisation reveal themselves as individual localization within a continuous line between these polarities. Gestural interaction thus proves to be a polyphonic mesh of points of reference and contact between the participants and their artistic procedures, which are constantly being renegotiated.